

Homer's *Odyssey*: A Discussion Guide

By David Bruce

This is a royalty-free discussion guide.

I will not make a dime from it — even from the print edition.

I recommend that you read the translations by Robert Fagles and by Ian Johnston.

**Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC has an excellent translation
available for a free download at**

<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/homer/odysseytofc.htm>

**I also recommend Elizabeth Vandiver's course on the *Odyssey*, which is available from the
Teaching Company.**

Dedicated with Respect to Jim Phillips

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Preface](#)

[Introduction to Homer](#)

[Introduction to Homer's *Odyssey*](#)

[Part 1: Mythological Background](#)

[Part 2: The Gods](#)

[Part 3: Homer's *Odyssey*](#)

[Part 4: *Xenia*](#)

[Book 1: "Athena Inspires the Prince"](#)

"Athena Visits Ithaca"

[Book 2: "Telemachus Sets Sail"](#)

"Telemachus Prepares for His Voyage"

[Book 3: "King Nestor Remembers"](#)

"Telemachus Visits Nestor in Pylos"

[Book 4: "The King and Queen of Sparta"](#)

"Telemachus Visits Menelaus in Sparta"

[Book 5: "Odysseus — Nymph and Shipwreck"](#)

"Odysseus Leaves Calypso's Island and Reaches Phaeacia"

[Book 6: "The Princess and the Stranger"](#)

"Odysseus and Nausicaa"

[Book 7: "Phaeacia's Halls and Gardens"](#)

"Odysseus at the Court of Alcinous in Phaeacia"

[Book 8: "A Day for Songs and Contests"](#)

"Odysseus is Entertained in Phaeacia"

[Book 9: "In the One-Eyed Giant's Cave"](#)

"Ismarus, the Lotus Eaters, and the Cyclops"

[Book 10: "The Bewitching Queen of Aeaea"](#)

"Aeolus, the Laestrygonians, and Circe"

[Book 11: "The Kingdom of the Dead"](#)

"Odysseus Meets the Shades of the Dead"

[Book 12: “The Cattle of the Sun”](#)

“The Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, The Cattle of the Sun”

[Book 13: “Ithaca at Last”](#)

“Odysseus Leaves Phaeacia and Reaches Ithaca”

[Book 14: “The Loyal Swineherd”](#)

“Odysseus Meets Eumaeus”

[Book 15: “The Prince Sets Sail for Home”](#)

“Telemachus Returns to Ithaca”

[Book 16: “Father and Son”](#)

“Odysseus Reveals Himself to Telemachus”

[Book 17: “Stranger at the Gates”](#)

“Odysseus Goes to the Palace as a Beggar”

[Book 18: “The Beggar-King of Ithaca”](#)

“Odysseus and Irus the Beggar”

[Book 19: “Penelope and Her Guest”](#)

“Eurycleia Recognizes Odysseus”

[Book 20: “Portents Gather”](#)

“Odysseus Prepares for His Revenge”

[Book 21: “Odysseus Strings His Bow”](#)

“The Contest with Odysseus’ Bow”

[Book 22: “Slaughter in the Hall”](#)

“The Killing of the Suitors”

[Book 23: “The Great Rooted Bed”](#)

“Odysseus and Penelope”

[Book 24: “Peace”](#)

“Zeus and Athena End the Fighting”

[Bibliography](#)

[Paper Topics](#)

[Paper Hints](#)

[Short Reaction Memos](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Appendix: Two Poems](#)

[Some Works by David Bruce](#)

[Chapter 1 of *Homer's Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose* by David Bruce](#)

Preface

The purpose of this book is educational. I have read, studied and taught Homer's *Odyssey*, and I wish to pass on what I have learned to other people who are interested in studying Homer's *Odyssey*. In particular, I think that the readers of this introduction to Homer's *Odyssey* will be bright high school seniors and college first-year students, as well as intelligent adults who simply wish to study the *Odyssey* despite not being literature majors.

This book uses a question-and-answer format. It poses, then answers, relevant questions about Homer, background information, and the *Odyssey*. This book goes through the *Odyssey* book by book. I recommend that you read the relevant section of the *Odyssey*, then read my comments, then go back and re-read the relevant section of the *Odyssey*. However, do what works for you.

Teachers may find this book useful as a discussion guide for the epic poem. Teachers can have students read books from the epic poem, then teachers can ask students selected questions from this discussion guide.

It helps to know something about Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Greek and Roman mythology, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but this background reading is not strictly necessary. You have to begin reading great literature somewhere, and Homer's *Odyssey* is a good place to start. (Come on in! The water's great! And later you can go and read the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, etc.)

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Note: Each book has two titles. The first title is from Robert Fagles' translation; the second title is from Ian Johnston's translation.

An Anecdote

Philip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, is a wonderful storyteller — not just when he writes his novels, but also when he tells out loud the stories of classic literature. For example, when he and his family were on vacation, Tom, his young son, found it difficult to stay still while they waited for their food in a restaurant. Therefore, Mr. Pullman started telling him the story of Odysseus, hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, who spent 10 years at Troy in the Trojan War, and who spent another 10 years returning back home to his home island, Ithaca. Although Odysseus was the King of Ithaca, he returned home without any of his men or ships. Ever cautious, he disguised himself as a beggar, and then he set out to see if he had any friends left on the island. He found that a gang of young men who thought he was dead had overtaken his palace. They wanted to kill his son and to force his wife, Penelope, to choose one of them to marry. Eventually, Mr. Pullman reached the point in the story where Odysseus gets his great bow in his hands and strings the bow. After stringing the bow, he plucks the string on the bow just like a harp player plucks a string on a harp. Immediately, the suitors besieging Penelope feel dread because they know that Odysseus is going to try to kill all of them. At this point, Tom, who was holding a drink in his hands, was so excited that he bit a chunk out of his glass. Their waitress saw him do that, and she was so shocked that she dropped the tray with all their food on the floor. Mr. Pullman ends his story by writing, "And I sent up a silent prayer of thanks to Homer." (Source: Margaret Speaker Yuan, *Philip Pullman*, pp. 53-54.)

Introduction to Homer

Homer wrote (or perhaps created orally) two great epic poems.

The first, the *Iliad*, tells the story of Achilles' anger during the Trojan War. At first, Achilles is angry at Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek expedition against Troy. Later, Achilles is angry at Hector, who killed in battle Achilles' best friend, Patroclus. At the end of the epic poem, Achilles is no longer angry. He is at peace with himself, and he is ready to die, as he knows he must. The *Iliad* tells only a small part of the story of the Trojan War. It does not tell the story of the Trojan Horse. A much later Roman epic poem, Virgil's *Aeneid*, does tell the story of the Trojan Horse.

The *Odyssey* tells the story of Odysseus after the end of the Trojan War. Odysseus has spent 10 years at Troy going to war, and he takes 10 years, much of it spent as a captive, getting back to his home island of Ithaca. He has a number of adventures as he journeys back home, and when he arrives on Ithaca he has more adventures. His ships and men have been lost, and he arrives alone on Ithaca, although he does have the powerful protection of his patron goddess, Athena. Odysseus discovers that almost everyone thinks that he is dead, and he discovers that suitors have taken over his house and are disrespecting his son, Telemachus, as they attempt to force his wife, Penelope, to marry one of them.

With the aid of Athena, and with the considerable aid of his own wits, Odysseus is able to reestablish himself as the King of Ithaca.

Introduction to Homer's *Odyssey*

Part One: Mythological Background

Important Terms:

Iliad

Odyssey

Zeus

Hera

Athena

Thetis

Aphrodite

Artemis

Iphigeneia

Agamemnon

Menelaus

Achilles

Odysseus

Hector

Paris

Judgment of Paris

Aeneas

Aeneid

• Why is it necessary to know background information about the Trojan War when reading Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*?

Homer is an epic poet who tells traditional stories that his audience is already very familiar with. Because of that, Homer does not need to explain who his characters are or even the major events of the Trojan War, such as how it started or how it will end. Homer is able to jump into the middle of the story in the *Iliad* and start telling about an incident that occurred during the final year of the Trojan War.

Of course, Homer's contemporary audience is very different from his audience of today. Homer created and performed his epic poems hundreds of years before Jesus of Nazareth was born. Homer came from an oral tradition, and he seems to have composed his poems either before writing was invented or perhaps when writing was coming into use. Possibly, he saw the

advantages of writing, and he used the new technology of writing to create two very long, very complex poems, both of which I would personally put in a list of the top 10 books ever created.

Anyone who reads Homer today (and in Homer's time, they would have probably heard Homer or heard a bard perform Homer's epic poems) will most likely not have been brought up hearing these traditional stories, the way that Homer's contemporary audience would have. Chances are, university students reading Homer in a Great Books course at a university would have read about Odysseus' adventure with the Cyclops, and that's about it.

That is why this introduction to Homer's *Odyssey* will fill you in on the background necessary to understand and enjoy the *Odyssey*.

• What are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are epic poems that have been created by Homer. Here are two definitions of "epic poem":

- a long narrative poem about the adventures of [a] hero or the gods, presenting an encyclopedic portrait of the culture in which it is composed.

Source:

<teacherweb.com/NC/OrangeHighSchool/MrMitchCox/HandyLiteraryandAnglo-SaxonTerms.doc>

- a long narrative poem telling of a hero's deeds.

Source: <wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>

The *Iliad* tells the story of one incident that lasted a few days during the last year of the Trojan War: a quarrel between Achilles, the mightiest of the Greek (Achaean) warriors, and Agamemnon, leader of the Greek armies against Troy. Both Achilles and Agamemnon are kings of their own lands, but Agamemnon is the leader among the many kings fighting the Trojans and the Trojan allies. The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon has devastating consequences.

• What is the mythic background of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?

The mythic background of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* consists of the Trojan War myth and myths about the Greek gods and goddesses.

• For what other works did this mythic background provide narrative material?

The Trojan War myth provided material for many other epic poems, both Greek and Roman, some of which have survived, and for many plays, including tragedies and comedies, by Greek and Roman authors. The Trojan War myth is one of the most important myths in the world.

During Roman times, the Trojan War myth provided material for Virgil's great epic poem the *Aeneid*, which tells the story of Aeneas and how he survived the fall of Troy and came to Italy to found (establish) the Roman people. He and his Italian wife, Lavinia, became important ancestors of the Romans. Later, Dante used material from the Trojan War myth and its aftermath in his *Divine Comedy*. Material from the Trojan War myth has appeared in opera and in drama. Of course, James Joyce uses this material in his novel *Ulysses*.

• **What is the *Iliad* about?**

The *Iliad* tells the story of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. Following the quarrel, Achilles (the mightiest Greek warrior) withdraws from the fighting, which allows the Trojans to be triumphant in battle for a while. The *Iliad* tells about Achilles' anger and how he finally lets go of his anger.

• **What is the *Odyssey* about?**

The *Odyssey* is about a different Greek hero in the Trojan War: Odysseus, whose Roman name is Ulysses. Following the 10 years that the Trojan War lasted, Odysseus returns to his home island of Ithaca, where he is king. It takes him 10 years to return home because of his adventures and mishaps. Much of that time he spends in captivity. When he finally returns home, he discovers that suitors are courting his wife, Penelope, who has remained faithful to him and who wants nothing to do with the suitors, who are rude and arrogant and who feast on Odysseus' cattle and drink his wine as they party all day. In addition, Telemachus, Odysseus' son, has found it hard to grow up without a strong father-figure in his life. The *Odyssey* tells the story of how Odysseus returns home to Ithaca and reestablishes himself in his own palace.

• **What is the *Aeneid* about?**

The *Aeneid* is a Roman epic poem by Virgil that tells the story of Aeneas, a Trojan prince who survived the fall of Troy and led other survivors to Italy. His adventures parallel the adventures of Odysseus on his return to Ithaca. In fact, they visit many of the same places, including the island of the Cyclopes. One of Aeneas' most notable characteristics is his *pietas*, his respect for things for which respect is due, including the gods, his family, and his destiny. His destiny is to found the Roman people, which is different from founding Rome, which was founded long after his death. Aeneas journeyed to Carthage, where he had an affair with Dido, the Carthaginian queen. Because of his destiny, he left her and went to Italy. Dido committed suicide, and Aeneas fought a war to establish himself in Italy. After killing Turnus, the leader of the armies facing him, Aeneas married the Italian princess Lavinia, and they became important ancestors of the Roman people.

• **What is the basic story of the Trojan War?**

The basic story of the Trojan War can be told very quickly. Paris, prince of Troy, visits Menelaus, King of Sparta, and then Paris runs off with Menelaus' wife, Helen, who of course becomes known as Helen of Troy. This is a major insult to Menelaus and his family, so he and his elder brother, Agamemnon, lead an army against Troy to get Helen (and reparations) back. The war drags on for 10 years, and the greatest Greek warrior is Achilles, while the greatest Trojan warrior is Hector, Paris' eldest brother. Eventually, Hector is killed by Achilles, who is then killed by Paris, who is then killed by Philoctetes. Finally, Odysseus comes up with the idea of the Trojan Horse, which ends the Trojan War.

That is a brief retelling of the Trojan War, but many, many myths grew up around the war, making it a richly detailed myth.

• **Does Homer allude to all of the details of the Trojan War?**

Homer does not allude to all the details of the Trojan War. For example, one myth states that Achilles was invincible except for his heel. Supposedly, his mother, the goddess Thetis, knew

that Achilles was fated to die in the Trojan War; therefore, to protect him, she dipped him into a pool of water that was supposed to make him invulnerable. To do that, she held him by his heel. Because she was holding him by his heel, the water did not touch it and so that part of Achilles' body remained vulnerable.

Homer never alludes to this myth; in fact, this myth plays no role whatsoever in Homer's epic poems. Achilles is not invulnerable. If he were, he could fight in battle naked, as long as he wore an iron boot over his vulnerable heel. In Homer, Achilles is vulnerable to weapons, and he knows it. At one point, he would like to join the fighting, but he cannot, because he has no armor. No one who reads the *Iliad* should think that Achilles is invulnerable except for his heel.

Myth changes and develops over time, and it is possible that Homer had no knowledge of this myth because it had not been created yet. Or it is possible that Homer knew of this myth but ignored it because he had his own points to make in his epic poem.

Another myth that may or may not be alluded to is the Judgment of Paris. It may be alluded to in a couple of places in the *Iliad*, but scholars disagree about this.

• **Who is Achilles, and what is unusual about his mother, Thetis?**

Achilles, of course, is the foremost warrior of the Greeks during the Trojan War. His mother, Thetis, is unusual in that she is a goddess. The Greeks' religion was different from modern religions in that they were polytheistic (believing in many gods) rather than monotheistic (believing in one god). In addition, the gods and human beings could mate with each other. Achilles is unusual in that he had an immortal goddess as his mother and a mortal man, Peleus, as his father. Achilles, of course, is unusual in many ways. Another way in which he is unusual is that he and Thetis have long talks together. Often, the gods either ignore their mortal offspring or choose not to reveal themselves to them. For example, Aeneas' goddess mother is Aphrodite (Roman name: Venus). Although Aphrodite does save Aeneas' life or help him on occasion, the two do not have long talks together the way that Achilles and Thetis do.

• **Which prophecy about Achilles was given to his mother, Thetis?**

The prophecy about Thetis' male offspring was that he would be a greater man than his father. This is something that would make most human fathers happy. (One exception would be Pap, in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Pap does not want Huck, his son, to learn to read and write or to get an education or to live better than Pap does.)

• **Who is Zeus, and what does he decide to do as a result of this prophecy?**

Zeus is a horny god who sleeps with many goddesses and many human beings. Normally, he would lust after Thetis, but once he hears the prophecy, he does not want to sleep with Thetis. For one thing, the gods are potent, and when they mate they have children. Zeus overthrew his own father, and Zeus does not want to give birth to a greater man than he is because his son will overthrow him. Therefore, Zeus wants to get Thetis married off to someone else. In this case, a marriage to a human being for Thetis would suit Zeus just fine. A human son may be greater than his father, but is still not going to be as great as a god, and so Zeus will be safe if Thetis gives birth to a human son.

• **Who is Peleus?**

Peleus is the human man who marries Thetis and who fathers Achilles. At the time of the *Iliad*, Peleus is an old man and Thetis has not lived with him for a long time.

• **Why is Eris, Goddess of Discord, not invited to the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis?**

Obviously, you do not want discord at a wedding, and therefore, Eris, Goddess of Discord, is not invited to the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis. Even though Eris is not invited to the wedding feast, she shows up anyway.

• **Eris, Goddess of Discord, throws an apple on a table at the wedding feast. What is inscribed on the apple?**

Inscribed on the apple is the phrase “For the fairest,” written in Greek, of course. Because Greek is a language that indicates masculine and feminine in certain words, and since “fairest” has a feminine ending, the apple is really inscribed “for the fairest female.”

• **Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each claim the apple. Who are they?**

Three goddesses claim the apple, meaning that each of the three goddesses thinks that she is the fairest, or most beautiful.

Hera

Hera is the wife of Zeus, and she is a jealous wife. Zeus has many affairs with both immortal goddesses and mortal women, and Hera is jealous because of these affairs. Zeus would like to keep on her good side.

Athena

Athena is the goddess of wisdom. She becomes the patron goddess of Athens. Athena especially likes Odysseus, as we see especially in the *Odyssey*. Athena is a favorite of Zeus, her father. Zeus would like to keep on her good side.

Aphrodite

Aphrodite is the goddess of sexual passion. She can make Zeus fall in love against his will. Zeus would like to keep on her good side.

Roman Gods and Goddesses

The Greek gods and goddesses have Roman equivalents. The Greek name is followed by the Roman name:

Aphrodite: Venus

Apollo: Apollo (yes, the same name)

Ares: Mars

Artemis: Diana

Athena: Minerva

Hera: Juno

Hades: Pluto

Hephaestus: Vulcan

Hermes: Mercury

Poseidon: Neptune

Zeus: Jupiter

By the way, the Greek warrior Odysseus has a Roman name: Ulysses.

• Why doesn't Zeus want to judge the goddesses' beauty contest?

Zeus is not a fool. He knows that if he judges the goddesses' beauty contest, he will make two enemies. The two goddesses whom Zeus does not choose as the fairest will hate him and likely make trouble for him.

Please note that the Greek gods and goddesses are not omnibenevolent. Frequently, they are quarrelsome and petty.

By the way, Athens, Ohio, lawyer Thomas Hodson once judged a beauty contest featuring 25 cute child contestants. He was running in an election to choose the municipal court judge, and he thought that judging the contest would be a good way to win votes. Very quickly, he decided never to judge a children's beauty contest again. He figured out that he had won two votes — the votes of the parents of the child who won the contest. Unfortunately, he also figured out that he had lost 48 votes — the votes of the parents of the children who lost.

• Who is Paris, and what is the Judgment of Paris?

Paris is a prince of Troy, and Zeus allows him to judge the three goddesses' beauty contest. Paris is not as intelligent as Zeus, or he would try to find a way out of judging the beauty contest.

• Each of the goddesses offers Paris a bribe if he will choose her. What are the bribes?

Hera

Hera offers Paris political power: several cities he can rule.

Athena

Athena offers Paris prowess in battle. Paris can become a mighty and feared warrior.

Aphrodite

Aphrodite offers Paris the most beautiful woman in the world to be his wife.

• Which goddess does Paris choose?

As most of you know, Paris chose Aphrodite, who offered him the most beautiful woman in the world to be his wife.

This is not what a Homeric warrior would normally choose. A person such as Achilles would choose to be an even greater warrior, if that is possible.

A person such as Agamemnon is likely to choose more cities to rule.

When Paris chooses the most beautiful woman in the world to be his wife, we are not meant to think that he made a good decision. Paris is not a likable character.

• **Does the Judgment of Paris appear in the *Iliad*?**

Maybe. Maybe not. A couple of passages in the *Iliad* may contain a veiled reference to the Judgment of Paris.

• **Does myth develop over time?**

Myth does develop over time. Possibly, the myth of the Judgment of Paris was invented after Homer had created the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

• **As a result of Aphrodite's bribe, Paris abducts Helen. Why?**

Aphrodite promised Paris the most beautiful woman to be his wife. As it happens, that woman is Helen. Therefore, Paris abducts Helen, with Aphrodite's good wishes.

Did Helen go with Paris willingly? The answer to this question is ambiguous, and ancient authorities varied in how they answered this question.

• **To whom is Helen already married?**

Helen is already married to Menelaus, the King of Sparta. Paris visits Menelaus, and when he leaves, he carries off both a lot of Menelaus' treasure and Menelaus' wife, Helen. Obviously, this is not the way that one ought to treat one's host.

• **Who are Agamemnon and Menelaus?**

Agamemnon and Menelaus are the sons of Atreus. They are brothers, and Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae, is the older brother and the brother who rules a greater land, as seen by the number of ships the two kings bring to the Trojan War. Menelaus brings 60 ships (Fagles *Iliad* 2.678-679). Agamemnon brings 100 ships (Fagles *Iliad* 2.667-672).

• **Who is responsible for leading the expedition to recover Helen?**

Agamemnon is the older brother, so he is the leader of the Greek troops in the Trojan War.

• **Why do the winds blow against the Greek ships?**

When the Greek ships are gathered together and are ready to set sail against Troy, a wind blows in the wrong direction for them to sail. The goddess Artemis (Roman name: Diana) is angry at the Greeks because she knows that the result of the Trojan War will be lots of death, not just of warriors, but also of women and children. This is true of all wars, and it is a lesson that human beings forget after each war and relearn in the next war.

• **Why does Artemis demand a human sacrifice?**

Artemis knows that Agamemnon's warriors will cause much death of children, so she makes him sacrifice one of his daughters so that he will suffer what he will make other parents suffer.

• **Who does Agamemnon sacrifice?**

Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigeneia. This is a religious sacrifice of a human life to appease the goddess Artemis.

• **Did Homer know about this sacrifice?**

Very possibly, he did. In Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon tells the prophet Calchas that he always brings bad news to Agamemnon. Calchas is the prophet who told Agamemnon that he had to sacrifice his daughter in order to get winds that would sail the ships to Troy.

• **What do Menelaus and Agamemnon do?**

After the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Agamemnon and Menelaus set sail with all the Greek ships for Troy. They land, then they engage in warfare.

• **Who are Achilles and Hector?**

Achilles is the foremost Greek warrior, while Hector is the foremost Trojan warrior. Both warriors are deserving of great respect.

• **Does Homer assume that Achilles is invulnerable?**

Absolutely not. Achilles needs armor to go out on the battlefield and fight.

• **What happens to Hector and Achilles?**

Hector kills Achilles' best friend, Patroclus, in battle. Angry, Achilles kills Hector. Later, Paris (assisted by Apollo) kills Achilles.

• **What is the story of the Trojan Horse?**

Odysseus, a great strategist, thought up the idea of the Trojan Horse. Epeus built it.

The Greeks build a giant wooden horse, which is hollow and filled with Greek warriors, then they pretend to abandon the war and to sail away from Troy. Actually, Agamemnon sails behind an island so that the Trojans cannot see the Greek ships. The Greeks also leave behind a lying Greek named Sinon, who tells the Trojans about a supposed prophecy that if the Trojans take the Horse inside their city, then Troy will never fall. The Trojans do that, and at night the Greeks come out of the Trojan Horse, make their way to the city gates and open them. Outside the city gates are the Greek troops led by Agamemnon, who have returned to the Trojan plain. The Greek warriors rush inside the city and sack it.

Virgil's *Aeneid* has the fullest surviving ancient account of the Trojan Horse. Of course, he tells the story from the Trojan point of view. If Homer had written the story of the Trojan Horse, he would have told it from the Greek point of view. For the Greeks, the Trojan War ended in a great victory. For the Trojans, the Trojan War ended in a great disaster.

• **Which outrages do the Greeks commit during the sack of Troy?**

• King Priam is killed by Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, aka Pyrrhus, at the altar of Zeus. This is an outrage because anyone who is at the altar of a god is under the protection of that god. When Neoptolemus kills Priam, an old man (and old people are respected in Homeric culture), Neoptolemus disrespects the god Zeus.

- Hector's son is murdered. Hector's son is a very small child who is murdered by being hurled from the top of a high wall of Troy. Even during wartime, children ought not to be murdered, so this is another outrage.

- Cassandra is raped by Little Ajax even though she is under the goddess Athena's protection. Cassandra is raped in a temple devoted to Athena. This is showing major disrespect to Athena. Again, the Greeks are doing things that ought not to be done, even during wartime.

- The Greeks sacrificed Priam's young daughter Polyxena. The Trojan War begins and ends with a human sacrifice of the life of a young girl. This is yet another outrage.

- **How do the gods react to these outrages?**

The gods and goddesses make things difficult for the Greeks on their way home to Greece.

- **What happens to the Greeks after the fall of Troy?**

Nestor is a wise, pious, old man who did not commit any outrages. He makes it home quickly.

Athena is angry at all of the Greeks, so she does not help Odysseus on his journey home until 10 years have passed.

Little Ajax, who raped Cassandra, drowns on his way home.

Agamemnon returns home to a world of trouble. His wife, Clytemnestra, has taken a lover during his 10-year absence, and she murders Agamemnon.

Menelaus is reunited with Helen, but their ship is driven off course, and it takes them years to return home to Sparta.

- **What happens to Aeneas?**

Aeneas fights bravely, and he witnesses such things as the death of Priam, King of Troy; however, when he realizes that Troy is lost, he returns to his family to try to save them. He carries his father on his back, and he leads his young son by the hand, but although he saves them by leading them out of Troy, his wife, who is following behind him, is lost in the battle.

Aeneas becomes the leader of the Trojan survivors, and he leads them to Italy, where they become the founders of the Roman people.

- **Who were the Roman people?**

The Romans had one of the greatest empires of the world.

- **In the Homeric epics, are human beings responsible for their actions?**

Yes, human beings are responsible for their actions in the Homeric epics.

- **Despite Aphrodite, is Paris responsible for his actions?**

Of course, Aphrodite promised Paris the most beautiful woman in the world to be his wife if Paris chose her as the fairest of the three goddesses who wanted the golden apple. However, Paris is responsible for his actions when he runs away with Helen, the lawful wife of Menelaus. Paris could have declined to run away with Helen.

• **Is Agamemnon responsible for his actions?**

Artemis required the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter before the winds would blow the Greek ships to Troy, but Agamemnon is still responsible for his actions. He could have declined to sacrifice his daughter, and he could have given up the war.

• **What happens to humans who do impious acts?**

Humans who do impious acts are punished for their impious acts.

• **What is the Greek concept of fate?**

The Greeks do believe in fate. We are fated to die at a certain time, although we do not know when we will die.

In addition, people may be fated to do certain things in their lives. For example, Oedipus is fated to kill his father and to marry his mother.

Similarly, certain events are fated to happen. For example, Troy is fated to be conquered in the Trojan War.

• **Do the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* tell the entire story of the Trojan War?**

No, they tell only a small part of the story. The *Iliad* tells the story of an event that occurred in a few weeks of the final year of the Trojan War. The story of the Trojan War is not fully told in either epic poem. Neither is the story of the Trojan Horse, although knowledge of it is essential for understanding the *Iliad*, and although the Trojan Horse is talked about briefly in the *Odyssey*.

• **What happened the first time your teacher read the *Iliad*?**

I read the *Iliad* for the first time the summer before I started college. It was my way of preparing myself to be educated. As I got near the end of the *Iliad*, I started wondering, "Where is the Trojan Horse?" When I got to the end of the *Iliad*, I was very surprised that Troy had not yet fallen.

• **Did other epics exist?**

Yes, other epics did exist, and we do have some Roman epics that were written much later than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, of course. The ancient Greek epics from the time of Homer have not survived. Fortunately, we know from ancient commentators that we have the really good epic poems. The epics that have been lost were not as good as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

• **What do the Homeric epics assume?**

The Homeric epics assume that you know the mythic background, which is why I have written about it in this introduction to the *Odyssey*.

• **What is the society described in the Homeric epics like?**

Classics scholar Elizabeth Vandiver points out that Homeric society is very different from our society; it is patriarchal, slave-holding, monarchical, and polytheistic (*The Iliad of Homer* 13-14):

Patriarchal

This is a society in which the men have the power. Of course, the goddesses are a special case and are more powerful than human men. However, even in the world of gods and goddesses, the gods have more power. The king of the gods is Zeus, a male. Often, contemporary American society is thought of as patriarchal. I won't deny that, but the ancient Greek society was much more patriarchal than contemporary American society.

Slave-Holding

Slaves exist in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, women are spoils of war, and young, pretty women become sex-slaves to the warriors who have killed their husbands. In the *Odyssey*, slaves are servants in the palace and on the farm. Slavery is taken for granted in the Homeric epics.

Monarchical

Kings exist in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Agamemnon is a king, Menelaus is a king, Achilles is a king, Odysseus is a king, etc.

Polytheistic

As we have seen, the ancient Greeks and Romans believed in many gods. Moderns tend to believe or to disbelieve in one god.

Conclusion

Ancient Greek society is very much different from our modern American society. All you can do is to start reading. Don't worry. Soon, you will understand ancient Greek society much better.

Part Two: The Gods

An Important Note

For more information about the role of the gods in the *Iliad*, read Elizabeth Vandiver's "The Paradox of Glory" in her *The Iliad of Homer*, pp. 101-111, to which I am greatly indebted.

Important Terms

Theos (THAY os): god (with a small 'g')

Athanatoi: immortals

Thnêtoi: mortals

Double motivation: Many actions in the *Iliad* are motivated both by humans and by gods. For example, at one point in Book 11 Great Ajax is forced back by the Trojans. On the human level, he has been fighting very hard for a long time, and he is tired. No wonder the Trojan warriors force him back! But we also read that Great Ajax is forced back by Zeus. Often, we can explain actions purely on the human level, but Homer tells us that the gods are also involved in the actions.

Over-determination: Many actions in the *Iliad* occur because of the actions both of humans and of the gods. This double motivation is sometimes called by critics over-determination. Over-determination stresses the inevitability of certain actions — they *had* to occur. In literature, over-determination occurs when an action is explained by more than one cause when only one cause is enough to explain why the action occurred.

• What do we mean by *theos*?

The Greek word *theos* (THAY os) is usually translated as "god" with a small g. Yes, this is a good translation of the word, but we modern readers can be misled by it because of our familiarity with the word "God" with a big G.

Professors who know Greek sometimes toy with the idea of teaching a course on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or a course on Greek mythology and literature in general, in which the words "god" or "gods" or "goddess" are never used. For example, Elizabeth Vandiver, to whose Great Books course I am indebted for what I am writing in this chapter, would like to do this (104-105). Instead of translating the word *theos*, she would leave it untranslated, and she would let the students figure out what it means through the course of reading the works without *theos* being translated into the word "god." The obvious problem with that is that she would not be able to use any translations of Greek literature that have ever been published. Instead, she would have to translate everything the students would read and keep *theos* as *theos*, so professors won't do that — translating the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* is a huge undertaking. However, if a professor would do that, the big advantage is that modern readers would not bring to the word *theos* the conceptions that we bring to the word "God."

• Are the gods personified forces of nature?

Originally, the gods seem to have been personified forces of nature. They are more than that in the Homeric epics, but they are still in part personified forces of nature.

One example is that Zeus is the god of the sky and lightning. Of course, in the *Iliad* Zeus is much more than merely the god of the sky and lightning. Maybe that is how belief in Zeus arose, but Zeus became much more than that. One of Zeus' weapons is thunderbolts, which he throws.

Another example is that Poseidon is the god of the sea.

Another example is that Ares is war. (Here we have an embodiment of human culture rather than an embodiment of a force of nature.) In the *Iliad*, Zeus says that Ares is hated. He is hated because he is war.

Another example is that Aphrodite is sexual passion. She is the personification of sexual passion. We can say that she inflicts sexual passion on other people, but in addition, she *is* sexual passion. This is not just a way of speaking. Someone may say, "Aphrodite filled me with lust"; in other words, Aphrodite is a way of explaining human emotion. However, in the Homeric epics, Aphrodite is more than a way of explaining human emotion. In Book 3 of the *Iliad*, Aphrodite forces Helen to go to bed with Paris. She threatens Helen, and she takes Helen to Paris' bedroom.

• Are the gods anthropomorphic?

These gods are anthropomorphic. They have human form, with some differences. The gods and goddesses are larger and better looking and stronger than human beings. However, they look like human beings, and they speak the language of human beings. They also eat, drink, and have sex like human beings. They also feel the human emotions of jealousy (Hera is jealous of Zeus' love affairs), passion (Zeus sleeps with many, many females, both mortal and immortal), anger (Ares becomes angry when he is wounded by Diomedes in battle), and grief (Zeus grieves because his son Sarpedon is fated to die).

• Are the gods omnibenevolent, omniscient, or omnipotent?

The Homeric gods are not omnibenevolent, omniscient, or omnipotent.

Not Omnibenevolent

Clearly, the gods are not omnibenevolent. They are not all-good; they are not even just. Some of the gods are rapists. Hera is very capable of exacting vengeance on innocent people. The gods are very dangerous, and they can do bad things to human beings. One example is the myth of Actaeon. He was out hunting with his dogs, and he saw the goddess Artemis bathing naked. He did not mean to see her naked, but she exacted vengeance anyway. She turned him into a stag, and he was run down and killed by his own dogs. He suffered horribly because his mind was still human although his body was that of a male deer.

Not Omniscient

In addition, the gods are not omniscient. We will see this in the *Odyssey*. Athena has been wanting to help Odysseus, but she does not want to anger Poseidon, who is opposed to Odysseus. Therefore, Athena waits until Poseidon's attention is turned elsewhere, and then she helps Odysseus. Another example (in the *Iliad*) is that when Hera seduces Zeus, he does not know that she is tricking him. Hera wants to seduce Zeus so that he will go to sleep, and the Achaeans will be triumphant in the battle. If Zeus were omniscient, he would have known that she was tricking him.

Of course, the gods do know a lot. For example, they know a human being's fate.

In addition, the gods hear prayers that are addressed to them.

Not Omnipotent

The gods are very powerful, but they are not omnipotent. The gods can change their shape. They can take the shape of a bird or of a particular human being. The gods can travel very quickly. The gods can fly through the air. Poseidon can cause earthquakes, and Zeus can cause lightning.

The gods cannot go back on their inviolable oaths. For example: When Alcmena was about to give birth to Heracles (Hercules), Zeus announced that on a certain day a boy would be born who was both a descendant of Perseus, an ancient hero, and who would rule over the city of Mycenae, which later Agamemnon ruled. Unfortunately, this news allowed Hera to interfere. Hera is the goddess of childbirth, and she was able to delay the birth of Heracles. She also was able to speed up the birth of Eurystheus, who was a descendant of Perseus. By doing this, Hera brought it about that Eurystheus, not Heracles, ruled Mycenae. Hera made sure that Eurystheus was born on that day, and not Heracles. After all, Zeus had sworn an inviolable oath that a descendant of Perseus born on that day would rule Mycenae, and the gods, including Zeus, cannot go back on their inviolable oaths.

• **Can the gods trespass on each other's spheres of influence?**

The gods do have spheres of influence, and they tend not to interfere with the sphere of influence of the other gods. Thus, Hades is the god of the Underworld, Poseidon is the god of the Sea, and Zeus is the god of the Sky. Possibly, they could trespass on each other's spheres of influence, but they choose not to. This may be a voluntary limit on their power.

Land supposedly is held in common by Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, but Zeus seems to regard land as being in his sphere of influence, thus the power struggle (with Zeus triumphant) between Zeus and Poseidon in Book 15 of the *Iliad*.

• **Can Zeus annul death?**

Zeus cannot simply annul death, as we see when Sarpedon dies. Zeus wants Sarpedon to live, and he is tempted to alter Sarpedon's fate and allow Sarpedon to live, but he does not do that. Apparently, Zeus cannot simply annul death for all human beings.

However, it may be the case that Zeus chooses not to annul the death of Sarpedon, that he chooses not to alter Sarpedon's fate. If he were to change the fate of his son, then other gods and goddesses would annul the fates of their mortal children. Apparently, this would have bad consequences, and perhaps Zeus decides not to change Sarpedon's fate although he could.

• **Are the gods transcendent?**

These gods are not transcendent. To be transcendent, the gods would have to be outside the universe. The Judeo-Christian God is transcendent; He created the universe. The ancient Greek gods and goddesses did not create the universe. Instead, the universe existed and then the gods such as Zeus came into existence.

• **Did the gods create human beings?**

Homer's gods may not even have created human beings. Homer does not address this issue. In some Greek myths, the gods did create human beings. In other ancient Greek myths, the gods did

not create human beings. Zeus is the father of some gods, such as Ares and Athena, as well as of some mortals, such as Heracles (Hercules). However, when Zeus is called the Father of Gods and Men, it simply means that he is powerful; it does not refer to actual fatherhood.

• **Do the gods love human beings?**

Usually, the gods do not love human beings, although exceptions exist. Thetis really does love Achilles. Aphrodite seems to love Aeneas to an extent, although she drops him on the battlefield and runs away when she is wounded in Book 5 of the *Iliad*. Her leaving him behind could have gotten him killed if it were not for Apollo.

Often, human beings seem to be playthings of the gods. Zeus rapes mortal women whom he desires but who are unwilling to sleep with him. The gods seem to look at the Trojan War as a long-running source of entertainment.

• **What are the gods not?**

The gods are not necessarily good, the gods are not omniscient, the gods are not omnipotent, the gods are not transcendent, and the gods are not necessarily loving. Occasionally, the gods can be good or loving, or both. Occasionally, the gods can be rapists or murderers, or both.

• **One characteristic of the gods is their anger (*menis*).**

We will see how strong the anger or *menis* of the gods is. In Book 1, Agamemnon disrespects the priest of Apollo, so Apollo sends the plague against the Achaeans. Agamemnon does not catch the plague and die, but many innocent Achaeans do. We do not know for sure whether Homer knew the myth of the Judgment of Paris, but if he did, then Athena and Hera are willing that Troy be sacked, Trojan warriors killed, Trojan women raped and made sex slaves, and Trojan women and children made slaves simply because they lost a beauty contest. The *menis* of the gods results in many innocent human beings dying.

Part Three: Homer's Odyssey

Important Terms

The Epic Cycle

Aethiopis

Little Iliad

Ilioupersis

Nostoi

nostos

kleos

in medias res

proem

polutropos

andra

Chronological Arrangement of the *Odyssey*

Books 9 through 12 (a flashback to Odysseus' adventures from the time he left Troy until he arrived at Calypso's island)

Books 5 through 8 (Odysseus' story as he leaves Calypso's island and journeys to Scheria) **happen at the same time as Books 1 through 4** (Telemachus' adventures)

Books 13 through 24 (Odysseus is back on Ithaca)

• Why is it important to understand the Trojan War myth when reading the *Odyssey*?

Homer's audience knew the story of the Trojan War. How did Homer's audience get its understanding of the Trojan War. Partly through stories told by their parents and grandparents. As they were growing up, they heard tales about the myth. Therefore, Homer assumes a lot of knowledge in his audience. Homer does not tell the story of the Trojan Horse; he assumes that his audience already knows the story. Homer does not tell the story of the Trojan War; he assumes that his audience already knows the story. Without a knowledge of the Trojan War, the audience will not be appreciate fully the *Odyssey*.

• What is the Epic Cycle of ancient Greece?

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the two truly great Greek epic poems that have survived from antiquity until today. However, we know that other, shorter Greek epic poems existed that did not survive until today. We know that these other epic poems existed because ancient authors referred to them and summarized them. These other epic poems formed what we call the Epic Cycle. They tell the stories of events that happened after the Trojan War. We need to know about those events because Homer assumes that his audience knows about those events. A man named Proclus summarized many of the epic poems.

Were any of these shorter epics as great as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*?

Because of these summaries, we know what each epic poem was about. These epic poems no longer exist. Critics in the ancient world recognized that these epic poems were not as good as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (but then, what is?). We would love to have copies of the epic poems to read, but such is life.

• What happened in the *Cypria*?

The *Cypria* tells about events that took place before the *Iliad*. It includes these stories:

- The Judgment of Paris, in which Paris chooses Aphrodite as the most beautiful of three goddesses.
- The meeting and love affair of Helen and Paris, as well as the deaths of Castor and Polydeuces, Helen's brothers, to whom Zeus granted immortality on alternate days.
- Menelaus decides to go after Paris and Helen, and a gathering of heroes to fight against Troy is started.
- Odysseus does not want to go, so he feigns insanity, but the other Greek heroes make him go by kidnapping Telemachus, Odysseus' son.
- Achilles marries Deidameia.
- At Aulis, Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia, or seems to, as Artemis takes her away and puts a deer on the sacrificial altar instead.
- The Greeks go to Troy.
- Achilles captures and ransoms Lycaon, and he gets Briseis while Agamemnon gets Chryseis.
- A catalog of the Greeks who fought at Troy follows.

• What happened in the *Aethiopis*?

The epic cycle followed a chronological order, and the first epic in the epic cycle, the *Aethiopis*, begins where the *Iliad* ends. The *Iliad* ends with the funeral of Hector, and the *Aethiopis* begins after the funeral of Hector. The *Aethiopis* is much shorter than the *Iliad*, being only five books long as compared to the *Iliad*'s 24 books.

The *Aethiopis* tells about the rest of the life of and death of Achilles:

- Achilles kills the Amazon Penthesileia.
- When Thersites reproaches Achilles, Achilles kills Thersites. Achilles is purified of the murder of Thersites.
- Memnon kills Antilochus, Achilles kills Memnon, and Achilles dies after being shot in the heel by Paris, prince of Troy.
- Following Achilles' death, both Odysseus and Great Ajax claim Achilles' armor.

• **What happened in the *Little Iliad*?**

Following the *Aethiopis* is the *Little Iliad*. This means that when the epic poems were recited at festivals, the *Aethiopis* would be recited, and then the *Little Iliad* would be recited. In the *Little Iliad*, these events happen:

- Odysseus and Great Ajax quarrel over the armor of Achilles.
- The Greek warriors award the armor to Odysseus, showing that they value Odysseus' cunning more than Great Ajax' prowess as a warrior.
- Great Ajax goes mad, and he commits suicide.
- Odysseus goes to an island and finds the archer Philoctetes, who had been wounded by a poisonous snake, and Odysseus brings him to the Trojan War.
- Machaon heals Philoctetes, and Philoctetes kills Paris in single combat.
- Helen marries Deiphobus.
- Odysseus brings Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, to the Trojan War and gives him his father's armor, which had been made by the god Hephaestus.
- Odysseus disguises himself and goes into Troy to spy. Helen recognizes him, and they plot the destruction of Troy.
- Odysseus and Diomedes visit Troy and carry the Palladium out of the city.
- Epeus builds the Trojan Horse (Odysseus thinks up the idea of the Trojan Horse), the best of the Greek warriors climb into the horse, the Greek ships pretend to sail back home to Greece, the Trojans think that they have won the war, and they take the Trojan Horse inside their city.

• **What happened in the *Ilioupersis*?**

Next in the epic cycle is the *Ilioupersis*, which means the Destruction of Ilium, aka the Sack of Troy. It is short, only two books long, but it had many important events recounted in it. Like the *Little Iliad*, the *Ilioupersis* tells about how the Trojans took the Trojan Horse into Troy. It includes these stories:

- Sinon the Lying Greek pretends to have escaped from the Greeks but is actually part of the plot to conquer Troy.
- It also tells the story of Laocoon and one of his sons, whom two serpents kill.
- According to the *Ilioupersis*, it is Odysseus who kills Astyanax, the son of Hector and Andromache, by throwing him off the walls of Troy.
- Aeneas, his family, and his followers withdraw to Mount Ida following the death of Laocoon.

- Which outrages did the Greeks commit during and following the Sack of Troy that make the gods angry? This is especially important for the *Odyssey* because it helps explain why Odysseus did not have the help of Athena for many years during his journey back to Troy.

In some of the summaries of the lost epic poems in the Epic Cycle, we learn about the outrages that the Greeks committed during the Trojan War:

1) The *Ilioupersis* — Achilles' Son Neoptolemus Killed King Priam

King Priam and his wife, Hecuba, take refuge at an altar. That is where Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, kills him. This is an outrage against the gods because by being at the altar, King Priam's safety should have been guaranteed. By killing Priam, Neoptolemus disrespected the gods.

2) The *Ilioupersis* — Little Ajax Raped Priam's Daughter Cassandra

Another outrage against the gods occurs when Little Ajax tears Cassandra, one of Priam's daughters, away from the altar of Athena and rapes her. This especially angers Athena, who is a virgin goddess. Cassandra was a virgin, and she was engaged to be married.

3) The *Ilioupersis* — The Greeks Killed Astyanax

According to the *Ilioupersis*, it is Odysseus who kills Astyanax, the son of Hector and Andromache, by throwing him off the walls of Troy. This certainly makes us lose some of our sympathy for Odysseus. It also apparently made Athena lose sympathy for Odysseus. Killing an innocent child is an outrage. It goes beyond what soldiers ought to do in war. Following the Fall of Troy, Neoptolemus gets as a reward Andromache, the widow of Hector. (According to other sources, someone else killed Astyanax. In the *Odyssey*, whoever killed Astyanax is not named; in fact, the death of Astyanax is not referred to.)

The *Ilioupersis* explains why the gods were angry at the Greeks following the Fall of Troy. As the *Ilioupersis* ends, Athena is plotting revenge against the Greeks. Athena is in no mood to help Odysseus or any other Greek.

- What happened in the *Nostoi*?

Nostoi means homecomings or returns. It describes what happened with the returns of some of the Greek heroes:

- Nestor has little trouble returning home. He apparently did not commit any outrages during the Sack of Troy.
- Little Ajax drowns during the journey home. Agamemnon and Menelaus argue, and they return home separately.
- Menelaus loses many of his ships in a storm and ends up in Egypt for a few years.
- Agamemnon returns home only to be murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. Orestes, Agamemnon's son, avenges the death of Agamemnon by killing his murderers.
- Finally, Menelaus returns home safely.

• **What does *nostos* mean?**

Nostos means “Homecoming” or “Return.” This is important to know because this is a main theme of the *Odyssey*. In this epic poem, we read about the homecoming of Odysseus to Ithaca, the island where he is king. Odysseus has been away from Ithaca for 20 years. He spent 10 years fighting in the Trojan War, and it took him an additional 10 years to return to Ithaca, after having lost all his ships and men.

The great theme of the *Iliad* was *kleos*, which means imperishable glory or the reputation that lives on after one has died if one has accomplished great deeds during one’s battles. The great theme of the *Odyssey* is *nostos*.

The *Iliad* is concerned with the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey* is concerned with the aftermath of the Trojan War.

• **What is the difference between *kleos* epics and *nostos* epics?**

If you want, you can divide ancient epics into two groups: *kleos* epics and *nostos* epics. Both groups involve heroes and adventures. One group is concerned with deeds during war; the other is concerned with deeds during homecoming.

If you want, you can also divide ancient epics up into these two groups: war epics and peace epics.

However, we see battles in the *Odyssey*, and Odysseus is concerned about his *kleos* in the *Odyssey*, so these are not hard and fast differences. Some overlap can exist in the different kinds of epic.

Kleos is different in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, *kleos* is one’s reputation after one has died. Achilles wants to achieve great deeds in battle so that he will be remembered after he has died.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is concerned about his reputation while he is still alive. During all the years he is held captive on an island by a goddess, he seems to be wondering whether people remember him and his deeds and his *kleos*, in addition to especially worrying about his family on Ithaca. When he hears a bard singing of his deeds, this must be a relief for Odysseus — people have not forgotten his deeds, and he still has *kleos*.

• **What does *in medias res* mean?**

In medias res is Latin for “in the middle things,” or as we would say, in the middle of things. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* begin in the middle of their stories, with Homer assuming that his audience knows the background of the stories.

Neither in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* does Homer tell the entire story of the Trojan War. He simply assumes that his audience already knows the story. In the *Iliad* he does not tell the story of the beginning of the Trojan War, but he simply assumes that his audience already knows it. In the *Odyssey* he does not tell the story of the Trojan Horse — he simply assumes that his audience already knows it.

Homer does make it clear at the beginning of the *Odyssey* that this is a *nostos* epic. He makes it clear that Odysseus is longing for his homecoming.

In the *Odyssey*, Homer definitely starts in the middle of the story rather than at the beginning. Odysseus has not returned to Ithaca yet, but the 10 years of wanderings and of being kept a prisoner after the Fall of Troy have already occurred. Homer will let his audience know what happened to Odysseus following the Fall of Troy in some flashback books. Books 9 through 12 will tell the audience of Odysseus' wanderings and adventures following the Fall of Troy.

Homer does not tell the story of the Trojan Horse, which is a great misfortune to us.

• **What is a proem?**

In Book 1 of the *Odyssey*, the bard uses an introduction or a proem to let the audience know what he will sing about. Homer tells the audience the main character of the epic, quickly sketches in previous events, and lets the audience know when the epic is set (when the epic begins in time). He very briefly tells the audience what Odysseus did following the Fall of Troy.

• **How does the *Odyssey* begin?**

The first few lines of the *Odyssey*, in English (Robert Fagles' translation), are these:

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
the hallowed heights of Troy.
Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove —
the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
and the Sungod blotted out the day of their return.
Launch out on his history, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
start from where you will — sing for our time too.
(Fagles 1.1-12)

Compare:

Muse, speak to me now of that resourceful man
who wandered far and wide after ravaging
the sacred citadel of Troy. He came to see
many people's cities, where he learned their customs,
while on the sea his spirit suffered many torments,

as he fought to save his life and lead his comrades home.

But though he wanted to, he could not rescue them —

they all died from their own stupidity, the fools.

They feasted on the cattle of Hyperion,

god of the sun — that's why he snatched away their chance

of getting home someday. So now, daughter of Zeus,

tell us his story, starting anywhere you wish.

(Johnston 1.1-12)

• **What do we learn from the proem?**

The beginning of the proem identifies the hero of the epic: Odysseus, who is “the man of twists and turns” (Fagles 1.1). In addition, we learn that the hero of the epic is the man “who plundered / the hallowed heights of Troy” (Fagles 1.1-2). Of course, Odysseus is the man who thought up the idea of the Trojan Horse. We learn that Odysseus had many adventures and that he wanted his men and himself to return home to Ithaca.

We also learn that Odysseus was unable to secure the homecoming of his men. We will find out that all the men he brought to the Trojan War have died. Many no doubt died in battle, but many survived the Trojan War only to die during their journey home.

This brings up an important question: Is Odysseus a good leader? A good leader should be able to bring at least some of his men back to Ithaca, but Odysseus turns out to be the only survivor among the Ithacans who went to fight in the Trojan War. Of course, it makes a better story if Odysseus arrives on Ithaca alone. It makes his struggle to reestablish himself on Ithaca more interesting than if he simply landed on Ithaca with an army and drove the suitors from his palace with little trouble.

Homer, of course, is on the side of Odysseus, his hero in the epic, and he does not want his audience to lose sympathy for Odysseus; therefore, Homer says straight out at the beginning of the *Odyssey* that Odysseus wanted his men to return to Ithaca, and he struggled to make that happen, but it did not happen because of his men's own “recklessness” (Fagles 1.8). We will find out the details of this later, but Homer tells us at the beginning that Odysseus is not responsible for his men's failure to return home. Instead, his men were reckless and did things that prevented them from having a homecoming. This theme will come up again in the *Odyssey*.

• **Odysseus is not named in the proem, but he is identified by the epithet *polutropos*. What does *polutropos* mean?**

In the *Iliad*, Achilles is named very quickly. Robert Fagles translates the first line of the *Iliad* in this way: “Rage — Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles” (Fagles 1.1). In the proem of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' name does not appear; nevertheless, the audience knows who the hero is.

Homeric heroes often have a descriptive epithet applied to them; for example, swift-footed Achilles and Hector of the glancing helmet. Odysseus' epithet is *polutropos*, which is translated here as “the man of twists and turns” (Fagles 1.1). This is an excellent descriptive epithet for

Odysseus. For one thing, his journey back to Ithaca takes a lot of twists and turns. More importantly, he is a man of cunning. His mind is full of twists and turns. We certainly see that in his invention of the Trojan Horse. Odysseus is crafty. Odysseus is able to think his way out of difficulty.

Even though the *Odyssey* does not name Odysseus by name in its proem, the audience knows immediately who is the hero of the epic.

• **What do we learn from the first word of the *Odyssey*: *andra* or “man”?**

The very first word of the *Iliad* is important, and so is the very first word of the *Odyssey*.

The very first word of the *Iliad* is the *menis*, the Greek word for wrath or anger, and we read about the wrath or anger of Achilles. Achilles is at first angry at Agamemnon, and then he is angry at Hector.

The very first word of the *Odyssey* is *andra* or man, and we read about the adventures of one man: Odysseus. Odysseus faces difficulties and has adventures in his attempt to return to Ithaca, and when he finally returns to Ithaca, he finds more difficulties and has more adventures.

• **Why is the word *nostos* or “homecoming” used so often in the proem of the *Odyssey*?**

The word *nostos* occurs frequently in the proem of the *Odyssey*. In the original Greek it occurs in one or another form three times in the first 15 lines:

Line 5: Odysseus longs for the homecoming of his companions and himself.

Line 9: Odysseus’ men did not see their homecoming because of the Sun god.

Line 15: Odysseus longs for two things — his homecoming and Penelope, his wife.

The word *nostos* appears so frequently in the proem because it is such an important theme of the *Odyssey*.

• **The *Odyssey* starts *in medias res*. At what time does it start?**

The bard asks the Muse, who is his inspiration, to start the story from wherever she wants to. As we already have seen, the Muse starts the story in the middle. Of course, the bard could start the story wherever he wishes. He could have started it immediately after the Trojan War if he wished, or he could have started the story with the Trojan Horse and the Fall of Troy.

However, the bard (and the Muse of Poetry) starts the story in the 10th year following the Fall of Troy. Homer tells his audience what happened to the heroes of the Trojan War after the Fall of Troy.

The other heroes have either made it back home to Greece or they have died. Odysseus is the only hero who has not done either. We find out that the goddess Calypso is holding Odysseus captive on an island. It seems that Odysseus will immediately return home because Zeus sends a messenger to tell Calypso that she must let Odysseus go.

Zeus does this because of the goddess Athena, who is Odysseus’ great patron goddess, a virgin goddess who likes Odysseus very much and usually tries to take care of him.

• **The *Odyssey* starts *in medias res*. At what place does it start?**

At first, it seems as if the *Odyssey* will start with Odysseus on Calypso's island, just as he is being released from seven years of captivity, but this is not the case. It actually starts on Ithaca once the episode with the gods is over. We will not see Odysseus as a character until Book 5 of the *Odyssey*. Instead, we will follow the adventures of Telemachus, Odysseus' son, who undertakes a journey to find news of his father.

• **How is the *Odyssey* organized?**

The narrative structure of the *Odyssey* does not follow a straightforward chronological organization; instead, it is more complex:

Books 1-4: The adventures of Telemachus, Odysseus' son, who undertakes a journey in order to find news of his father. These books are known as the *Telemachy*, so Telemachus stars in his own minor epic poem.

Books 1-2: We see Telemachus on Ithaca. This gives us a glimpse of Ithacan society, and we see Odysseus' palace under siege by the suitors who wish to marry Penelope.

Books 3-4: Telemachus journeys to the mainland to seek news of his father from Nestor and from Menelaus.

Books 5-8: In Books 5-8 we read about Odysseus and his adventures on Calypso's island and following his release from the island. He does not yet land on Ithaca, but he lands on Scheria, the island of the Phaeacians, the kind-hearted people who will return Odysseus to Ithaca.

Books 9-12: These flashback chapters are known as the Great Wanderings. They tell the story of Odysseus' adventures following the Fall of Troy. We read about Odysseus' adventures in the cave of the Cyclops, and we read about how Odysseus' men died. This is the most famous section of the *Odyssey*, and in it Odysseus narrates his own adventures.

Books 13-24: These books have a straightforward chronology with no flashbacks. In these books Odysseus returns to Ithaca and reestablishes himself as king of the island and as husband to Penelope, father to Telemachus, and son to Laertes.

As you can see, the chronology of the *Odyssey* is not straightforward. If we were to have a straightforward chronological order of the *Odyssey*, we would have to reorder the books like this:

1. Books 9-12: These flashback chapters are known as the Great Wanderings. They tell the story of Odysseus' adventures following the Fall of Troy. We read about Odysseus' adventures in the cave of the Cyclops, and we read about how Odysseus' men died. This is the most famous section of the *Odyssey*, and in it Odysseus narrates his own adventures.

2. Books 1-4: The adventures of Telemachus, Odysseus' son, who undertakes a journey in order to find news of his father. These books are known as the *Telemachy*, so Telemachus stars in his own minor epic poem.

a. Books 1-2: We see Telemachus on Ithaca. This gives us a glimpse of Ithacan society, and we see Odysseus' palace under siege by the suitors who wish to marry Penelope.

b. Books 3-4: Telemachus journeys to the mainland to seek news of his father from Nestor and from Menelaus.

and (occurring at the same times as Books 1-4)

2. Books 5-8: In Books 5-8 we read about Odysseus and his adventures on Calypso's island and following his release from the island. He does not yet land on Ithaca, but he lands on Scheria, the island of the Phaeacians, the kind-hearted people who will return Odysseus to Ithaca.

Note: The events of Books 1-4, which are about Telemachus, and Books 5-8, which are about Odysseus, occur at the same time.

3. Books 13-24: These books have a straightforward chronology with no flashbacks. In these books Odysseus returns to Ithaca and reestablishes himself as king of the island and as husband to Penelope, father to Telemachus, and son to Laertes.

• **Is the *Odyssey*'s complex structure good or bad?**

Critics disagree about the complex structure of the *Odyssey*. Some dislike it, but I think it is masterful. I will try to explain why Homer did something very good when he delayed the entrance of Odysseus into the epic until Book 5.

• **What effect does the bard get by delaying Odysseus' entrance for four books?**

Why would Homer delay the entrance of Odysseus into the epic until Book 5? Why would Odysseus not appear in the epic for four entire books? By delaying the appearance of Odysseus into the epic until Book 5, Homer is able to accomplish a couple of things:

1) Homer shows us the situation on Ithaca. We learn how desperately Odysseus is needed back home. The suitors have taken over the palace, they want to marry Penelope, and they would be happy if Telemachus were dead — in fact, they are plotting to kill Telemachus.

2) Homer allows Telemachus to do a notable deed. Telemachus is the son of a hero, and we want him to be heroic. In Books 3-4 Telemachus does something notable.

• **Which problems does Odysseus' absence cause for Penelope, his wife?**

Odysseus' absence for 20 years has caused many problems. Penelope has been without her husband, Telemachus has been without his father, and Ithaca has been without its king. In addition, since Odysseus took the men of Ithaca with him to Troy, Ithaca is a society without fathers.

Odysseus is Missing in Action. This can be harder for a family than knowing that a loved one is dead. If a loved one has died, the family can mourn and then get on with their lives. This is something that all of us do. Or if we have not done it yet, we will do it later because every family knows death. Death is not optional, and we and everybody we love will someday die.

The *Odyssey*, of course, is set in a sexist society. In this society, women are wives and mothers and not much else. Women are expected to be married. In Penelope's case, she doesn't know if she is a wife or a widow. If she is a wife, her duty is to remain faithful to her husband and to take care of his property. If she is a widow, her duty is to marry again and to turn the palace over to Telemachus.

In this society, Penelope cannot get on with her life. Today, a woman can get a divorce with her husband not absent, or after a few years can have her husband declared legally dead. Penelope does not have those options.

Since Penelope does not know whether she is a wife or a widow, she does not know what she ought to do.

Penelope points this out very clearly in Book 19, when she and Odysseus, who is in disguise as an old beggar, speak in the presence of disloyal female servants who would tell the suitors to come and kill the old beggar if they knew that the old beggar was Odysseus:

“so my wavering heart goes shuttling, back and forth:
 Do I stay beside my son and keep all things secure —
 my lands, my serving-women, my grand high-roofed house —
 true to my husband's bed, the people's voice as well?
 Or do I follow, at last, the best man who courts me
 here in the halls, who gives the greatest gifts?”
 (Fagles 19.591-596)

Compare:

“[...] my heart
 moves back and forth in its uncertainty.
 Should I stay with my son and keep careful watch
 on all possessions and my female slaves
 and my large and lofty home, honouring
 my husband's bed and what the people say,
 or go off with the best of those Achaeans
 who court me in my halls — the one who offers
 countless bridal gifts.”
 (Johnston 19.659-667)

• **Which problems does Odysseus' absence cause for Telemachus, his son?**

Telemachus also does not know what to do. Should he wait for his father to return, assuming that his father is still alive? Or should he assert himself and throw the suitors out? Because he does not know whether Odysseus, his father, is still alive or not, Telemachus does not know what to do. If Telemachus attempts to throw out the suitors, he may be killed. If Telemachus waits for his father to return, perhaps Odysseus will come back with an army and retake the palace with little problem.

Neither Penelope nor Telemachus know what they should do because they don't know whether Odysseus is dead or alive.

• **Which problems does Odysseus' absence cause for society on Ithaca?**

Odysseus' absence has also negatively affected his society. Ithaca, like the other societies in Homer, is a monarchy. Odysseus is the king, and he has not been present for 20 years. Because Odysseus is not present, he is not able to make Ithaca a law-abiding society. Because of this, and because of a lack of fathers to control them, the young men who are the suitors are running wild. They are not behaving with regard for the gods. They are at Odysseus' palace every day, eating his food, drinking his wine, trying to make Penelope marry one of them, and plotting to kill Telemachus.

In addition, in Telemachus we see another effect of a lack of fathers. Telemachus is very much a mama's boy. He must be 20 or 21 at this point, but when the *Odyssey* begins, he has never asserted himself as a man. Telemachus is immature at this point.

Ithacan society is in disarray. The suitors don't respect Odysseus, whom they think is dead, and they don't respect Penelope or Telemachus. The suitors are wasting the property of Odysseus and not giving anything in return. They hope that one of them will marry Penelope and become the new king of Ithaca.

• **Why does Homer start the *Odyssey* at this exact time?**

Odysseus is needed on Ithaca — right now. Things are very bad. The suitors may finally force Penelope to marry one of them, and they may succeed in killing Telemachus.

For a long time, Penelope has managed to hold off the suitors, but she may not be able to hold them off any more. Penelope has managed to raise Telemachus, and soon Telemachus will have to either take action or allow the suitors to deprive him of his rights.

In addition, for a while, Penelope was able to hold off the suitors with her famous weaving trick, but the suitors have discovered the trick, and it looks as if Penelope will be forced to marry one of the suitors.

Penelope's famous weaving trick was to tell the suitors that she would marry one of them after she had finished weaving a shroud for Laertes, Odysseus' father, to be buried in. Laertes is still alive, but Penelope is preparing for the future, when Laertes will die. Weaving takes time, and when Laertes dies, Penelope will not be able to weave a shroud at that time. Because Odysseus' sister is a married woman who lives on Same, an island near Ithaca, and because Odysseus' mother is dead, it is Penelope's duty to weave the burial shroud.

Each day, Penelope weaves the shroud, and each night, she unweaves what she has woven. This trick worked for three years, but eventually one of the servant girls told the suitors what Penelope was doing. They caught her in the act of unweaving the shroud, and they have forced her to finish weaving the shroud.

Homer carefully chooses when to begin the *Odyssey*. Things are at a crisis point on Ithaca, and Odysseus is needed home. Telemachus has grown up, and he needs to take action. Penelope has finished weaving the shroud, and now the suitors are going to force her to marry one of them.

By delaying the entrance of Odysseus until Book 5, Homer has shown us the situation on Ithaca and how badly Odysseus is needed there.

Part Four: Xenia

Important Terms

Xenia

Xenoi

Xenos: guest, host, stranger, friend, and foreigner

Xenophobia

Zeus *Xenios*

Telemachy: the 1st four books of the *Odyssey* (a mini-epic about Telemachus, Odysseus' son)

Introduction

In this section, we are going to look at and define a key theme of the *Odyssey* — the concept of *xenia*. The beginning of the *Odyssey* — the first four books, which are known as the *Telemachy* — examine the concept of *xenia*. We see that the suitors abuse *xenia*. They are bad guests.

• What does *xenia* mean?

Xenia is often defined as the guest-host relationship. English does not have a word like *xenia*, although “hospitality” is sometimes used as a translation of *xenia*. However, “hospitality” is too weak a word for what the ancient Greeks meant. The word *xenia* carries with it an obligation to the gods. Zeus is the god of *xenia*, and when people abuse their sacred duty of *xenia*, they are disrespecting Zeus.

• In which way is *xenia* a reciprocal relationship?

Xenia is a reciprocal relationship between guest and host in both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*.

Xenia is a reciprocal relationship between two *xenoi*. (*Xenoi* is the plural; *xenos* is the singular.)

• Which meanings does *xenos* have?

Xenos can mean five different things, depending on the context: guest, host, stranger, friend, and foreigner.

In ancient Greece, no hotels or motels existed. If you were traveling and you arrived at a town in the evening, you would look for hospitality at a home. In such a case, you and your host would be *xenoi*.

In this case, you would be a guest, a stranger, and a foreigner. You would be a guest in this home. Because your host doesn't know you, you would be a stranger. Because you aren't from this town, you would be a foreigner.

Of course, your host would be a host.

In addition, you and your host would be friends. You would not be friends in the sense that you have known and liked each other for a long time. You would be friends because you have participated in the guest-host relationship.

By the way, *xenia* is a root word of *xenophobia*, or fear of strangers.

Also by the way, modern Greece has the tradition today of *xenophilia*, or of showing hospitality to tourists.

• **Which safeguards protect against the violation of *xenia*?**

There can be a lot of danger in such a relationship. What would happen if either the guest or the host were a robber and a killer? Bad things.

Therefore, there needs to be some kind of safeguard in place. The host must not murder his guest. The guest must not murder his host.

The ancient Greeks did have a safeguard for *xenia*: Zeus *Xenios*, which means Zeus, the god of *xenia*. Anyone who does not follow the rules of *xenia* is not doing the will of Zeus. This offends Zeus, and eventually the offender will pay for his transgression.

Sinbad's Poverty Tour: Early in Sinbad the comedian's career, he knew that he needed to have more experience if he wanted to be a stand-up comedian. Therefore, he went out on what he called his Poverty Tour. He simply loaded up the truck of his car with some tools and clothing, drove to a city, and looked for places where he could do his act. He would tell the owner of the club that he wouldn't charge him anything, but would simply pass the hat after his act. This was OK with the owners, as it saved them money. Of course, Sinbad didn't make much money that way, and he often slept in his car. To solve that problem, when he did his act for the last time at night, he would ask the audience if someone would let him sleep on their couch. Of course, Sinbad is a big guy and he can take care of himself. He would look over the prospective host, and if he looked OK, he would go home with him and sleep on the couch. If the prospective host looked dangerous, Sinbad would say that he was going to get his car, but he would drive off. Sinbad was a good guest, by the way. In his day job, he had done plumbing and carpentry work. He would unobtrusively look around his host's apartment, find something that needed fixed, and then he would say, "Hey, I've got my tools in my car. Let me fix that for you." Sinbad says that he always left his host's apartment in better shape than it was when he arrived.

• **In which way was the cause of the Trojan War a violation of *xenia*?**

Of course, the Trojan War began because of a violation of *xenia*. The Trojan Paris was a guest of Menelaus, King of Sparta. When you are a guest, you aren't supposed to run away with your host's wife and much of his treasure. We know what happened to Troy as a result of this transgression of *xenia*: the Greeks conquered Troy. As you can see, *xenia* is important in the *Odyssey*, but it is important also in the *Iliad*.

• **How is *xenia* an important theme in the first four books of the *Odyssey*?**

We will see *xenia* throughout the *Odyssey*. Odysseus is often going to have to rely on the kindness of strangers. He hopes that they will show him good *xenia*. Sometimes Odysseus will receive good *xenia*; at other times Odysseus will receive the worst *xenia* possible.

The first four books of the *Odyssey* show us *xenia* in action. In the first two books, we see the bad *xenia* of the suitors. They are violating *xenia*. They are eating up the substance of their host and are giving nothing in return. They are plotting to kill Telemachus, who is their host in the

absence of Odysseus. They are trying to force Penelope to marry one of them. Guests are not supposed to act this way.

Books 3 and 4 show us the way that *xenia* is supposed to work. Telemachus visits Nestor and Menelaus on the mainland. They are excellent hosts, and Telemachus is an excellent guest. Of course, this is quite a contrast to the way that the suitors are acting on Ithaca.

The first four books of the *Odyssey* feature Telemachus as the most important character, and so they are known as the *Telemachy*. In Books 1 and 2, we see Telemachus acting as host to the suitors. In Books 3 and 4, we see Telemachus as the guest of Nestor and Menelaus. Therefore, we see *xenia* from both the perspective of the host and from the perspective of a guest.

• **Why is *xenia* important for our understanding of the suitors?**

In order to understand the suitors, we have to understand *xenia* because the suitors are violating *xenia*. The suitors are not acting the way that guests should act. This is something that Telemachus points out in Book 2, when he calls a council on Ithaca. What are the suitors doing? They are eating all of Telemachus' food and drinking all of his wine. They are wasting all of Telemachus' property.

The guests have long overstayed their welcome. They should have left a long time ago. Now, they have been partying in Odysseus' palace for three long years. Each day, more of Odysseus' cows, sheep, goats, and pigs are brought to the palace to be slaughtered and to be cooked as a feast for the suitors.

One of the reasons, by the way, to be a good guest and a good host is because if you are a host this year, you may be a guest next year, or if you are a guest this year you may be a host next year. A host should feel obligated to be a good host because of the times that he has been a guest in the past. We see that with Menelaus in Book 4, who becomes angry when one of his men wants Telemachus to seek hospitality elsewhere. Because Menelaus had received good *xenia* during his travels, he wishes to give good *xenia* now.

The suitors take and take, and they give nothing in return to Telemachus. In the assembly in Book 2 in the *Odyssey*, Telemachus says,

“[...] they infest our palace day and night,
they butcher our cattle, our sheep, our fat goats,
feasting themselves sick, swilling our glowing wine
as if there's no tomorrow — all of it, squandered.”
(Fagles 2.59-62)

Compare:

“[...] they hang around our house, day after day,
slaughtering oxen, fat goats, and sheep.
They keep on feasting, drinking sparkling wine
without restraint, and they consume so much.”

(Johnston 2.73-76)

Telemachus points out that the suitors give nothing in return. They feast and feast, and they give Telemachus nothing in return.

- **An example of bad *xenia*.**

How evil were the people of Sodom? When a stranger arrived in their city, each citizen would give him a piece of gold that had been marked with the name of the giver. The stranger would be grateful, of course, to receive the gold, but he would quickly find that he was unable to spend it. Each time he would attempt to buy food, the shop owners would refuse to sell it to him. In addition, the stranger found that he was unable to leave the city — the guards would not allow him to pass the gates. Therefore, the stranger — despite his pile of gold coins — would slowly starve to death. When the stranger had starved to death, the citizens would come by the pile of gold coins, pick up the coin with their name marked on it and wait to starve to death another stranger. (Source: Simon Certner, editor, *101 Jewish Stories for Schools, Clubs and Camps*, p. 136.)

- **Note**

For an introductory lecture by Ian Johnston on Homer's *Odyssey*, see

<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/introser/Homer.htm>

[Odyssey, Book 1:](#)
[“Athena Inspires the Prince”](#)
[“Athena Visits Ithaca”](#)

Important Terms

Telemachy: the first four books of the *Odyssey*, which are about Odysseus’ son, Telemachus

Introduction

In Book 1, we get our first glimpse of the suitors, and of Telemachus. We get our first glimpse of *xenia* in action.

• What do we learn from our very first glimpse of Telemachus?

In our very first glimpse of Telemachus, we see him receiving a *xenos*: Athena, who is in disguise. We see him acting properly and doing the right thing by welcoming this stranger to his palace.

Penelope has raised Telemachus well; she has taught him to observe *xenia*.

• How does Telemachus show that he knows and practices proper *xenia*?

In the *Odyssey*, many scenes show a host greeting a guest. This is the first such scene we see in the *Odyssey*. Telemachus sees the disguised Athena, and he goes to her and says, “Greetings, *xenos*!” Robert Fagles translates this as “Greetings, stranger!” (Fagles 1.144). He leads her inside, and he takes her spear from her.

The taking away of Athena’s spear is interesting. Obviously, you don’t want an armed stranger in your house, so to be polite you relieve the stranger of any weapons he is carrying. You put the weapon to one side, and you make sure that the guest is not going to kill you. You want to make sure that the guest knows and understands *xenia*.

In this society, weapons are common. We read:

Once in the high-roofed hall, he took her lance
 and fixed it firm in a burnished rack against
 a sturdy pillar, there where row on row of spears,
 embattled Odysseus’ spears, stood stacked and waiting.
 (Fagles 1.148-151)

Compare:

He moved up near Athena, grasped her right hand,
 and took her bronze-tipped spear.
 (Johnston 1.157-158)

Also:

Once they'd come inside the high-roofed house,
 he walked to a tall pillar carrying the spear
 and set it in a finely-polished rack, which held
 many other spears belonging to Odysseus.

(Johnston 1.165-168)

A good author will make even small details count. Here we learn that many spears are in the great hall. The fact that weapons are in the great hall will become important later, after Odysseus has returned to Ithaca. In other words, we have foreshadowing here.

The 6th edition of *A Handbook to Literature* by C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon defines “foreshadowing” in this way: “The presentation of material in a work in such a way that later events are prepared for” (201).

Here are a couple of other definitions:

Foreshadowing is the use of hints or clues to suggest what will happen later in literature.

Source: http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/foreshadowing.html

Definition: A literary device used to hint at events that will follow later in the story, sometimes generating feelings of anxiety or suspense. Anton Chekhov once said that “if there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last.” That remark captures the essence of foreshadowing.

Source: <http://contemporarylit.about.com/library/bldef-foreshadowing>

Of course, plays also contain foreshadowing. According to the playwright Anton Chekhov, “If there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last.” Here we have spears hanging on the wall, and many spears will be thrown in the climax to the *Odyssey*.

After Telemachus has relieved Athena of her weapon, he offers her food, a bath, and a place to sleep for the night. After she has eaten, he then asks her who she is. Of course, he asks her who *he* is because she is disguised as a male. In this society, solitary (and most) travelers would be males.

This is an important point: Only after she has eaten does he ask her who she is. *Xenia* is not supposed to depend on whether you know or like the guest. Rather, if a stranger needs hospitality, it is your responsibility to provide that hospitality even if you have never seen or heard of this person before. It doesn't matter if the stranger is the great-grandson of an enemy of yours. One reason not to ask who a person is before they eat, is that if you did that, you might be tempted to deny that person hospitality if you find out that the person is the great-grandson of an enemy of yours. If you ask who a person is after they have eaten, you have had some time to get to know that person, to bond with them over food, and to judge them on their merits rather than by whom they may be related to.

• **What do we learn from our very first glimpse of the suitors?**

Athena, who is in disguise, visits Telemachus, and she sees the suitors. She is disgusted with the suitors. We read:

There she met the suitors,
 those arrogant men, who were enjoying themselves
 playing checkers right outside the door, sitting down
 on hides of cattle they themselves had butchered.
 Some heralds and attendants were keeping busy
 blending wine and water in the mixing bowls.
 Some were wiping tables down with porous sponges
 and setting them in place, while others passed around
 huge amounts of meat.
 (Johnston 1.139-147)

What the suitors do each day is party and eat food and drink wine that does not belong to them. They also gamble.

By the way, feasting each day was not something people did at this time. Very few people were wealthy enough to do that. The proper occasions for feasting were occasions such as celebrating a wedding or making a sacrifice to the gods.

• **What do we learn from Telemachus' conversation with the disguised Athena? (She is disguised as a human male named Mentos.)**

We learn a number of things about Telemachus in his conversation with the disguised Athena. One major thing we learn is that he is careful to observe *xenia*. He treats the stranger — the disguised Athena — properly. We also learn about the situation on Ithaca from what Telemachus tells Athena in their conversation.

Telemachus has two main concerns:

- 1) Telemachus is grieving over his absent father.
- 2) Telemachus is angry at the suitors' behavior.

Athena does have a purpose in coming to Telemachus. In Book 1, she tells Zeus that

“I'll go to Ithaca and urge his son
 to be more active, put courage in his heart,
 so he will call those long-haired Achaeans
 to assembly, and there address the suitors,
 who keep on slaughtering his flocks of sheep

and shambling bent-horned cattle. I'll send him
 on a trip to Sparta and sandy Pylos,
 to learn about his father's voyage home —
 he may hear of it somewhere — and to gain
 a worthy reputation among men.”

(Johnston 1.116-125)

Many readers have noticed that Telemachus is immature. He has to be at least 20 years old because Odysseus is his father, and Odysseus has been away for 20 years, but Telemachus has not asserted himself as a man.

• **What is the disguised Athena's advice to Telemachus? What does she think of the suitors?**

Clearly, Athena does not like the suitors. She wants to encourage Telemachus to stand up to the suitors. She even tells Telemachus that the first time she saw Odysseus he had been sailing and hunting for man-killing poison to use on his man-killing arrows (Fagles 1.303-306). I regard this as a hint for Telemachus to do the same or something similar.

Athena encourages Telemachus to take action against the suitors in two ways. Athena tells Telemachus:

- 1) Call a council of all the men of Ithaca.
- 2) Assert himself to the suitors.

Telemachus does take Athena's advice. In Book 2, he calls a council on Ithaca and denounces the suitors for their violation of *xenia*, and in Books 3 and 4 he visits the mainland so that he can speak to Nestor and Menelaus in an attempt to find news about his father.

Athena is helping Telemachus to grow up. Odysseus will be home soon, and Athena knows it. She has spoken to Zeus, who has sent a messenger to Calypso to tell her to let Odysseus go. The council and the trip to the mainland are not really necessary except as a way to encourage Telemachus to assert himself as a man. Of course, Athena does not want Odysseus to be disappointed in Telemachus. Telemachus needs to do a notable deed before his father returns to Ithaca.

Athena advises Telemachus about what he ought to do. If he discovers that Odysseus is dead, then he ought to figure out a way to kill all the suitors. If he discovers that Odysseus is alive, then he ought to wait one more year for Odysseus to return home before taking action against the suitors:

“If you hear reports your father is alive
 and coming home, you could hang on a year
 still wasting his resources. But if you hear
 that he is dead and gone, then come back here,

to your dear native land, build him a tomb,
 and carry out as many funeral rites
 as are appropriate. Give your mother
 over to a husband. When you've done that
 and brought these matters to a close, then think,
 deep in your mind and heart, how you might kill
 these suitors in your home, either openly
 or by some trick. You must not keep on acting
 like a child — you're now too old for that.
 Have you not heard how excellent Orestes
 won fame among all men when he cut down
 his father's murderer, sly Aegisthus,
 because he'd slain his famous father?"

(Johnston 1.393-409)

Athena does tell Telemachus a lot while she is disguised as Mentos:

"For there's no chance
 that brave Odysseus has died somewhere.
 No. He's still alive but being detained
 on an island, surrounded by the sea,
 with wild and dangerous men restraining him,
 holding him back against his will."

(Johnston 1.260-265)

Also:

"Odysseus will not stay away much longer
 from his dear native land, not even if
 he's chained in iron fetters. He'll devise
 some way to get back home, for he's a man
 of infinite resources."

(Johnston 1.272-275)

However, since Athena is disguised when she says these things, Telemachus doesn't put much credence in them, apparently even after he learns that Mentos is really Athena in disguise.

• **Describe the relationship of Telemachus and Penelope as it appears in Book 1.**

After Athena leaves (she flies away, so Telemachus knows that she is a god), Penelope comes into the Great Hall to request that the bard sing about something other than "The Achaeans' Journey Home from Troy" — it makes her think of Odysseus and feel sad.

Telemachus gives orders to Penelope:

"Go up to your rooms and keep busy there
with your own work, the spindle and the loom.
Tell your servants to perform their duties.
Talking is a man's concern, every man's,
but especially mine, since in this house
I'm the one in charge."
(Johnston 1.481-486)

We know that Telemachus does have some heart put into him by Athena because he orders his mother to go back to her quarters and do womanly tasks. That may sound sexist (Homeric society is sexist), but we are supposed to approve of his words to Penelope. After all, Penelope does:

Astonished at his words,
Penelope went back to her own chambers,
setting in her heart the prudent words her son had said.
(Johnston 1.486-488)

Penelope may approve of what Telemachus has said because it shows that he is growing up. He is asserting himself as the master of the house (although the suitors still hold a lot of power and mostly push him around). This may sound sexist, but I think that we are supposed to approve of his words to Penelope. For one thing, Telemachus is keeping Penelope away from the suitors.

Here is an anecdote about something that may sound sexist, at least at first:

Subject: Smart women

Barbara Walters of 20/20 (USA) did a story on gender roles in Kabul several years before the Afghan conflict. She noted that women customarily walked about 5 paces behind their husbands.

She returned to Kabul recently and observed that women still walk behind their husbands, but now seem to walk even further back and are happy with the old custom.

Ms. Walters approached one of the Afghani women and asked, “Why do you now seem happy with the old custom that you used to try and change?”

“Land mines,” said the woman.

MORAL: BEHIND EVERY MAN IS A SMART WOMAN.

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Also, Telemachus may be showing good sense in keeping Penelope away from the suitors. You don't want a mostly defenseless woman around a lot of young men who have been drinking.

Odyssey, Book 2:
“Telemachus Sets Sail”
“Telemachus Prepares for His Voyage”

Introduction

In Book 2, Telemachus grows up a little and calls a council on Ithaca. In the council, he denounces the suitors.

• What does Telemachus do in the council?

Telemachus takes the advice of his guest. This is wise; after all, in Book 1 Athena flies away from him, and so Telemachus knows that his visitor was a god in disguise:

This said, Athena with the gleaming eyes departed,
 flying off like some wild sea bird. In his heart she put
 courage and strength. She made him recall his father,
 even more so than before. In his mind, Telemachus
 pictured her, and his heart was full of wonder.
 He thought she was a god. So he moved away.

(Johnston 1.436-441)

Telemachus asserts himself in the council he calls. He denounces the suitors for their violation of *xenia*.

An old man, Aegyptius, lets us know that this is the first council that has been called since Odysseus left for Troy.

• How is Telemachus backed up by the seer Halitherses?

The prophet Halitherses predicts disaster for the suitors if they don't stop violating *xenia*. Halitherses, of course, is aware that the gods approve of *xenia* and disapprove of anyone who violates *xenia*. In the Trojan War, Troy fell because of its guilt — Paris violated *xenia* by running away with Helen, Menelaus' wife. In the *Odyssey*, the suitors will die because of their violation of *xenia*.

Halitherses sees an omen: a bird-sign. Two eagles attack each other in the sky. As a seer or seer, Halitherses is able to interpret the bird-sign correctly: Odysseus will return and fight the suitors.

• How does Eurymachus respond to Halitherses and Telemachus?

Now that Halitherses and Telemachus have spoken, Eurymachus, one of the leaders of the suitors, replies. In his reply, we find out just how evil the suitors are. The suitors do not respect the rules of their society; they are evil. The speech that Eurymachus makes here is very important in revealing the character of the suitors and in revealing how the audience ought to regard them.

Halitherses has stated that Odysseus will return to Ithaca soon and that the suitors need to change the way they act. Eurymachus and the suitors, however, believe that Odysseus will never return to Ithaca. In his speech, Eurymachus makes clear that he does not respect the rules of *xenia*. No suitors contradict him, so they don't respect the rules of *xenia* either.

Answering Halitherses, Eurymachus says,

“Old man, you should go home and prophesy
to your own children, so that something bad
does not happen to them later. In these things
I can foretell events much better than you can.
There are lots of birds flying here and there
beneath the sunshine, and not all of them
are omens of disaster. Odysseus
has perished far away, and how I wish
you had died there with him. If you had,
you wouldn't utter prophecies like these
or be encouraging Telemachus
when he's enraged, in hopes you'll get a gift,
something he might give you for your house.”

(Johnston 2.238-250)

Eurymachus continues to insult the prophet, and by extension, the prophet's god:

“You know many things an old man knows,
so if your words deceive a younger man
and incite him to get angry, first of all,
he'll be worse off, and, with these men here,
won't have the slightest power to act.
And on you, old man, we'll lay a penalty
that will pain your heart to pay — your sorrow
will be difficult to bear.”

(Johnston 2.252-259)

After threatening the old seer — and in this society, both seers and the aged are respected — Eurymachus makes it clear that he and the other suitors will not respect the rules of *xenia*. He

and the other suitors are not going to leave Odysseus' palace. Instead, Eurymachus tells Telemachus to tell his mother to choose a suitor and marry him. The suitors have no intention of leaving the palace until Penelope has married one of them.

Eurymachus concludes by making it clear that he does not respect his host, Telemachus:

“[...] Who's there to fear? I ask you.
 Surely not Telemachus, with all his tiresome threats.
 Nor do we balk, old man, at the prophecies you mouth —
 they'll come to grief, they'll make us hate you more.
 The prince's wealth will be devoured as always,
 mercilessly, no reparations, ever ... not
 while the queen drags out our hopes to wed her,”
 (Fagles 2.221-227)

Compare:

“[...] there's no one
 we're afraid of yet — not Telemachus,
 for all his wordiness — nor do we care
 about a prophecy which you, old man,
 may spout. It won't come to fruition,
 and people will despise you all the more.
 And his possessions will be eaten up
 in this shameful way. There will never be
 compensation given, so long as she
 keeps putting off Achaeans in this marriage.”
 (Johnston 2.267-276)

• What do we learn about Eurymachus and the suitors from Eurymachus' response to Halitherses and Telemachus?

The analysis of Eurymachus' speech is very important. In his speech, Eurymachus has shown contempt for all the things that his society regards as important. In his speech, Eurymachus has shown just how contemptuous and contemptible he and the other suitors are.

In his speech, Eurymachus has shown contempt for all of these things:

- Eurymachus has shown disrespect to Halitherses, who is an old man. The Homeric society respected the old, but Eurymachus does not.

- Eurymachus has shown disrespect to Halitherses, who is a prophet. Again, the Homeric society respected seers and prophets, but Eurymachus does not.
- Eurymachus has shown disrespect to Halitherses, who is a prophet who serves Zeus. By disrespecting Halitherses, Eurymachus is also disrespecting Zeus. It is never a good idea to disrespect a god. One should especially not disrespect Zeus, who is the strongest of the gods.
- Eurymachus is disrespecting Odysseus by moving into his palace and courting his wife and disrespecting his son, Telemachus. Eurymachus thinks that Odysseus is dead, and he certainly does not mourn Odysseus' supposed death. Odysseus is the King of Ithaca, and therefore Odysseus is disrespecting his King.
- Eurymachus is disrespecting Telemachus, Odysseus' son. If Odysseus is dead, then apparently Telemachus would become King. Again, Eurymachus is disrespecting his King.
- Eurymachus is disrespecting the rules of *xenia*. Guests aren't supposed to outstay their welcome. Eurymachus and the other suitors have been feasting in Odysseus' palace for years. By disrespecting *xenia*, Eurymachus is disrespecting the god of *xenia*: Zeus.
- Eurymachus makes it clear that he does not care about prophecies. Prophecies come from the gods and goddesses, and they are mouthed or interpreted by seers, and so again Eurymachus is disrespecting the gods and the servants of the gods.
- Eurymachus makes it clear that he and the other suitors are going to stay in Odysseus' palace until Penelope marries one of them. Again, he disrespects the rules of *xenia* and the god of *xenia*.

Because none of the suitors objects to what Eurymachus says, and because none of the suitors listens to Halitherses and changes his ways, we know that all the suitors agree with Halitherses. Civilization has rules, and Eurymachus and the other suitors reject those rules.

In the *Odyssey*, the good guys win, and the bad guys die. Odysseus and Telemachus are the good guys, and the suitors — all 108 of them — are the bad guys. Odysseus and Telemachus, with a little help from a few loyal servants and a goddess, are going to kill all 108 suitors.

After analyzing Eurymachus' speech, we can, I hope, see that the suitors deserve to die. They are uncivilized, and the world is better off without them.

• What happens to sons in a society without fathers?

The society on Ithaca (and on surrounding islands) is unusual. What is unusual is that it is a society without fathers. When Odysseus went to the Trojan War, he took the fathers with him. The males who were left were the old men, who are very old now, and the very young, who have become young men without having father figures in their lives.

One thing that you can investigate as you read the *Odyssey* is what happens in a society without fathers. We can see what happens by looking at Telemachus and by looking at the suitors.

Telemachus seems to be a bit of a mama's boy. He is at least 20 years old because his father has been gone for 20 years. He has never become a man. We can guess why the suitors moved in.

Telemachus was just a boy when they moved in, and the suitors have never left. Now Telemachus has grown up, and he needs to assert himself. When he visits the mainland, he will receive hints that he ought to fight the suitors. Of course, the suitors number 108, so fighting them can be difficult. One thing that Telemachus could do, of course, is to go to the mainland and raise an army. He could visit his father's friends and seek help in driving out the suitors from his palace. One effect of a society without fathers is that boys can remain immature, like Telemachus is now. Telemachus is not fully a man at this point. Fortunately, he will receive help. Athena, in disguise, has visited him to encourage him to do a notable deed: to visit the mainland to seek news of his father. If Odysseus had stayed at Ithaca, he would have been able to help Telemachus become mature at an earlier age.

The suitors give us another effect of a society without fathers. The suitors are uncivilized. No fathers were around to restrain them and to teach them how to act. If fathers had lived at Ithaca, the suitors would never have moved into Odysseus' palace.

Obviously, Ithacan society is dysfunctional at this point. Things are badly rotten in Ithaca.

What kind of a character is Telemachus? Is he mature or immature? Does he become more mature in Books 1 and 2?

Telemachus is immature at the beginning of the *Odyssey*. The suitors have taken over his household, and he does nothing about it. However, I am sympathetic to Telemachus. He is a young man of 20, and 108 suitors are in his household. In addition, in his society there are no police forces and no judges that he can go to, to get help. In addition, the suitors moved in before he was even a man, so he could not stop them then. Telemachus is in a difficult situation.

What can Telemachus do about it? Probably, very little. He can wait for his father, Odysseus, to come home and set everything to rights. He can call a council on Ithaca and ask for help. He can go to the mainland and ask for help (and perhaps raise an army to fight for him).

Basically, Telemachus does all three. The waiting works, as Odysseus does come home and set everything to rights. Telemachus does call a council, but the suitors are there, and they put down any call to action against them. Telemachus does go to the mainland to ask about his father, but he does not receive help in the form of soldiers, although he does hear that his father was alive recently.

Telemachus gains some maturity in Books 1 and 2. He speaks out against the suitors, in public and directly to their faces. The suitors are astonished by what he tells him, and they recognize that he can become dangerous to them. Thus, later they will plot to kill him. Already, they are thinking about it. In addition, he speaks sharply to Penelope and says that he is in charge. This may seem harsh (and sexist) to modern ears, but in this culture, it is a sign of maturity. A grown man should not be subservient to his mother.

By the end of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus will have grown up completely.

Conclusion

At the end of Book 2, Telemachus has set sail with a few friends. He is going to the mainland, to Pylos, to see King Nestor, who fought with Odysseus in the Trojan War.

Odyssey, Book 3:
“King Nestor Remembers”
“Telemachus Visits Nestor in Pylos”

Important Terms

Mentor

Kleos: glory or fame or reputation

Timê: honor

Geras: prize of honor

Introduction

We have done a number of important things so far. We have discussed the background of the *Odyssey*, the theme of *xenia*, and the first two books of the *Odyssey*.

• Which important things do Books 3 and 4 do?

Books 3 and 4 do several important things:

- 1) Telemachus will see some important male role models. Both Nestor and Menelaus are fully grown, fully mature men. Both are important advisors. Both have important experience.
- 2) *Xenia* is working properly in these books. We have seen Telemachus as host already. He was a good host to Athena, but the suitors were poor guests. Now we see Telemachus in the role of guest. Telemachus is a good guest, and Nestor in Book 3 and Menelaus in Book 4 are good hosts.
- 3) Telemachus grows up a little. Telemachus does a notable deed, a deed worthy of the son of Odysseus. He journeys to the mainland to find news of his father. From Menelaus, Telemachus in fact learns news of his father; unfortunately, the news is not recent.

• Who have been Telemachus' role models so far?

Telemachus has, of course, grown up around other people who have been role models for him. Unfortunately, he has not had the role model of a father, which is what he needs to become mature.

The suitors have been role models for Telemachus; however, they have been bad role models for him. They are not male role models that anyone would wish for a son. They are wild, reckless, and uncivilized. They do not respect the things that they ought to respect. In Book 2, Eurymachus made a speech that showed that the suitors don't respect Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachus, *xenia*, old men, prophets, and the gods. The suitors have lived around the palace for approximately three years. The suitors probably were nice at first, but they have taken more and more advantage of their hosts as time went on. No male authority figure has been around to restrain him. Now they are completely outside of civilized society, and the only thing that can be done with them is to kill them.

Laertes is Odysseus' father and Telemachus' grandfather. He was an old man when Odysseus left for Troy, and he is a very old man now. He has been unable to resist the suitors and has given up and gone to work like a slave in the fields. He is a good person, but Telemachus needs a more vigorous role model. When Odysseus succeeds in ridding his palace of suitors and sees his father for the first time in 20 years, he is shocked at how his father is dressed. His father looks like a slave.

Servants — that is, slaves — are also role models for Telemachus. Some of the slaves are loyal to Odysseus and Telemachus; some are not loyal to them. All of the slaves are forced to serve the suitors, either willingly or unwillingly. Telemachus needs free role models.

Penelope is a good mother to Telemachus, but he needs a male role model.

Fortunately, Telemachus will meet up with some role models during his visit to the mainland. Nestor and Menelaus are good role models for him. So is Pisistratus, Nestor's son who becomes a traveling companion to Telemachus.

• Nestor is sacrificing animals when Telemachus arrives. The sacrifice will result in a meat feast. Compare this kind of feast with the feasting done by the suitors in King Odysseus' palace.

At the end of Book 2, Telemachus set sail. The first place he visits on the mainland is Pylos, which is the land of Nestor, the able, wise, old advisor of the Achaeans during the Trojan War. Athena, who is now disguised as Odysseus' old friend Mentor, guides Telemachus and his ship. (Of course, this is where we get the word "mentor," meaning an older, helpful guide for a young person.)

Here in Pylos, a feast will be held because Nestor is sacrificing animals. This is meant to serve as a contrast to the feasting of the suitors in Odysseus' palace.

Two sacrifices are held on the two days that Telemachus stays with Nestor. The first sacrifice is to Poseidon, while the second is to Athena. These two gods are concerned greatly with Odysseus. Poseidon hates Odysseus at this time and wants to hinder his homecoming, while Athena is fond of Odysseus at this time and wants to help him return home. Sacrifices show honor to the gods; Nestor is a pious man.

There are only two times that feasts would ordinarily be held in ancient Greece at this time:

- 1) When there is a sacrifice to the gods, as we see here in Book 3.
- 2) When a major event such as a wedding is being celebrated, as we will see in Book 4, when Hermione, the daughter of Menelaus and Helen, marries the son of Achilles. This is actually a double wedding, as Menelaus' son by a concubine is also being wedded.

Other than these two types of occasions, feasts would be rare in ancient Greece. The ancient Greeks did not have the advantage of modern methods of raising and growing food. They would look at the way we eat and think that we are filthy rich — especially when they would see the amount of food we waste. The ancient Greeks would also look at the suitors' feasting and realize that they are behaving really badly.

• **How does Athena (disguised as Mentor) help Telemachus to grow up when he arrives at King Nestor's palace?**

Telemachus is a little shy and awkward when he reaches Pylos and Nestor. Athena, who is disguised as Mentor, gets out of the ship first while Telemachus lags behind. Athena has to tell Telemachus not to be shy:

Telemachus climbed out last, with Athena far in front
and the bright-eyed goddess urged the prince along:
“Telemachus, no more shyness, this is not the time!
We sailed the seas for this, for news of your father — ”
(Fagles 3.14-17)

Compare:

With Athena showing him the way, Telemachus
stepped from the ship. The bright-eyed goddess spoke to him:
“Telemachus, no need to feel embarrassed,
not in the least, for this is why you've sailed
across the sea, to get information
about your father — where he is buried
and what fate has befallen him.”
(Johnston 3.14-18)

• **What kind of host — and father — is Nestor?**

Nestor is an excellent host, and he shows excellent *xenia*. So does his family, including his son Pisistratus.

We find out that Pisistratus, Nestor's son, has been raised properly. He greets the guests (Telemachus and Athena, disguised as Mentor) with a cup of wine, and he gives the gold cup to Athena so she can drink first. (Of course, Pisistratus thinks that she is Mentor, and she gets the cup first because she appears to be the older man.) This society respects the old, and so Mentor (Athena) is given a drink first. Pisistratus says to Athena,

“Since he's a younger man [Telemachus] of my own age,
I'll start by giving you this golden cup.”
(Johnston 3.59-60)

Why has Pisistratus, Nestor's son, been raised properly? He has had a good male role model in his father, who has been present for the last 10 years. Nestor made it home immediately after the Trojan War. We see that Nestor is a good male role model by the way that Nestor behaves.

Nestor observes all the rules of *xenia*. For example, when Telemachus arrives, the first thing that Nestor does is to offer him a meal. He does this even before he finds out who Telemachus is. This is one of the rules of *xenia*: Feed your guest before you ask him who he is. One of the rules of *xenia* is that you have to give good *xenia* to all guests, including the descendants of your enemies. If you were to ask the name of your guest, you might not give as good hospitality as you would have if you had not known their name.

Nestor says after Athena and Telemachus have eaten,

“Now’s the time, now they’ve enjoyed their meal,
to probe our guests and find out who they are.”

(Fagles 3.77-78)

Compare:

“It seems to me that it’s a good time now
to ask our guests to tell us who they are,
now they’ve enjoyed our food.”

(Johnston 3.84-86)

In saying this, Nestor is acting like a teacher. He explains things. He is teaching his son how to act properly.

• **Nestor gives Telemachus information about the homecomings of the Achaeans. We find out that Athena was angry at the Achaeans. Why was she angry? (Nestor doesn’t say why, but we can guess why based on what we know about the Fall of Troy.)**

Telemachus has gone to Pylos to search for information, and Nestor gives him some information about the homecomings of the Achaeans. Nestor made it back home quickly; he was not one of the Greeks who committed outrages during the Fall of Troy. Many other Achaeans, of course, died while trying to get home (Little Ajax), had trouble trying to get back home (Menelaus), found trouble when they made it back home (Agamemnon).

Why did the Achaeans have such trouble getting back home? For one thing, Athena was angry at them. After the Fall of Troy, Agamemnon knew that Athena was angry at the Achaeans, so he offered sacrifices to her, but she remained angry. Why was she angry at them? We aren’t told directly, but we can use our knowledge of the Fall of Troy to guess why.

The Achaeans committed various outrages during the Fall of Troy. Even during war, one ought not to do some things. The Achaeans, however, committed atrocities. For example, Little Ajax raped Cassandra, one of the daughters of Priam, in the temple of Athena. At this time, civilized people believed that if you were in a temple, you were under the protection of the god or goddess the temple was dedicated to. The temple was a sanctuary. Cassandra should have been respected because she was in a temple, but Little Ajax raped her anyway. This shows disrespect to the goddess Athena.

For a long time, Athena was angry at the Achaeans, including Odysseus. Now, however, enough time has passed that she has gotten over her anger. Athena now is helping Odysseus, and she is helping his son, Telemachus.

• We learn crucial background information — as well as learn about *xenia* — in Book 3 of the *Odyssey*. What do we learn about Agamemnon's homecoming?

One story that will be referred over and over again in the *Odyssey* is the homecoming of Agamemnon, leader of the Achaean expedition against Troy. Nestor tells Telemachus the story of how Agamemnon returned home only to be killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. More importantly, he tells the aftermath of that story. Agamemnon's son, Orestes, avenged Agamemnon's death by killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Orestes is unlike Telemachus, who has not grown up. Orestes was a young person when his father was killed. But Orestes grew up and took action. He avenged his father's death. The implication is that Telemachus needs to grow up and take action. His father's palace is infested with suitors; therefore, he needs to grow up, take action, and get rid of the suitors.

Nestor also tells about what happened to Menelaus after the Fall of Troy. Menelaus did not sacrifice to the gods, the gods became angry at him, and Menelaus ended up in Egypt for some years. However, he is now safely returned, with Helen of Troy, to his homeland, Sparta.

• In what way is the homecoming of Agamemnon meant to be compared to the situation of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus?

Homer wants his audience to compare the situation of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes to the situation of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus.

We know that Penelope has remained faithful to Odysseus, but Odysseus does not know that. Because of what happened to Agamemnon, we know that if Penelope had not remained faithful to Odysseus, his homecoming could be very dangerous. What if Penelope had remarried? In that case, she and her new husband could very well decide to kill Odysseus. Of course, while Odysseus is held captive for seven long years, he is wondering about his wife, Penelope. Has she or has she not remained faithful to him?

Of course, Homer's audience is meant to compare Telemachus to Orestes. When Orestes grew up, he took action. Isn't it time for Telemachus to grow up and take action?

• The authors of the Greek epics believed in personal responsibility. What role does personal responsibility play in the *Odyssey*?

In the *Odyssey*, we have the theme of personal responsibility. In Book 1, Zeus mentions Aegisthus. Zeus had even sent the god Hermes to tell Aegisthus not to seduce Clytemnestra. Hermes told him straight out that seducing Clytemnestra would lead to Aegisthus' ruin. Aegisthus seduced her anyway, and he paid with his life. Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are responsible for their actions, and both of them deserved to be killed by Orestes.

The bard sings that Zeus says,

“Now there's Aegisthus, who took for himself
the wife of Agamemnon, Atreus' son,

and then murdered him, once the man came home.

None of that was set by Fate. Aegisthus knew
his acts would bring about his total ruin.

We'd sent Hermes earlier to speak to him.

The keen-eyed killer of Argus told him
not to slay the man or seduce his wife,
for Orestes would avenge the son of Atreus,
once he grew up and longed for his own land.

That's what Hermes said, but his fine words
did not persuade Aegisthus in his heart.

So he has paid for everything in full."

(Johnston 1.45-57)

This story also is relevant to the suitors. The suitors have been infesting Odysseus' palace. A seer has told them straight out that they need to stop doing their evil actions or pay the price when Odysseus returns. As time goes on, we will see that the suitors receive many warnings of Odysseus' return, but they ignore them and continue to violate the protocol of *xenia*.

The suitors are responsible for their actions, and they will pay for their evil deeds with their lives after Odysseus returns to Ithaca. When the suitors die, they will have deserved to be killed by Odysseus.

According to the *Ilioupersis*, it is Odysseus who kills Astyanax, the son of Hector and Andromache, by throwing him off the walls of Troy. This certainly makes us lose some of our sympathy for Odysseus. It also apparently made Athena lose sympathy for Odysseus. Killing an innocent child is an outrage. It goes beyond what soldiers ought to do in war. However, according to other versions of the myth, it was not Odysseus who killed Hector's son. We do not know whether Homer knew the version of the myth that has Odysseus killing Hector's son.

Odysseus also is personally responsible for his actions. One action that causes trouble for him is blinding Polyphemus, a Cyclops who is the son of Poseidon. Odysseus has good reason for blinding Polyphemus, but the anger or *menis* of the gods is often unreasonable, and Odysseus pays for his action by becoming the target of the wrath of Poseidon, who keeps him from reaching Ithaca for many years.

Another action that causes trouble for Odysseus is the slaughter of the Sun god's cattle by his men. Odysseus did not slaughter the cattle, but he was unable to keep his men from slaughtering the cattle.

For all of these actions, Odysseus faces hardship.

• **Nestor stresses the actions taken by Orestes after the murder of his father, Agamemnon. Why might he do that?**

Why does Nestor stress the actions taken by Orestes after the murder of his father, Agamemnon? Perhaps he is hinting to Telemachus that it is time for him to grow up and take action: Orestes won renown by avenging the death of his father. You, Telemachus, can win renown by ridding Odysseus' palace of the suitors.

Of course, Telemachus would have to fight 108 suitors, plus any servants who are loyal to the suitors instead of being loyal to Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus, but he could raise an army to help him.

• **Why do you think that Nestor does not offer to help Telemachus to get rid of the suitors?**

Nestor does not offer to help Telemachus to clear the palace of suitors. Why not? We aren't told, but probably because Nestor is very old now — too old to fight. We saw in the *Iliad* that Nestor mainly gave advice. In addition, Nestor's son, Pisistratus, is very young — Telemachus' age.

There is a person who would have been the right age and with the right experience to help Telemachus, but he is dead. Nestor's son, Antilochus, died during the Trojan War. If he had survived, he could have helped Telemachus.

• **How does Athena react when Telemachus says that Odysseus will not return to Ithaca — “not even if the gods should will it so” (Fagles 3.260). Compare “even if / the gods themselves were willing” (Johnston 3.308-309).**

Telemachus is still discouraged. When Nestor raises the possibility that Odysseus may eventually return to Ithaca, perhaps with an army at his back, and with the help of Athena, Telemachus says that that is impossible — “not even if the gods should will it so” (Fagles 3.260). Compare “even if / the gods themselves were willing” (Johnston 3.307-309).

Telemachus' remark angers Athena. She tells him,

[229] Then the goddess, flashing-eyed Athena, spoke to him, and said: “Telemachus, what a word has escaped the barrier of thy teeth! Easily might a god who willed it bring a man safe home, even from afar. But for myself, I had rather endure many grievous toils ere I reached home and saw the day of my returning, than after my return be slain at my hearth, as Agamemnon was slain by the guile of Aegisthus and of his own wife. But of a truth death that is common to all the gods themselves cannot ward from a man they love, when the fell fate of grievous death shall strike him down.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray; Cf. Fagles 3.260-271)

Compare:

“Telemachus,
what a speech just passed the barrier of your teeth!
A god could easily bring someone home
from a long way off, if he wanted to.

But I'd prefer to go through many hardships
 and then see the day when I got back
 and reached my home, than to complete my trip
 only to be butchered by my own hearth,
 the way that Agamemnon was cut down,
 tricked by his own wife and by Aegisthus.
 But the gods cannot protect a man from death —
 which comes to all — even ones they love,
 once the destroying fate of a harsh doom
 has seized him.”

(Johnston 3.310-323)

We see a limitation in what the gods can do here. The gods can interact with humans and help humans, if the gods choose to do so. However, the gods cannot keep human beings from dying.

Of course, Athena is disguised as a man, and she is able to hear what people say about her when they don't think that she is around. Mostly, she has to be pleased with what she hears. Telemachus is discouraged and messed up, but Nestor acknowledges her power. He said that if only Athena would help Odysseus, then Odysseus would be able to kill the suitors. That is exactly what will happen.

• **Which pieces of advice does Nestor offer to Telemachus?**

Nestor does offer Telemachus two pieces of advice. He makes two long speeches in which he mentions Orestes — one speech is about Agamemnon, and one speech is about Menelaus — and after each speech, he offers Telemachus some advice.

Piece of Advice Number 1: Be Brave

After telling Telemachus about Orestes, Nestor says,

“And you, my friend —
 how tall and handsome I see you now — be brave, you too,
 so men to come will sing your praises down the years.”

(Fagles 3.225-227)

Compare:

“And you, my friend, I see
 that you're a strong, fine-looking man,
 but you must act with courage, so those born

in future years will say good things of you.”

(Johnston 3.264-267)

Piece of Advice Number 2: Don't Stay Away Too Long

After telling about Menelaus finally arriving home and finding out that his brother had been murdered by Aegisthus and that Orestes had just killed and was burying Aegisthus, Nestor tells Telemachus,

“So now, my friend, you must not wander off
and stay away from home too long, leaving
your possessions there, with such arrogant men
in your own house, in case they take over
all your wealth or eat it up. That would make
your voyage here quite useless. I'd urge you —
and this I strongly recommend — to go
to Menelaus.”

(Johnston 3.430-437)

Telemachus, of course, should beware of the suitors. No doubt they would be happy if he were dead. Now that Telemachus is growing up, he can be a problem for them. For example, the suitors may be worried that Telemachus has travelled to the mainland to raise an army to attack them.

Piece of Advice Number 3: Visit Menelaus

Of course, although Nestor can't tell Telemachus that Odysseus is still alive, he does tell Telemachus to travel to Sparta to see Menelaus as Menelaus may have recent information about Odysseus.

• **How does Nestor become aware that Athena has visited him in disguise?**

Still disguised as Mentor, Athena says that she will return to the ship. She then turns herself into an eagle and flies off, apparently to the ship.

Nestor is very happy for Telemachus because obviously a god is looking after him. Mentor has to be a god — human beings don't turn themselves into eagles.

Nestor tells Telemachus,

“Friend, in no wise do I think that thou wilt prove a base man or a craven, if verily when thou art so young the gods follow thee to be thy guides.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

“My friend, I don’t think you’ll turn out to be
a bad or feeble man, if gods follow you
to be your guide, when you’re so very young.”

(Johnston 3.510-512)

• **Which powers do the gods — and goddesses — have?**

The gods are not all powerful, but they are powerful. (They are not omnipotent.) The gods can do these things:

- The gods can change shapes. Athena can turn herself into a mortal man, and she can turn herself into an eagle.
- The gods can travel quickly through the air.
- The gods can hear prayers even when the gods are not present when the prayers are uttered.
- The gods can see things from a great distance.
- The gods know people’s fate, but the gods cannot keep people from dying when their fate says that they will die. Mortals are fated to die.

• **Telemachus gets a bath. What is unusual about that bath from our modern point of view?**

In addition to giving good advice, Nestor does other things as well. He feeds Telemachus, gives him a place to sleep, and lets him take a bath. Telemachus takes a bath the next day; that is, one of Nestor’s younger daughters gives him a bath and rubs him with oil. This was accepted in Homeric society, and there is nothing immoral about it.

Things are going well for Telemachus. He was downhearted when he arrived at Nestor’s palace. We see that because Telemachus asked him for news of how his father died (Fagles 3.102-103). However, he does not receive certain information that his father is dead. In addition, he has learned that a god or goddess is looking after him, which has to make him feel better. Also, he has been given very good hospitality.

As part of the hospitality, he is given food and drink, a bath, and a bed to sleep in.

• **Is Nestor’s kingdom, Pylos, civilized? That is, does Nestor give his guests good *xenia*?**

All of this hospitality shows that Pylos is civilized. Civilized people observe *xenia*, and Nestor and his family observe *xenia*.

Nestor treats Telemachus well. Nestor is a good host who observes the rules of *xenia*. He feeds Telemachus, he does not ask questions until Telemachus has finished eating, he allows Telemachus to bathe, and he gives Telemachus a place to sleep.

Usually, a gift is given to the guest. We don’t have that here, but that is because Telemachus’ visit is not supposed to be over yet. Nestor expects Telemachus to return to him once he has visited Menelaus.

However, Nestor offers Telemachus other things, including advice. Because Nestor is a wise old man, his advice is valuable. He also helps Telemachus to accept his advice by giving him the means to carry it out. For example, he advises Telemachus to visit Menelaus, who has returned to Sparta after years of wandering. Possibly, Menelaus will have recent news of Odysseus. To enable Telemachus to visit Menelaus, Nestor allows Telemachus to use horses and a chariot and to take Nestor's son, Pisistratus, along as a guide. Of course, Nestor gives them food and wine for the journey.

Telemachus and Pisistratus receive very good *xenia* during their trip. It is a long way to Sparta, so they stop at night at the house of Diocles, son of Ortilochus. The bard sings,

And they came to Pherae, to the house of Diocles, son of Ortilochus, whom Alpheus begot. There they spent the night, and before them he set the entertainment due to strangers.

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

He gave them a royal welcome; there they slept the night.

(Fagles 3.549)

Compare:

They reached the home of Diocles in Pherae.

He was Ortilochus' son, whose father

was Alpheus, and there they spent the night.

Diocles offered them the hospitality

he owed to strangers who stayed there as his guests.

(Johnston 3.651-655)

Conclusion

In Book 4, we will see Telemachus visit Menelaus.

[Odyssey, Book 4:](#)
[“The King and Queen of Sparta”](#)
[“Telemachus Visits Menelaus in Sparta”](#)

Important Term

Nepenthe: a drug that is also known as heart's-ease

Introduction

We have already seen *xenia* working properly in Book 3, when Telemachus visited Nestor. In Book 4, we continue to see *xenia* working properly, as Telemachus visits Menelaus and Helen. Menelaus and Helen wandered the Mediterranean for eight years (Fagles 4.92), spending much time in Egypt, before returning to Sparta. Now, however, they are home, and they are celebrating a double wedding. (The double wedding may be why Menelaus does not volunteer to help Telemachus by leading warriors to drive the suitors out of Odysseus' palace. That, and the fact that he has recently spent 18 years having adventures. And, of course, he is probably leery about leaving Helen alone since the last time he did that she and Paris ran away together.)

Like Nestor, Menelaus is a wonderful host. He even gives Telemachus a guest-gift when he leaves to return home.

• With what are Menelaus and Helen busy when Telemachus arrives for a visit?

When Telemachus and Pisistratus drive up to Menelaus' palace, Menelaus is busy. The only child of Menelaus and Helen, a beautiful woman named Hermione, is being married. In addition, Menelaus' son, whose mother is a slave woman, is being married. Hermione is being married to the son of Achilles.

• Do you think that Menelaus and Helen have a happy marriage?

Menelaus had a concubine. A concubine is a woman whom a man sleeps with without being married to her. In this case, a slave-woman bore him a son.

As you might expect, concubines make married women angry. In Book 1, we read that Laertes, Odysseus' father, had purchased the slave-woman Eurycleia (eu ry CLEYE a) when she was young and desirable, but he had not slept with her, because his wife would have been angry:

Laertes had paid a price with the woman years ago,
 still in the bloom of youth. He traded twenty oxen,
 honored her on a par with his own loyal wife at home
 but fearing the queen's anger, never shared her bed.
 (Fagles 1.490-493)

Compare:

Some years ago Laertes
 had purchased her with his own wealth — at the time,

she was in her early youth — paying twenty oxen.

In his home he honoured her the way he did

his noble wife, but not once did he have sex with her,

because he wanted to avoid annoying his wife.

(Johnston 1.574-580)

However, we should be aware that in some ancient cultures kings had many concubines or perhaps had many wives. In the *Iliad*, King Priam had many more children than Queen Hecuba alone could bear.

Menelaus and Helen have an unhappy marriage. On the surface, they get along, but we will see that there is a lot of tension underneath the surface. Menelaus is not sure that Helen did not run away willingly with Paris. We can see some of the tension in the fact that Menelaus had a concubine. (By the way, all the Greek heroes had concubines at Troy. They slept with the young women who were their prizes of honor.) We don't know whether Menelaus got this concubine before or after Helen left him. Chances are, he has more than one concubine.

People may wonder why Menelaus would take Helen back. According to Aristophanes' comic play *Lysistrata*, written of course hundreds of years after the *Odyssey* was written down, Menelaus thought about killing Helen during the Fall of Troy, but she bared her breasts to him and he decided to take her back.

• **Is Menelaus a good host? Does he observe proper *xenia*?**

Menelaus is a good host, and he observes proper *xenia*.

When a lord named Eteoneus asks Menelaus if he should tell the two travelers to seek hospitality elsewhere because of the double wedding, Menelaus replies,

“Before today,

Eteoneus, son of Boethous,

you haven't been a fool. But now you talk

just like a silly child. For both of us

often feasted on the hospitality

of other men before we got back here,

hoping that Zeus would give us some relief

from later suffering. So unhitch those horses

the strangers brought, and bring the men inside,

so they may dine.”

(Johnston 4.42-51)

In the past, Menelaus has received *xenia*; now it is his turn to give *xenia*. *Xenia* is a reciprocal relationship. One year you may receive *xenia*; the next year you may give *xenia*.

Once again, we see a feast — an honorable feast. Menelaus is celebrating the marriage of his daughter, Hermione. He is also celebrating the marriage of a son. This is another occasion on which feasting is ethical and permitted. Again, just as we saw in the previous book — Book 3 — with Nestor and the sacrifice to the gods, this is a feast that we are meant to contrast with the feasting of the suitors. In addition to the feast, a bard performs and dancers dance. A wedding of a king's daughter is an important event. So is the wedding of a king's son.

In visiting at the time of the wedding feast, Telemachus is experiencing family life — in fact, family life at its best. That, of course, is what Odysseus' goal is. Odysseus wants to get back home again. He desperately wants to enjoy family life with his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, and his father, Laertes. No doubt Odysseus would like to be present when Telemachus gets married.

• **How does Telemachus react to Menelaus' palace?**

Of course, Telemachus is a young, inexperienced man, and he is overwhelmed by the splendor of Menelaus' palace. His praise reveals him to be inexperienced and someone who has not seen the world. It's like a tourist gawking at the skyscrapers of New York City:

“Son of Nestor, dear to this heart of mine, mark the flashing of bronze throughout the echoing halls, and the flashing of gold, of electrum, of silver, and of ivory. Of such sort, methinks, is the court of Olympian Zeus within, such untold wealth is here; amazement holds me as I look.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

“Son of Nestor, who brings my heart such joy,
look at how, throughout this echoing hall,
there's so much sparkling bronze and gold,
electrum, silver, ivory — to me
it's the interior of Zeus' home
on Mount Olympus, so much untold wealth —
I'm amazed just looking at it.”

(Johnston 4.96-102)

Menelaus sets Telemachus straight: Yes, the palace is splendid for a mortal man, but it does not and cannot compare to the palace of Zeus.

• **How does Menelaus recognize that Telemachus is the son of Odysseus?**

As a good host, Menelaus feeds Telemachus and his companion, Pisistratus, and then they tell each other their stories.

The story of Agamemnon and his murder by his wife and her lover is told over and over in the *Odyssey*. Here Menelaus tells the story yet once more as a part of the story of himself and his brother.

When Menelaus talks about the missing Odysseus, Telemachus cries, and by that, Menelaus recognizes him. He is wondering whether to say that he recognizes Telemachus or to simply wait and let Telemachus tell his story in his own time when Helen walks in. She recognizes Telemachus immediately — he looks like his father — and she blurts that right out. Helen is impulsive, while Menelaus thinks more and weighs more carefully what is right to say or to leave unsaid.

• **What do we learn about the relationship between Menelaus and Helen?**

Helen is an interesting character. For one thing, we don't know whether she ran away willingly with Paris or if Paris kidnapped her. In Homer, that is ambiguous, and Helen's character is ambiguous. In Book 4, her character is ambiguous.

When Menelaus, Telemachus, and Pisistratus talk about the Trojan War and its aftermath, they are sad. Menelaus weeps over all the deaths of the Achaeans in the war, Telemachus weeps over his lost father, and Pisistratus weeps over the death of Antilochus, his brother who died in the war. Therefore, Helen drugs them with a drug whose properties she learned while she and Menelaus were in Egypt.

This drug, nepenthe, is so powerful that it makes it impossible to weep and grieve. In fact, if you are on this drug, you will not weep even if your entire family is slaughtered in front of you:

[219] Then Helen, daughter of Zeus, took other counsel. Straightway she cast into the wine of which they were drinking a drug to quiet all pain and strife, and bring forgetfulness of every ill. Whoso should drink this down, when it is mingled in the bowl, would not in the course of that day let a tear fall down over his cheeks, no, not though his mother and father should lie there dead, or though before his face men should slay with the sword his brother or dear son, and his own eyes beheld it. Such cunning drugs had the daughter of Zeus, drugs of healing, which Polydamna, the wife of Thon, had given her, a woman of Egypt, for there the earth, the giver of grain, bears greatest store of drugs, many that are healing when mixed, and many that are baneful; there every man is a physician, wise above human kind; for they are of the race of Paeon.

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

Then Helen, Zeus' daughter, thought of something else.

She quickly dropped into the wine they were enjoying
a drug which eased men's pains and irritations,
making them forget their troubles. A drink of this,
once mixed in with wine, would guarantee no man
would let a tear fall on his cheek for one whole day,

not even if his mother and his father died,
 or if, in his own presence, men armed with swords
 hacked down his brother or his son, as he looked on.

(Johnston 4.296-304)

Why does Helen drug the three men? Her reason is ambiguous. Perhaps she wants to end their grieving and make it possible for them to be happy. Perhaps she drugs Menelaus on a regular basis for self-preservation. Whenever he shows remorse about the Trojan War, which Helen was the cause of, perhaps she drugs him so that he will not grieve over everything the Achaeans lost in the war, including much time and many lives. Helen may do that out of self-preservation — if Menelaus were to become angry with her, he could do serious damage.

Robert Fagles translates “nepenthe” as “heart’s-ease” (2.245).

Even with the drug nepenthe, there is a lot of stress in this household. Even though this drug is powerful enough to keep you from grieving over dead relatives, it is not powerful enough to stop Menelaus from being angry at Helen.

Homer may be being clever here. He says that a man who is drugged with heart’s-ease will feel no sorrow — not even if his family is slaughtered in front of him. Homer may be saying that if Helen were slaughtered in front of Menelaus, Menelaus would feel no sorrow.

Menelaus apparently does not know that Helen drugs him — she slips the drug into the wine he and his guests are drinking.

• Which story does Helen tell about Odysseus?

Helen and Menelaus both tell stories about Odysseus. Both stories reveal Odysseus as resourceful, brave, and clever. However, Helen’s story casts Helen in a good light, while Menelaus’ story casts Helen in a bad light.

Helen tells a story about how she helped Odysseus during the Trojan War. Her story is that Odysseus came disguised in rags into Troy and that she recognized him. Rather than turning Odysseus over to the Trojans, who would have killed him, she gives him a bath, rubs him down with oil, and gives him clothes to wear. Of course, this ruins his disguise. Odysseus no longer resembles a beggar. Odysseus kills a number of Trojans before leaving Troy — probably he had to fight his way out.

This is interesting. Helen’s giving Odysseus a bath and clothing may not have been the right thing to do. Odysseus’ disguise as a beggar had worked, and probably it would have kept on working. After Odysseus gets a bath and clothing and is no longer disguised as a beggar, he has to fight before leaving Troy.

Helen also promised not to reveal Odysseus until after he had left Troy.

Helen also says that by then her “heart had changed” (Fagles 4.291) and that Odysseus revealed to her “the whole Achaean strategy” (Fagles 4.288) — which is, apparently, the stratagem of the wooden horse.

Odysseus is in disguise when he enters Troy in Helen's story. He will also be in disguise when he returns to Ithaca, alone, after years of war and wandering. Note that he was disguised as a beggar when he went to Troy in Helen's story; he will be disguised as a beggar when he returns to Ithaca. Odysseus went to great pains to make his disguise perfect. He even whipped himself to scar his body.

Helen does not blame herself for being the cause of the Trojan War. She blames Aphrodite. Helen is like the character Francesca da Rimini in Dante's *Inferno*. Francesca does not take responsibility for her sins, but instead blames love or a book — anything but herself.

Helen also says that when she was in Troy for a while, her heart changed, and she no longer wanted to be there. This is consistent with her character in the *Iliad*. There it is clear that she no longer respects Paris; instead, she would prefer to be with Menelaus.

• **Which story does Menelaus tell about Helen?**

Menelaus' story is very different from Helen's and casts her in a bad light. According to Menelaus' story, Helen tried to get all the Achaean warriors inside the Trojan Horse killed. Having heard, apparently, about the plan for the Trojan Horse from Odysseus when he entered Troy while in disguise as a beggar, she walked three times around the Trojan Horse, calling out to the men inside and mimicking the voices of their wives. One Greek warrior was eager to reply, but Odysseus kept him from calling out by putting his hands over the warrior's mouth (Fagles 4.321).

Deiphobus is with Helen as she circles the Trojan Horse, calling out to the soldiers inside while imitating the voices of their wives. Menelaus doesn't identify who Deiphobus is, but Helen married him after the death of Paris.

I think that we can see why Helen drugs Menelaus with heart's-ease (Fagles 4.245).

• **How do Menelaus' and Helen's stories differ? How are they similar?**

Differences

Helen, as always, is ambiguous. Did she want to be at Troy, or not? Helen's story says that she was on the side of the Achaeans; Menelaus' story says that she was on the side of the Trojans.

Obviously, there is a lot of tension in the household of Menelaus and Helen. Helen is trying to say that even while she was inside Troy, sleeping with first Paris and then Deiphobus, she was on the side of the Greeks, working in the resistance, as it were. Menelaus, on the other hand, thinks that Helen was willingly inside Troy, sleeping with first Paris and then Deiphobus.

A Similarity

Note that the two stories about Odysseus cast him in a good light. In Helen's story, he makes a notable raid against the Trojans. In Menelaus' story, he keeps the Trojans from discovering the Achaean soldiers hidden inside the Trojan horse.

• **How does Telemachus show maturity when it seems that Menelaus and Helen will quarrel?**

Here Telemachus shows some maturity. A quarrel is about to break out between Menelaus and Helen, creating an ugly scene, but Telemachus avoids it by saying that it is time for bed:

[290] Then wise Telemachus answered him: “Menelaus, son of Atreus, fostered of Zeus, leader of hosts, all the more grievous is it; for in no wise did this ward off from him woeful destruction, nay, not though the heart within him had been of iron. But come, send us to bed, that lulled now by sweet sleep we may rest and take our joy.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

“But come, send us to bed, so sweet Sleep
can bring us joy once we lie down to rest.”

(Johnston 4.396-397)

• **How does Menelaus gets the minor sea-god Proteus to talk?**

The story of getting Proteus to talk is interesting. A minor sea-goddess named Eidothea tells Menelaus how to proceed. Menelaus and three handpicked men need to wait until Proteus is asleep, then jump on him. To avoid being detected and to get close to Proteus, Menelaus and his men wrap themselves in the hide of seals as a disguise and wait for Proteus to arrive and to fall asleep. (Eidothea daubs ambrosia under their noses so that they aren't overcome by the stench of the sealskins.) They grab him, and Proteus changes form. He becomes a lion, a serpent, a panther, a boar, and even a torrent of water, but Menelaus and his men hang on tight, and eventually Proteus returns to his original form and tells them what they want to know.

• **Proteus tells Menelaus what will happen to him after he “dies.” What is in store for Menelaus?**

Menelaus's future fate is very good, Proteus says,

“As for you, Zeus-fostered Menelaus,
it's not ordained that you will meet your fate
and die in horse-rich Argos. No. The gods
will send you off to the Elysian fields,
and to the outer limits of the earth —
the place where fair-haired Rhadamanthus lives
and life for human beings is really easy —
there's no snow or heavy storms or even rain,
and Oceanus sends a steady breeze,

as West Wind blows to keep men cool and fresh.

Helen is your wife — that's why they'll do this,

because they see you as the man who married

Zeus['] daughter."

(Johnston 4.758-770)

Here it sounds as if Menelaus will not die, but will be carried to the very pleasant Elysium Fields by the gods.

• **What news about Little Ajax does Menelaus learn from the minor sea-god Proteus?**

Little Ajax died at sea because he was so proud. His ship sank, but Poseidon allowed him to reach a rock to hang onto. However, Little Ajax boasted that he had escaped drowning, so Poseidon split the rock in two, and Little Ajax fell back into the ocean and drowned. Little Ajax is the Achaean who raped Cassandra in the temple of Athena.

• **What news does Menelaus learn about his brother, Agamemnon, from the minor sea-god Proteus?**

Proteus tells Menelaus that the Achaeans should have offered sacrifices to the gods before sailing for home. If they had done that, they would have made it back much quicker and much safer.

Of course, Agamemnon did offer the sacrifices. (Some other Achaeans did not offer enough sacrifices.) Agamemnon returned home quickly, but he was slaughtered by his wife and her lover. Proteus tells Menelaus,

[512] "But thy brother escaped, indeed, the fates and shunned them with his hollow ships, for queenly Hera saved him. But when he was now about to reach the steep height of Malea, then the storm-wind caught him up and bore him over the teeming deep, groaning heavily, to the border of the land, where aforetime Thyestes dwelt, but where now dwelt Thyestes' son Aegisthus. But when from hence too a safe return was shewed him, and the gods changed the course of the wind that it blew fair, and they reached home, then verily with rejoicing did Agamemnon set foot on his native land, and he clasped his land and kissed it, and many were the hot tears that streamed from his eyes, for welcome to him was the sight of his land. Now from his place of watch a watchman saw him, whom guileful Aegisthus took and set there, promising him as a reward two talents of gold; and he had been keeping guard for a year, lest Agamemnon should pass by him unseen, and be mindful of his furious might. So he went to the palace to bear the tidings to the shepherd of the people, and Aegisthus straightway planned a treacherous device. He chose out twenty men, the best in the land, and set them to lie in wait, but on the further side of the hall he bade prepare a feast. Then he went with chariot and horses to summon Agamemnon, shepherd of the people, his mind pondering a dastardly deed. So he brought him up all unaware of his doom, and when he had feasted him he slew him, as one slays an ox at the stall. And not one of the comrades of the son of Atreus was left, of all that followed him, nor one of the men of Aegisthus, but they were all slain in the halls."

(Trans. A.T. Murray; Cf. Fagles 4.573-604)

Compare:

“Aegisthus came up with a treacherous plan.
 He picked out twenty men, the best there were
 in the whole state, and set up an ambush.
 Then, in another section of the house,
 he had a feast made ready and went off
 with chariot and horses to escort
 Agamemnon, shepherd of his people,
 all the while intending to destroy him.
 Aegisthus then accompanied him home —
 he suspected nothing of the murder —
 and then, after the feast, he butchered him,
 just as one might slay an ox in its own stall.
 Of those companions of the son of Atreus
 who followed him, not one was left alive.”
 (Johnston 4.711-724)

By the time Menelaus returned from Egypt, Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, had avenged the death of Agamemnon, but Menelaus raised a funeral mound for Agamemnon (Fagles 4.656).

• **What news about Odysseus does Menelaus learn from the minor sea-god Proteus?**

Telemachus, of course, has visited the mainland to get news of his father, and Menelaus is able to give him some news of his father, as well as news about some of the other Achaeans as they returned or tried to return to Achaea from Troy. The news is that the goddess Calypso is holding Odysseus captive on an island. The news is a little old now, but at least Odysseus was alive two years ago.

• **Which lessons can Telemachus learn from Menelaus’ story?**

Menelaus’ story has some lessons for Telemachus:

1) Menelaus’ years of war and wandering are similar to Odysseus’ years of war and wandering.

Menelaus finally made it back home; therefore, it is possible that Odysseus will make it back home. After all, Odysseus was alive just two years ago.

2) To subdue Proteus, Menelaus had to persevere.

Menelaus and his men grab Proteus and Proteus changes form. He becomes a lion, a serpent, a panther, a boar, even a torrent of water, but Menelaus and his men hang on tight, and eventually

Proteus returns to his original form and tells them what they want to know. Menelaus persevered, and therefore Telemachus ought to persevere.

3) *Telemachus learns that other people realize that the behavior of the suitors is bad.*

Menelaus is indignant when he hears of the behavior of the suitors. Menelaus speaks the first extended simile in the *Odyssey*:

“It’s disgraceful
 how such wretched cowards want to lie
 in that brave warrior’s bed, as if a deer
 had lulled her new-born suckling fawns to sleep
 in a mighty lion’s den and then gone roaming
 through mountain fields and grassy valleys
 in search of forage — then the lion comes
 back to his lair and brings to both of them
 a shameful death. That just how Odysseus
 will bring those suitors their disgraceful doom.

(Johnston 4.444-453)

• **Which gift does Menelaus give to Telemachus?**

As part of the guest-host relationship, Menelaus gives Telemachus a gift. At first, he wants to give Telemachus three horses, a chariot, and a cup, but Telemachus tactfully (with praise) points out that rugged Ithaca is good country for goats, but poor country for stallions. (Even Noëmon, from whom Telemachus borrowed the ship to voyage in, keeps his horses on the mainland. See Fagles 4.709-716.)

Earlier, Telemachus had been timid. When his ship reached the mainland, he got off last, and Athena (disguised as Mentor) had to tell him that it was not the time and place to act that way. Now, Telemachus is able to speak up. Although he is tactful, Telemachus lets Menelaus know that the gift of horses is not a proper gift for one who lives on Ithaca.

Being a proper host, Menelaus offers Telemachus another gift, a silver bowl with a gold lip made by the god Hephaestus.

Menelaus praises Telemachus:

“Thou art of noble blood, dear child, that thou speakest thus.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

“Good blood runs in you, dear boy, your words are proof.”

(Fagles 4.688)

Compare:

“My lad, the way you’ve spoken out proclaims
your noble blood.”

(Johnston 4.825-826)

• Why do you suppose Menelaus doesn’t offer to help Telemachus rid Odysseus’ palace of the suitors?

Menelaus doesn’t offer to help Telemachus rid his palace of suitors. Why not? After all, he says he has a lot of respect for Odysseus. We can guess what are his reasons:

- 1) He and Helen have only recently returned home to Sparta. (Eight years passed following the Fall of Troy before Menelaus had his adventure with the sea-god Proteus, who told Menelaus and his men that they had to return to Egypt to make a sacrifice to the gods. We don’t know how long they spent in Egypt this time. Possibly not long.) They have been traveling for a long time. Menelaus was away at the Trojan War for 10 years and then spent several years returning home.
- 2) The leader of the Atridae was his brother, Agamemnon, who during the Trojan War said that too often Menelaus hangs back (Fagles *Iliad* 10.141).
- 3) He and Helen are hosting a double wedding, which is an important event.
- 4) Can anyone blame Menelaus for not wanting to go to war again and leave Helen at home alone? Look at what happened with Helen and Paris. Look at what happened with Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

• What has Telemachus accomplished in the Telemachy (the first four books of the *Odyssey*)?

Telemachus has accomplished a few things in the Telemachy:

1) Telemachus has grown up a little.

Telemachus has called and spoken up in an assembly on Ithaca, he has denounced the suitors, and he has traveled to the mainland and visited both Nestor and Menelaus to find news about his father. He is more mature and more traveled now than he was at the beginning of the *Odyssey*. He has done a notable deed.

2) Telemachus has learned news about his father.

Telemachus has learned that Odysseus was alive recently. In addition, Telemachus learns that he closely resembles Odysseus, and he learns that other people (Nestor, Menelaus, and Helen) greatly respect Odysseus.

How do the suitors react when they learn that Telemachus has visited the mainland?

The Telemachy consists of the first four books of the *Odyssey*. The Telemachy ends with a return to Ithaca and the suitors, who are threatened by Telemachus’ actions. Telemachus has journeyed

to the mainland, and the suitors try to guess why he journeyed to the mainland. One possible reason is to seek aid in ridding Odysseus' palace of the suitors. Possibly, Telemachus could return to Ithaca with an army. Or possibly, Telemachus could again journey to the mainland at a later date and then come back with an army.

Because Telemachus is growing up and beginning to assert himself as a man, the suitors are threatened enough to plot to murder him.

We learn something good about Telemachus when the suitors are dismayed that Telemachus has journeyed to the mainland. They did not think that he was assertive enough to do such a thing.

Antinous says,

“And this is just the start of the trouble he [Telemachus] can make.

Zeus kill that brazen boy before he hits his prime!

Quick, fetch me a swift ship and twenty men —

I'll waylay him from ambush, board him coming back

in the straits between Ithaca and rocky Same.

This gallant voyage of his to find his father

will find *him* wrecked at last!”

(Fagles 4.751-757)

Compare:

“He'll soon begin

creating problems for us. I hope Zeus

will sap his strength before he comes of age

and reaches full maturity. Come now,

give me a swift ship and twenty comrades,

so I can watch for him and set an ambush,

as he navigates his passage through the strait

dividing Ithaca from rugged Samos,

and bring this trip searching for his father

to a dismal end.”

(Johnston 4.898-907)

Definitely, the suitors are dangerous. They are now plotting to kill Telemachus, in addition to marrying Penelope and taking over Odysseus' palace. By the way, the suitors all approve of Antinous' plot to kill Telemachus:

They all roared approval, urged him on.

(Fagles 4.758)

Compare:

When Antinous had finished,
all of them agreed, and they instructed him
to carry out what he'd proposed.

(Johnston 4.907-909)

• **What do we learn about Penelope and Eurycleia at the end of Book 4?**

The herald, Medon, tells her that the suitors are plotting to kill Telemachus. Medon is loyal to Penelope and Telemachus. He has eavesdropped on the suitors, and he tells Penelope what he has heard.

In this scene, we learn that some servants are loyal to Penelope, Telemachus, and Odysseus. This will be important later in the epic, when Odysseus returns to Ithaca.

When Penelope cries about her son, Telemachus, going off on a voyage without telling her, Eurycleia, the old servant woman, speaks up. She says that she knew about Telemachus' going, but that he made her promise to be silent for 10 or 12 days or until Penelope missed him before telling her. (Young men had more freedom back then than they do today. Today a young man of 20 is likely to let his parents know where he is going before he makes a journey a couple of weeks long.)

Eurycleia is another servant who is loyal to Penelope, Telemachus, and Odysseus.

Often, Penelope weeps in the *Odyssey*. Here she weeps after learning that the suitors are plotting to kill her son.

• **What do we learn about Pallas Athena at the end of Book 4?**

Pallas Athena makes Penelope dream about her sister, who visits seldom because she lives far away. Her sister, even in a dream, does not tell Penelope whether Odysseus is alive or dead.

Travel was dangerous and difficult. Penelope seldom if ever sees her sister or their parents.

Nevertheless, the dream is reassuring. Penelope in the dream learns that Telemachus has Athena for an escort. The dream also tells Penelope:

“Be brave. And do not let your mind and heart
succumb to fear too much.”

(Johnston 4.1112-1113)

Odysseus is very special to Athena — she likes him a lot. However, Athena also cares for Odysseus' family. She is looking out for Penelope and for Telemachus.

Conclusion

At the end of Book 4, some of the suitors are on an island with a ship waiting to ambush and kill Telemachus when he returns to Ithaca.

In Books 1-4, we have learned how badly Odysseus is needed on Ithaca. It seems that unless he returns to Ithaca right now, the suitors will kill Telemachus and then marry Penelope.

At this point, Homer can leave Telemachus and Penelope and now begin to sing about Odysseus. We have learned a lot about the situation on Ithaca, and it will stay in our minds while the poet spends several books (of several hours of performance time) telling us, his audience, about Odysseus and his story.

Odyssey, Book 5:

“Odysseus — Nymph and Shipwreck”

“Odysseus Leaves Calypso’s Island and Reaches Phaeacia”

Importance of Book 5

If you are interested in Odysseus’ skill in rhetoric, you need to pay attention to Book 5 and Book 6.

Introduction

So far, we have focused on *xenia* and Telemachus. *Xenia* will continue to be an important part of the *Odyssey*, but now we focus on Odysseus. The poet has let us know what is happening on Ithaca and with Telemachus and Penelope. We know that Odysseus is very badly needed on Ithaca. Now that the poet has set the scene on Ithaca, he can turn his (and our) attention to Ithaca.

• How does Book 5 open?

Book 5 opens with a scene of the gods, just as Book 1 opened with a scene of the gods following the proem. The gods repeat their plans for Odysseus. They — and especially Athena — are concerned about him and wish to help him. Of course, Poseidon is Odysseus’ enemy because Odysseus blinded his son, Polyphemus the Cyclops, but Poseidon is not present. Athena is taking advantage of the fact that Poseidon is not present to act to help Odysseus.

Opening Book 5 with the same kind of information that we had in Book 1 — the gods making plans to help Odysseus — makes a lot of sense. In performance time, it has been approximately four hours since we heard the gods’ plans for Odysseus. It makes sense to remind the audience what is going on as far as the gods and Odysseus are concerned.

So here we get some recapping of events:

- Again, Homer tells us where Odysseus is — he is being held captive on an island by the goddess Calypso.
- Again, Athena talks to Zeus and tells him about Odysseus and asks him to help Odysseus. In particular, she asks him to send the messenger-god Hermes to the nymph Calypso to tell her to allow Odysseus to leave the island. This is what we expected to happen in Book 1, but of course the poet wanted us to learn about the situation on Ithaca before he began to tell Odysseus’ story, and we had the four books of the Telemachy before Homer returns to Odysseus in Book 5. In addition, the poet wanted to introduce the theme of *xenia*.

• What is Odysseus’ situation?

Odysseus seems to be in a paradise. He is on an island with a goddess to sleep with. He does not have to work because the goddess has plenty of food and wine. Lots of guys today might want to be in such a place with such a beautiful goddess to sleep with.

By the way, in his Answer Man column, film critic Roger Ebert answered a question by Matt Sandler about who was the world’s most beautiful woman by saying that she was Indian actress Aishwarya Rai. In a later Answer Man column, a reader stated that Mr. Ebert should have

answered the question by saying, “My wife.” However, Mr. Ebert had a good reason for not answering the question that way: “Matt Sandler asked about women, not goddesses.” (Source: Roger Ebert, “Answer Man.” Answer Man. 20 December 2004. <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>>.)

Mr. Ebert lives in modern times, but in classical mythology sleeping with a goddess can be dangerous. Calypso complains to Hermes that the gods don’t like mortal men who sleep with immortal goddesses. Mortals should not mess around with immortals. All too often, sleeping with a goddess can get you killed. The gods and goddesses can be dangerous beings, indeed.

Another major drawback, of course, is that Odysseus misses his wife and son and father and homeland.

By the way, Odysseus is the only mortal who appears in Book 5.

• **Which kind of *xenia* is Calypso showing to Odysseus: good or bad?**

Calypso is showing Odysseus bad *xenia*. Hosts should not make their guests stay longer than they want to stay. Calypso is keeping Odysseus captive although he desperately wishes to go back home. Odysseus has been on Calypso’s island for seven long years.

• **How does Calypso react to Hermes’ visit when Zeus sends Hermes to tell her to let Odysseus go?**

Zeus sends Hermes to Calypso’s island to tell her that she must let Odysseus go.

Calypso may be suspicious about why Hermes has come. She immediately asks why he has come — even before giving him nectar and ambrosia (the drink and food of the gods). A good hostess would feed her guest before asking him why he has come to visit him or her. However, she does feed him, and then he answers her question.

Calypso has a temper. She does not want to hear that she must let Odysseus go. After Hermes tells her that Zeus has said that Odysseus is not fated to die on her island, far from home, Calypso says,

“The gods are harsh and far too jealous —
 more so than others. They are unhappy
 if goddesses make mortal men their partners
 and take them to bed for sex. That’s how it was
 when rose-fingered Dawn wanted Orion —
 you gods that live at ease were jealous of her,
 until golden-throned sacred Artemis
 came to Ortygia and murdered him
 with her gentle arrows. In the same way,
 when fair-haired Demeter was overcome

with passion and had sex with Iasion
 in a thrice-ploughed fallow field, soon enough
 Zeus heard of it and annihilated him
 by throwing down his dazzling lightning bolt.
 Now once again you gods are envious,
 because a mortal man lives here with me.
 (Johnston 5.146-160)

It is dangerous for mortal men to sleep with goddesses. Orion slept with Dawn; Artemis killed him. Demeter slept with Iasion; Zeus killed him. Odysseus is in a very dangerous situation.

Calypso gives in. She has to. Zeus is the strongest of the gods, and he rules by might. Calypso is afraid not to do what Zeus directly orders her to do.

Hermes advises Calypso,
 Then the killer of Argus, Zeus' messenger,
 said to Calypso:

“Yes, send him away.

Think of Zeus's rage. He may get angry
 and make things hard for you in days to come.”

(Johnston 5.182-184)

• **What do we learn about Odysseus from our first view of him?**

Finally, we see Odysseus. We notice that he is alone. All of the men whom he took with him to Troy are dead. They either died at Troy or during their voyage after the Fall of Troy when they were trying to get home.

We also notice that Odysseus is homesick. Odysseus is the most homesick guy you ever saw — he is much more homesick than your roommate the first quarter of college. He is the most homesick person you ever saw, including that roommate of yours who packed up after a week and went home again. He desperately wants to be back home in Ithaca.

Odysseus is inactive. All Odysseus does is to stay on the shore all day at the point nearest Ithaca. He grieves because he is not home. We remember what Athena said in Book 1:

“But he [Odysseus], straining for no more than a glimpse
 of hearth-smoke drifting up from his own land,
 Odysseus longs to die ...”

(Fagles 1.69-71)

Compare:

“But Odysseus yearns to see even the smoke
rising from his native land and longs
for death.”

(Johnston 1.77-79)

That is exactly what Odysseus is doing when we see him for the first time.

This is not the Odysseus we knew in the *Iliad*. That Odysseus was a man of action. Here Odysseus is completely stymied. He can't go against a goddess. If the goddess gets angry, she can easily kill him. It is never a good idea to get an ancient Greek god or goddess angry at you. Here Odysseus is completely passive. All he can do is mourn and wish that he were home on Ithaca. Even with all his wit and intelligence, he is unable to escape from Calypso's island.

• **How is the Odysseus of the beginning of Book 5 of the *Odyssey* different from the Odysseus of the *Iliad*? How is he the same?**

The Odysseus of the beginning of Book 5 of the *Odyssey* is passive, while the Odysseus of the *Iliad* is a man of action.

Throughout the *Iliad*, Odysseus takes action. In Book 2, Agamemnon makes a speech that sends the warriors scrambling for the ships, ready to go home to Achaea. Odysseus rallies the troops and makes them turn back from the ships. In Book 9, Agamemnon sends an embassy to Achilles to ask him to return to the fighting. Nestor handpicks Odysseus to be one of the members of the embassy, and Odysseus speaks first to Achilles. In Book 10, Diomedes wishes to go on a raid against the Trojans and their allies, and he handpicks Odysseus to go with him. Throughout the *Iliad*, Odysseus is a man of action.

In the beginning of Book 5 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is very passive. All he does is sit on the shore all day, crying and wishing to see even the smoke rising from the fires on his home island of Ithaca. This is a man who desperately wishes to go home. We find out that he has to be passive because the goddess Calypso is keeping him a prisoner on the island. Not even Odysseus can go against the wishes of a goddess.

In other ways, Odysseus in the beginning of Book 5 of the *Odyssey* is like the Odysseus of the *Iliad*. In the proem, we learn that Odysseus is the man of twists and turns. He is a man who can think quickly and do exactly the right thing. We don't see him doing that in Book 1 or in the beginning of Book 5, but Homer tells us that he is the kind of man who does that. Later in Book 5, Odysseus will take action again.

• **What does the name “Calypso” mean?**

Calypso's name literally means, “I shall hide” or “I shall conceal.” Calypso is hiding Odysseus from the world. To the mortals, Odysseus is a great Trojan War hero who suddenly dropped out of sight, and no one knows whether he is alive or dead. Menelaus received news that Calypso is holding Odysseus captive on an island, but he learned this information from a sea-god.

In addition, Calypso is hiding Odysseus' true nature. Odysseus is a man of action, but she has made it impossible for him to take action.

• **What do we learn about Odysseus when Calypso tells him that he can leave her and her island?**

A change immediately comes over Odysseus when Calypso tells him that he can leave her island. He becomes a man of action again. Instead of passively sitting on the beach, mourning because he is not at home in Ithaca, he takes action and begins to build a raft.

As we know, Odysseus is a man of action and a man of speech, and he demonstrates excellent rhetoric in his conversations with the goddess Calypso.

We learn much about Odysseus in Book 5. For example, Odysseus is cautious. Before building the raft, he speaks to Calypso. He wants to make sure that she is not setting a trap to get him killed.

Odysseus says to Calypso:

“Some other thing, goddess, art thou planning in this, and not my sending, seeing that thou biddest me cross on a raft the great gulf of the sea, dread and grievous, over which not even the shapely, swift-faring ships pass, rejoicing in the wind of Zeus. But I will not set foot on a raft in thy despite, unless thou, goddess, wilt bring thyself to swear a mighty oath that thou wilt not plot against me any fresh mischief to my hurt.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

“Besides,
without your consent I’d never board a raft,
not unless you, goddess, would undertake
to swear a mighty oath on my behalf,
you’ll not come up with other devious plans
to injure me.”

(Johnston 5.221-226)

Odysseus is afraid that Calypso is plotting to get him killed, so he makes the goddess swear “a binding oath” (Fagles 5.198) on the River Styx that she is not plotting to hurt him. An oath on the River Styx is inviolable — a god or a goddess cannot violate it. Zeus swore by the river Styx to Thetis that he would allow the Trojans to win against the Achaeans for a while in Book 1 of the *Iliad*.

Odysseus’ caution will be useful to him when he returns to Ithaca. Of course, this is not to say that Odysseus is not courageous or daring. He will show great courage and daring as he kills the suitors in his palace.

We can appreciate Odysseus’ caution in dealing with Calypso. We have seen that Calypso can get angry, even at another god such as Hermes, so Odysseus is justified in being worried here that Calypso is trying to trick him. If she is tired of him, she may be wishing that he were dead — and she can definitely make that happen.

• **How does Odysseus react when Calypso offers him immortality?**

The great theme of the *Iliad* is the human condition, and it is important in the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, Achilles rejected the human condition for a long time, but both in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey* Odysseus accepts the human condition. In the *Iliad* Odysseus pointed out that he and the other men needed to eat before engaging in battle. Achilles, however, refused to eat until he had killed Hector. In the *Odyssey* Calypso offers to make Odysseus immortal and ageless, but he declines her offer.

Odysseus knows that the human condition is to live for a while and then die, and this is something that he accepts. He prefers to grow old and die with Penelope than to remain forever alive and young with Calypso.

• **If you feel like doing research, tell the story of Tithonus and Dawn.**

Odysseus is wise to reject Calypso's offer of immortality. In some ancient Greek myths human beings become immortal, and these myths usually end badly for the human being. In one myth, Dawn, a goddess, falls in love with Tithonus, a mortal human being. She offers to make him immortal. He accepts, she makes him immortal, and he grows older and older because she forgot to make him ageless, like the gods. The gods are born and then they grow older for a while and finally they stop growing. Zeus and Hera are and will remain a mature man and woman. Apollo, Athena, Minerva, and Aphrodite are and will remain young adults. Tithonus simply grows older and frailer and weaker. Finally, Dawn gives Tithonus the gift of sleep. He grows older, but at least he is always dreaming. As we know, many old people spend a lot of time sleeping. While they are asleep, they don't feel their aches and pains.

Of course, this story shows that immortality is very bad for a human being. Odysseus is wise to reject Calypso's offer of immortality.

Tithonus is mentioned at the very beginning of Book 5:

[1] Now Dawn arose from her couch from beside lordly Tithonus, to bear light to the immortals and to mortal men.

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

As Dawn stirred from her bed beside lord Tithonus,

(Johnston 5.1)

Wise poet that he is, Homer wanted to remind his audience of the myth of Dawn and Tithonus before he recounted Calypso's offer of immortality to Odysseus.

Another story of immortality not working out for human beings is the Sibyl of Cumae, whom Apollo loved. In exchange for having sex with Apollo, she asked for as many years of life as the number of grains of sand she could hold in her hand. She forgot to ask for youth, and she grows older and older. As she grows older and older, the only four words she ever says are "I want to die."

When Leonor Acevedo de Borges, the mother of author Jorge Luis Borges, reached 95 years old, she told her son, “Goodness me, Georgie, I think I overdid it.” Every night from then until she died at age 98, she prayed that in the morning she would not wake up.” (Source: Adrian Lennon, *Jorge Luis Borges*, p. 95.)

- *Guardian* columnist Emine Saner once asked the 96-year-old great-grandmother of a friend what, if anything, she got excited about. The 96-year-old replied, “Death.” (Source: Emine Saner, “Why I still get incredibly excited about Christmas.” *The Guardian*. 9 December 2009 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2009/dec/09/christmas>>.)

• What does Odysseus want instead of immortality?

Wisely, Odysseus rejects immortality. Instead, Odysseus wants to return home to Ithaca so that he can be with his wife and son. He is willing to undergo the aches and pains of old age and he is willing to eventually undergo death just so he can be with his family. Of course, Odysseus is fully human. He wants to return home.

In ancient Greece, home and community and family were very important. Achilles was isolated for much of the *Iliad*. He was not fighting for Agamemnon, and then he was separated from his friend when his best friend died. That kind of isolation is very undesirable in Homeric society. Odysseus’ isolation is also undesirable. He is being held captive by a goddess, and he is separated from his home, his wife, his son, and his father.

• What is the definition of “rhetoric”?

Definitions of rhetoric on the Web:

- using language effectively to please or persuade
- study of the technique and rules for using language effectively (especially in public speaking)

Source: <wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>.

Rhetoric: “The art or study of using language effectively and persuasively.” — *The American Heritage College Dictionary*.

Understanding the definition of rhetoric is important because Odysseus is a master of rhetoric. He knows how to speak persuasively. He knows how to use language effectively. He knows how to use language to achieve his goals. He is able to craft what he says to make it persuasive to the people who hear it. Odysseus understands his audience and what will appeal to his audience.

• How does Calypso tempt Odysseus to stay with her on her island?

Calypso tempts Odysseus to stay with her on her island by offering him immortality and agelessness. We know, of course, that Odysseus rejects her offer. However, when Odysseus rejects her offer, he must do so carefully. It is not wise to get a god or goddess angry at you because they can do horrible things to people they are angry at. Odysseus needs to say no to Calypso’s offer, but he needs to do so in a way that will not make her angry at him.

In fact, Odysseus does this. He is able to tactfully explain to Calypso why he wants to leave her island. He does this tactfully without making her angry at him.

Calypso and Odysseus are eating and drinking together as they share a meal. As a goddess, Calypso drinks nectar and eats ambrosia, while as a human being, Odysseus drinks wine and eats regular human food. Calypso reminds Odysseus that she has offered him immortality. She also mentions his wife, Penelope:

“[...] Much as you long to see your wife,
the one you pine for all your days ... and yet
I just might claim to be nothing less than she,
neither in face or figure. Hardly right, is it,
for mortal woman to rival immortal goddess?
How, in build, in beauty?”
(Fagles 5.231-236)

Compare:

“If your heart recognized
how much distress Fate has in store for you
before you reach your homeland, you’d stay here
and keep this home with me. You’d never die,
even though you yearned to see your wife,
the one you always long for every day.
I can boast that I’m no worse than her
in how I look or bear myself — it’s not right
for mortal women to compete with gods
in form and beauty.”
(Johnston 5.257-266)

Here she says that she, Calypso, is a goddess and therefore much more beautiful than Penelope, Odysseus’ wife. Calypso is thinking that Odysseus wants to go home to see his wife. She is thinking that Odysseus prefers his wife to her even though she is a goddess. Of course, this is true, but Odysseus would be unwise if he said that to her. Calypso could feel that she has been insulted, and she could become angry at Odysseus.

• Important analysis: Explain Odysseus’ use of rhetoric and persuasion in his reply to Calypso.

Odysseus must be careful not to get Calypso angry at him. If he were to compare her to Penelope and say that he prefers Penelope, that would definitely make Calypso feel insulted and make her angry at him. Therefore, he says,

“Mighty goddess,
 do not be angry with me over this.
 I myself know very well Penelope,
 although intelligent, is not your match
 to look at, not in stature or in beauty.
 But she’s a human being and you’re a god.
 You’ll never die or age. But still I wish,
 each and every day to get back home,
 to see the day when I return.

(Johnston 5.267-275)

What Odysseus does not say is as important as what he says. Odysseus does not say that he prefers Penelope to Calypso.

This would make Calypso angry at Odysseus because Calypso is being compared to Penelope and Penelope wins in the comparison.

Odysseus says a couple of things that will not make Calypso angry at him. The first thing he does is to say that Calypso, the goddess, is more beautiful by far than Penelope, a mortal woman. This is not going to upset Calypso.

The second thing that Odysseus says is this: I want my home. This is something that is understandable. Home is important to all of us. Calypso can hear this and understand this and not be insulted by what Odysseus is saying.

In this brief speech, Odysseus has crafted what he says to be persuasive to his audience, who in this case is Calypso. Calypso should be able to understand the longing for home that Odysseus is feeling. Odysseus has been careful not to say that he prefers Penelope to Calypso. Odysseus has been careful not to say that he loves Penelope but does not love Calypso.

• **What does Poseidon do after Odysseus sets out on his raft?**

Odysseus builds a raft, and Calypso gives him provisions for the raft: wine, water, and food. Odysseus is handy. He works with his hands, and he has practical knowledge. He is a problem-solver who will work hard to overcome whatever problems he faces. Odysseus sails on the raft for 18 days. Eventually, he sails very near the island of Scheria. At this time, Poseidon, who is returning to Olympus following a visit to the Ethiopians, notices him.

When Poseidon notices Odysseus, he wrecks Odysseus’ raft. We will find out later that Odysseus blinded Polyphemus, a Cyclops who is the son of Poseidon. Because of that, Poseidon is angry at Odysseus. When a god is angry at you, the god will do bad things to you. Here, Poseidon, god of the sea, sends a storm to wreck Odysseus’ raft.

Poseidon already knows that Odysseus is fated to return to Ithaca. This is special knowledge that the gods have. However, although Odysseus is fated to reach Ithaca, Poseidon can make it difficult for Odysseus to reach Ithaca.

• **Is Poseidon omniscient?**

The ancient Greek gods are not omniscient. They don't know everything, although they do have special powers such as being able to hear prayers. Poseidon did not know that Odysseus was sailing on a raft until he, Poseidon, returned from a visit to the Ethiopians and saw Odysseus on the raft.

When Athena spoke to Zeus in Book 1 about helping Odysseus, she was taking advantage of Poseidon's absence. Because Poseidon was visiting the Ethiopians, he did not know that Athena was arranging help for Odysseus.

Now that Poseidon sees Odysseus on the raft, Poseidon wrecks Odysseus' raft.

• **How does Odysseus reach land?**

A sea-goddess helps Odysseus. Leucothea (lew-KO-the-a), whose name when she was mortal was Ino, gives Odysseus an immortal scarf (Fagles 5.382). When it is tied around his waist, he need not fear pain nor death. However, she tells Odysseus that once he has reached shore, he must give it back to her. Also, she tells him to strip off his clothing to make swimming easier.

Odysseus is still cautious with the sea-goddess. She has told him to leave the wrecked raft and swim to shore, but Odysseus thinks that the shore is too far away for him to make it there. Therefore, he stays on the wrecked raft until it drifts closer to shore, then he starts swimming to shore after the wrecked raft breaks up. He comes to a river and prays to the god of the river to help him, and the river-god helps him to reach the bank of the river.

Odysseus does what the sea nymph tells him to do. He takes off the scarf, which is his only clothing (he took off his clothing earlier so that he could swim better), then tosses it into the river so that it will flow downstream and the goddess can retrieve it. This shows something good about Odysseus. He obeys the goddess. Some of us would be tempted to keep this magic scarf.

Despite the help of the goddess, Odysseus is in bad shape. He has been battered during the time he spent in the water — battered against rocks. He is covered with sea salt and looks terrible. He is naked. However, he is alive, and he is alive on the island of a people who will offer him excellent *xenia* — but he doesn't know that yet. For all he knows, this island is inhabited by savage people or monsters who will kill him.

• **How did the mortal Ino become the immortal Leucothea?**

Ino was the daughter of Cadmus and the wife of Athamas, with whom she bore Learchus and Melicertes. Athamas suffered from insanity and killed Learchus. Ino and Melicertes jumped into the sea, where they were transformed into sea deities with the new names Leucothea and Palaemon.

In this myth, Ino achieves immortality, but she has to suffer greatly to get it. If we were to ask Leucothea which she prefers — to be mortal with her two children alive and healthy, or to be immortal but with one child dead — I think that she would prefer to be mortal with her two children alive and healthy. Mothers are like that.

• **What is an epic simile?**

Homer is known for his epic similes. *A Handbook to Literature*, 6th edition, edited by C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, defines epic simile in this way:

An elaborated comparison. The epic simile differs from an ordinary simile in being more involved and more ornate, in a conscious imitation of the Homeric manner. (172)

“My love is like a red, red rose” is an ordinary simile. Epic simile is much more extended.

• **How do some of the five epic similes we see in the final 200 lines of Book 5 show that Poseidon is more powerful than Odysseus?**

In the final 200 lines of Book 5 are five epic similes. Some of them show that Poseidon is much powerful than Odysseus:

- Odysseus’ raft is blown this way and that just like the winds blows thistle across the fields (Fagles 5.360-365):

Just as in autumn North Wind sweeps the thistle down
along the plain, and the tufts bunch up together,
that[’s] how the winds then drove his raft to and fro
across the sea.

(Johnston 5.405-408)

- When Odysseus’ raft breaks up, the planks of the raft are scattered just like a gust of wind scatters piles of dry chaff or straw (Fagles 5.402-407):

Just as a storm wind scatters dry straw in a heap,
blowing pieces here and there in all directions —
that’s how that wave split the long planks on the raft.

(Johnston 5.455-457)

- When Odysseus is torn away from the rocks he is trying to cling to, the skin of his hands sticks to the rocks just like pebbles stick to the suckers of an octopus when it is dragged from its lair (Fagles 5.476-478):

But as the wave flowed back once more,
it charged, struck, and flung him out to sea. Just as
an octopus is dragged out of its den with pebbles
clinging to its suckers, that’s how his skin was scraped
from his strong hands against the rocks, as that great wave
engulfed him.

(Johnston 5.425-430)

• **What do we learn from the epic simile that appears near the end of Book 5 (Fagles 5.436-442 / Johnston 5.481-487)?**

An important epic simile appears near the end of Book 5:

Joy ... warm as the joy that children feel
 when they see their father's life dawn again,
 one who's lain on a sickbed racked with torment,
 wasting away, slowly, under some angry power's onslaught —
 then what joy when the gods deliver him from his pains!
 So warm, Odysseus' joy when he saw that shore, those trees,
 as he swam on, anxious to plant his feet on solid ground again.
 (Fagles 5.436-442)

Compare:

Odysseus saw the land close by. Just as children
 rejoice to see life in a father who lies sick,
 in savage pain through a long wasting illness,
 with a cruel god afflicting him, and then,
 to their delight, the gods release him from disease,
 that's how Odysseus rejoiced when he could see
 the land and forests.
 (Johnston 5.481-487)

This simile has at least two purposes:

- 1) This simile shows a return to life. Odysseus is becoming active again; he is returning to being Odysseus, the man of twists and turns. Odysseus the captive on Calypso's island was hardly Odysseus at all.
- 2) The simile vividly depicts Odysseus' state of mind when he sees the island.

Odysseus is being reborn. Like a newborn baby, Odysseus is naked when he swims to the island and comes out of the water.

• **What do we learn from the epic simile that appears at the end of Book 5 (Fagles 5.540-545) / (Johnston 5.593-600)?**

Odysseus falls asleep at the end of Book 5. He is barely alive. He still has a small spark of life left. The epic simile at the end of Book 5 compares the little bit of life left in Odysseus as he covers himself with leaves for shelter to the coals that a farmer will cover with ashes so that the fire will not go out during the night.

This is the simile that Homer uses:

As a man will bury his glowing brand in black ashes,
off on a lonely farmstead, no neighbors near,
to keep a spark alive — no need to kindle fire
from somewhere else — so Odysseus buried
himself in leaves and Athena showered sleep
upon his eyes ...

(Fagles 5.540-545)

Compare:

Just as
someone on a distant farm without a neighbour
hides a torch underneath black embers, and thus saves
a spark of fire, so he won't need to kindle it
from somewhere else, that's how Odysseus spread the leaves
to cover him. Athena then poured sleep onto his eyes,
covering his eyelids, so he could find relief,
a quick respite from his exhausting troubles.

(Johnston 5.593-600)

• **What is a symbol?**

According to the 6th edition of *A Handbook to Literature*, by C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon,

A symbol is something that is itself and also stands for something else; as the letters *a p p l e* form a word that stands for a particular objective reality; or as a flag is a piece of colored cloth that stands for a country. All language is symbolic in this sense, and many of the objects that we use in daily life are also. (466)

• **What is the olive tree of Book 5, lines 527-528 (trans. Fagles) / lines 579-586 (Trans. Johnston), a symbol of?**

We read that Odysseus takes shelter under an unusual olive tree:

He set out for the woods and not far from the water
found a grove with a clearing all around and crawled
beneath two bushy olives sprung from the same root,

one olive wild, the other well-bred stock.
 No sodden gusty winds could ever pierce them,
 nor could the sun's sharp rays invade their depths,
 nor could a downpour drench them through and through,
 so dense they grew together, tangling side-by-side.
 (Fagles 5.525-532)

Compare:

Close by the water
 he found a place with a wide view. So he crept
 underneath two bushes growing from one stem —
 one was an olive tree, the other a wild thorn.
 Wet winds would not be strong enough to ever blow
 through both of these, nor could the bright sun's rays shine in,
 and rain would never penetrate — they grew so thick,
 all intertwined with one another.
 (Johnston 5.579-586)

It is unusual that such an olive tree would even exist: two olive trees growing from the same root, with one olive tree “wild” and the same olive tree “well-bred” (Fagles 5.528). When a great writer such as Homer creates an image such as this, the reader (or listener) needs to pay attention.

This olive tree, in my opinion, is a symbol. Odysseus is taking shelter here, in a land whose inhabitants are either wild or civilized — he does not know which. The olive tree is a symbol of this. In addition, the way to tell whether a land or its inhabitants are wild or civilized is to see whether or not they respect the protocol of *xenia*. If they respect the protocol of *xenia*, they are civilized. If they do not respect the protocol of *xenia*, they are uncivilized. This interpretation works even if, as Johnston has it, it is an olive tree and a thorn bush growing “all intertwined with one another” (Johnston 5.586).

In the next book, we will see Odysseus equating civilization with observing the protocol of *xenia*. Of course, when Homer created the *Odyssey*, he did not divide it into books.

• What is Odysseus' situation at the end of Book 5?

Odysseus is in a pretty bad spot at the end of Book 5. He is completely naked, and he has no possessions with him. He is nearly dead, and he is covered with a pile of leaves that keep a spark of life alive in him as he sleeps.

Conclusion

In Book 6, Odysseus will encounter the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa. The theme of *xenia* will be important in Book 6. Odysseus' command of rhetoric will be important in Book 6.

Odyssey, Book 6:
“The Princess and the Stranger”
“Odysseus and Nausicaa”

Introduction

Book 6 is important because of Odysseus’ encounter with the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa. That encounter reveals that Odysseus is a master of rhetoric. In addition, the theme of *xenia* is important in Book 6 of the *Odyssey*.

If you are planning to write a paper about Odysseus’ skill in rhetoric, you need to pay attention to Book 6 of the *Odyssey*. The same is true if you are planning to write about *xenia*.

• What is Odysseus’ situation at the end of Book 5?

At the end of Book 5, Odysseus has very little life left in him. Homer shows this very well with the simile that ends Book 5. Odysseus covers himself with leaves the same way that a farmer will cover glowing embers with ashes in order to keep the fire alive until morning.

This is the simile that Homer uses:

Just as
 someone on a distant farm without a neighbour
 hides a torch underneath black embers, and thus saves
 a spark of fire, so he won’t need to kindle it
 from somewhere else, that’s how Odysseus spread the leaves
 to cover him. Athena then poured sleep onto his eyes,
 covering his eyelids, so he could find relief,
 a quick respite from his exhausting troubles.
 (Johnston 5.593-600)

• Who are the Phaeacians (FEE-aaa-shuns)?

Odysseus has landed on the shore of Scheria, where the Phaeacians (FEE-aaa-shuns) live. This is fortunate for Odysseus because the Phaeacians are dedicated to showing strangers hospitality. The Phaeacians will give Odysseus the best *xenia* that he could hope for. Of course, Odysseus does not yet know where he is and he does not yet know who or what lives there. For all Odysseus knows, this could be a savage land where men or monsters will try to kill him.

The name Phaeacians is a little strange for the people who live on Scheria. However, they used to live on Phaeacia before moving to Scheria, and they have not changed their name. The Phaeacians left their land of Phaeacia because their neighbors — bad neighbors — were the Cyclopes. The Cyclopes harried the Phaeacians, so the Phaeacians found a new island to live on. The Phaeacians respect the protocol of *xenia*; the Cyclopes do not respect the protocol of *xenia*.

One of the good things about the Phaeacians is that they are very willing to provide passage on board ships for travelers who need to return home. Odysseus will receive that kind of help.

However, Odysseus is still separated from the Phaeacians. Odysseus is still asleep by the river, The Phaeacians are in their city. The Phaeacians have to become aware of Odysseus' existence before they are able to help him.

• **Who is Nausicaa (four syllables)? Which dream does Athena give her?**

Odysseus' patron goddess, Athena, intervenes to help Odysseus. Athena is fond of Odysseus when she is not angry at him, and she wishes to help him since she is now over her anger about the events that happened during the Fall of Troy.

Athena decides to have the young Phaeacian princess Nausicaa do the family's laundry by the river where Odysseus is sleeping. To convince Nausicaa to do this, Athena appears to her in a dream.

Nausicaa is an appealing character in the *Odyssey*. Although she appears very briefly in the *Odyssey*, many readers will remember that appearance. Nausicaa is a young girl. She has entered puberty, and it is time for her to be married. Already, many of the Phaeacian men have expressed an interest in marrying her. However, no bridegroom has yet been chosen for her.

When Nausicaa gets married, there will be a major celebration and everyone will be wearing clean clothes. Therefore, in Nausicaa's dream, Athena appears to her and says that it would be a good idea for her to do laundry. Of course, ancient Greece has no Laundromats, so if an ancient Greek needs to do laundry, the ancient Greek goes to a river or a stream and washes clothing there. Athena says,

“Nausicaa, how comes it that thy mother bore thee so heedless? Thy bright raiment is lying uncared for; yet thy marriage is near at hand, when thou must needs thyself be clad in fair garments, and give other such to those who escort thee. It is from things like these, thou knowest, that good report goeth up among men, and the father and honored mother rejoice. Nay, come, let us go to wash them at break of day, for I will follow with thee to aid thee, that thou mayest with speed make thee ready; for thou shalt not long remain a maiden. Even now thou hast suitors in the land, the noblest of all the Phaeacians, from whom is thine own lineage. Nay, come, bestir thy noble father early this morning that he make ready mules and a wagon for thee, to bear the girdles and robes and bright coverlets. And for thyself, too, it is far more seemly to go thus than on foot, for the washing tanks are far from the city.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

“Nausicaa,
how did your mother bear a girl so careless?
Your splendid clothes are lying here uncared for.
And your wedding day is not so far away,

when you must dress up in expensive robes
 and give them to your wedding escort, too.
 You know it's things like these that help to make
 a noble reputation among men
 and please your honoured mother and father.
 Come, at day break let's wash out the clothing."
 (Johnston 6.31-40)

Nausicaa's father is the King of the Phaeacians, Alcinous (al-SI-no-us). He is intelligent, and he recognizes that when she offers to wash the laundry, she is thinking about her upcoming marriage. (He does not say that, though.)

Homer compares Nausicaa to the goddess Artemis in these lines:

When they'd enjoyed their food,
 the girl and her attendants threw their head scarves off
 to play catch with a ball, and white-armed Nausicaa
 led them in song. Just as when archer Artemis
 moves across the mountains, along the lofty ridges
 of Erymanthus or Taygetus, full of joy,
 as she pursues wild boars and swiftly running deer,
 with nymphs attending on her, daughters of Zeus,
 who bears the aegis, taking pleasure in the hunt,
 and Leto's heart rejoices, while Artemis
 holds her head and eyebrows high above them all,
 so recognizing her is easy, though all of them
 are beautiful — that's how that unmarried girl
 stood out then from her attendants.
 (Johnston 6.124-137)

This is very intelligent of Homer. Later, Odysseus is going to compare Nausicaa to Artemis, and Homer tells his audience here that Nausicaa resembles Artemis. This is foreshadowing.

• **How is Odysseus awakened by Nausicaa and the other girls?**

Nausicaa goes to a river to wash the laundry; this is the same river by which Odysseus has fallen asleep. Wagons are loaded with dirty clothes and other laundry, and Nausicaa and some slave-girls go to the river, where they wash it and spread it out to dry in the sun.

While waiting for the laundry to dry, Nausicaa and the slave-girls play games with a ball. The ball falls into the river and makes a splash and the girls cry out. The splash and the girls' cries awaken Odysseus.

• **What are the important lines that Odysseus says about *xenia* (Fagles 6.131-133) when he wakes up?**

When Odysseus first wakes up, he does not know where he is, and he does not know who or what lives there. He says three lines that will be repeated elsewhere in the *Odyssey*. These are lines in which he wonders where he is and he wonders about whether the people who live there are civilized or not. Do they respect the rules of *xenia*, or do they not respect the rules of *xenia*? If the people who live here give *xenia*, they are civilized. If they do not give *xenia*, they are uncivilized.

Odysseus says to himself,

“Woe is me! to the land of what mortals am I now come? Are they cruel, and wild, and unjust? or do they love strangers and fear the gods in their thoughts?”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

“Man of misery, whose land have I lit on now?

What *are* they here — violent, savage, lawless?

or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?”

(Fagles 6.131-133)

Compare:

“Here’s trouble! In this country I have reached,

what are the people like? Are they violent

and wild, without a sense of justice?

Or are they kind to strangers? In their minds

do they fear the gods?

(Johnston 6.148-152)

If you are planning to write a paper on *xenia*, one way to organize it would be first to define *xenia* (in the introduction), then to write about *xenia* working properly (Nestor and Menelaus), then to write about the three places where Odysseus says these lines and the kind of *xenia* that he finds there, then to write about the suitors, and finally to write a conclusion.

• **How best can Odysseus approach Nausicaa?**

When Odysseus wakes up, he needs help. He is naked. He is covered with sea-salt and seaweed. His hair is matted. He looks like a wild man. Some young girls are playing nearby, and they can help him. They can give him food and wine to drink, and they can give him clothing to wear. The problem is this: How can Odysseus ask the girls for help without scaring them? If they get scared, they won't help him. If they run back to the palace and say that a wild man was trying to hurt them, Odysseus could be lynched. Odysseus is in danger here.

So what can Odysseus do? What is the best way to approach these young girls? He wonders for a moment whether he should come out of the bushes, clasp the knees of the young girl in charge, and ask her for help. Fortunately, he decides not to do that, as it might cause the young girl concern.

Any woman reading this can imagine what she would do if she was sunbathing by a river and a naked man ran out of some bushes and grabbed her. Such an action by a naked man might very well cause her concern.

• **Why does Odysseus need to be careful when approaching Nausicaa?**

Fortunately, Odysseus decides not to get that close to Nausicaa and the other girls. Instead, he decides to cover his nakedness with a leafy branch and to stand back away from the young girls. That way, they probably won't feel threatened, and they probably will listen to what he has to say.

This is very intelligent on Odysseus' part. He does not want to scare these young girls.

If he were a different kind of man, he could be dangerous to these young girls. Fortunately, Odysseus is not a rapist. He also must act very carefully so that these young girls, who don't know him, realize that he is not a rapist.

Indeed, the seashore is a particularly dangerous place for young girls, and this river leads to the sea. In this culture, young girls would normally be around male protectors. However, while doing laundry the young girls may be alone, as they are in this case. Piracy was a problem in the ancient world, and the young girls could be kidnapped and sold into slavery. In Book 15 of the *Odyssey*, a Phoenician woman is seduced by a sailor as she is washing clothes. Later, she kidnaps the king's son and runs away with the sailor. The king's son is sold into slavery, and he becomes a swineherd.

The main point here is that Odysseus is in a dangerous situation. He needs help from these young girls. If he frightens them, he will not get help from them, and their male protectors are likely to hurt him and perhaps kill him.

Odysseus must be very careful in what he says to these young girls.

Most of the girls are afraid and run a little away from him, but Nausicaa, who has authority here, stays and listens to Odysseus.

• **Important analysis: Explain Odysseus' use of rhetoric and persuasion in his speech to Nausicaa. What is rhetoric?**

Odysseus' skill in rhetoric is amply displayed in his speech to Nausicaa. He carefully crafts his speech to her to reassure her that he is not dangerous and to persuade her to help him.

Of course, rhetoric is the use of language to persuade. Rhetoric involves the effective use of language.

Odysseus is able to let Nausicaa know that he is not going to rape her. Very importantly, he is able to do that without mentioning the word "rape." It is a good idea not to use that word because Odysseus does not want Nausicaa to be thinking about the possibility of being raped.

• **Odysseus says that Nausicaa must be the goddess Artemis. Why would he say that?**

Standing away from Nausicaa and covering his nakedness with a leafy branch, Odysseus calls Nausicaa Artemis:

"O divine queen,
I come here as a suppliant to you.
Are you a goddess or a mortal being?
If you're one of the gods who hold wide heaven,
then I think you most resemble Artemis,
daughter of great Zeus, in your loveliness,
your stature, and your shape.

(Johnston 6.186-192)

Odysseus does exactly the right thing here, and he carefully chooses the goddess whom he says that Nausicaa must be. Yes, some impressive flattery is going on here — Nausicaa is being compared to a lovely goddess, but more is going on here.

The goddess Artemis is a militant virgin. In ancient Greece there were three virgin goddesses: Athena, the goddess of wisdom; Hestia, the goddess of the hearth; and Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. Of the three, Artemis is the goddess who is most fiercely protective of her virginity.

The ancient Greek gods and goddesses can do horrible things to human beings who anger them. Certainly this is true of Artemis. One need not be especially guilty — or guilty at all — to anger a Greek god or goddess.

• **If you want to do research, explain what happened to Actaeon when he saw the goddess Artemis naked.**

The goddess Artemis gets very angry whenever a mortal man seems to threaten her virginity. One myth about Artemis involves the hunter Actaeon, who goes hunting with his dogs one day. Actaeon comes to a place where a pool of water is, and unfortunately for him Artemis is bathing naked in the pool of water. Even more unfortunately for him, Artemis notices that Actaeon is present and has seen her naked. Therefore, she turns Actaeon into a stag — a male deer. His dogs

are trained to hunt, and the dogs hunt the stag, and the dogs tear to pieces Actaeon, who still has a human mind and knows what is happening.

In this myth, Artemis acts immediately. Actaeon has seen her naked, and therefore must pay with his life. Artemis does not care that Actaeon saw her naked by accident — he did not know that she was bathing naked in the stream. Actaeon saw her naked, and therefore Actaeon must pay for that with his life.

• Which implicit message is Odysseus conveying when he says that Nausicaa must be the goddess Artemis?

By comparing Nausicaa to Artemis, Odysseus is letting her know that he is not going to hurt her. Any mortal man would be crazy to mess around with Artemis. Odysseus is telling Nausicaa, I would be crazy to even try to hurt you. Since you are a goddess, you can easily kill me if I offend you in any way.

By comparing Nausicaa to Artemis, Odysseus is letting her know that he is not going to try to rape her, and he has done that without mentioning the word “rape.” In addition, he has flattered Nausicaa by saying that she must be a goddess.

By comparing Nausicaa to Artemis, Odysseus is letting her know that she is in control here. She has the authority. She has the power. Odysseus is not a threat to her. She is safe.

• How else does Odysseus flatter Nausicaa?

Odysseus also calls Nausicaa beautiful in very flattering words:

“If you’re human,
 one of those mortals living on the earth,
 your father and noble mother are thrice-blest,
 and thrice-blest your brothers, too. In their hearts
 they must glow with pleasure for you always,
 when they see a child like you moving up
 into the dance. But the happiest heart,
 more so than all the rest, belongs to him
 who with his wedding gifts will lead you home.
 These eyes of mine have never gazed upon
 anyone like you — either man or woman.”

(Johnston 6.192-202)

Nausicaa must be flattered. According to Odysseus, she must be a goddess, but if she is not a goddess, she is a very beautiful girl — a girl whose beauty fills him with “a sense of wonder” (Fagles 6.177).

In addition, Odysseus mentions her father and her brothers, subtly reminding Nausicaa that she has male relatives who will look out for her. If Odysseus were to try to take advantage of her in any way, her father and brothers will be very angry at him and they will hurt him.

• **Why does Odysseus mention the temple of Apollo at Delos?**

Odysseus does say that there was another beautiful thing that he has seen: a “young slip of a palm-tree” (Fagles 6.179) beside the altar of Apollo at Delos (DEE-los):

“In Delos once I saw something like this —
a youthful palm-tree shoot growing up
beside Apollo’s altar. I’d gone there,
with many others in my company,
on the trip where Fate had planned for me
so many troubles.”

(Johnston 6.203-208)

By mentioning the temple of Apollo at Delos, Odysseus lets Nausicaa know that he is civilized and knows about the gods. Of course, by being civilized and knowing about the gods, he knows about *xenia*. Because he is civilized and knows about *xenia*, he knows the protocol of *xenia* and is going to respect that protocol. A civilized man is not going to violate *xenia* by hurting his host.

In addition, by telling Nausicaa that he has travelled and has suffered hardships, Odysseus is letting Nausicaa know that he has interesting stories to tell. One thing that a guest can do to repay his host is to tell interesting stories. Of course, Odysseus’ stories are so interesting that we still read them thousands of years after they were written down. Also, of course, guests are an important source of news. Nausicaa will not be present when Odysseus tells his stories later, but she will know that he has an interesting history to relate to her father and mother, the King and Queen of Phaeacia.

• **How does Odysseus ask Nausicaa for compassion?**

Odysseus tells Nausicaa about his adventures and about being shipwrecked, and then he asks her for compassion:

“But, divine queen,
have pity. You’re the first one I’ve approached,
after going through so much grief. I don’t know
any other people, none of those who hold
the city and its land. Show me the town.
Give me some rag to throw around myself,
perhaps some wrapping you had for the clothes

when you came here.”

(Johnston 6.224-231)

Nausicaa does have power here. She has the power to help him, and Odysseus, after arousing her pity, tells her exactly what he most needs: some clothing to hide his nakedness and directions to town.

• **Does Odysseus really think that Nausicaa is the goddess Artemis?**

At the end of his speech, Odysseus wishes that Nausicaa will find a good husband:

“And may the gods give you all your heart desires:

husband, and house, and lasting harmony too.”

(Fagles 6.198-199)

Compare:

“As for you, may gods grant
all your heart desires — may they give you
a husband, home, and mutual harmony,
a noble gift — for there is nothing better
or a stronger bond than when man and wife
live in a home sharing each other’s thoughts.”

(Johnston 6.231-236)

This, of course, shows that Odysseus knows that Nausicaa is not the goddess Artemis. She is a young girl about the age to be married.

In his speech, Odysseus has used words skillfully and effectively — he is a master of rhetoric. He has let Nausicaa know that he will not harm her, he has flattered Nausicaa, he has aroused her pity, and he has let her know that he knows that she can hurt him.

Nausicaa does help Odysseus, and she gives Odysseus more help than what he asked for.

Odysseus’ speech to Nausicaa has been effective and has the result he wanted.

• **Nausicaa responds by offering Odysseus a bath. Why does Odysseus decline having help when he bathes?**

Nausicaa is civilized and understands *xenia*. She offers Odysseus clothing and a bath. Of course, Odysseus is covered in sea-salt and seaweed and looks terrible, so he needs a bath in the fresh river water.

In Book 3 of the *Odyssey*, Nestor’s youngest daughter gave Telemachus a bath; in this culture, nothing is wrong with women giving men baths. Therefore, Nausicaa offers to have her servants give Odysseus a bath in the river.

Wisely, Odysseus says no to the offer. He needs a bath, but he says that he will bathe himself:

“[...] I won’t bathe in front of you. I would be embarrassed —
stark naked in front of young girls with lovely braids.”

(Fagles 6.245-246)

Compare:

“I won’t wash myself in front of you,
for I’m ashamed to stand stark naked
in the presence of such fair-haired girls.”

(Johnston 6.284-286)

Of course, this is wise of Odysseus. It is best if he has no contact of that kind with these young girls. The male protectors of these young girls don’t know him, and it is best if the male protectors don’t wonder why the young girls were bathing Odysseus and what might have happened during the bath.

• How does Athena help Odysseus?

Athena helps Odysseus by making him better looking. He has been looking very bad because of the sea-salt and the seaweed and the hardships, but Athena makes him look younger and more handsome after he takes his bath in the river.

This is one of the powers of the Greek gods and goddesses. They are able to change the appearance of human beings. When Odysseus is back on Ithaca, Athena is able to make his skin old and his head bald. In this book, Athena makes Odysseus taller.

Nausicaa is interested in this good-looking stranger who is Odysseus. She is of an age to be soon married, and Odysseus looks to her like husband material. She tells her maids,

“Ah, if only a man like *that* were called my husband,
lived right here, pleased to stay forever ...”

(Fagles 6.270-271)

Compare:

“Would a man like that could be my husband,
living here and happy to remain.”

(Johnston 6.313-314)

Nausicaa is interested in Odysseus. She thinks that he would make a good husband for her.

In addition to her other hospitality, Nausicaa gives Odysseus food and drink after he has had a bath.

• **Which instructions does Nausicaa give to Odysseus? Why does she give him those instructions?**

Nausicaa gives Odysseus directions to the palace of her parents, and she gives him advice about how to ask her parents for help.

Nausicaa tells Odysseus to follow her until they are near the city, then to hang back and not enter the city with her. Odysseus should enter the city alone to avoid arousing gossip about Nausicaa and him.

Nausicaa is able to subtly express an interest in Odysseus and even an interest in marrying Odysseus. She brings up the possibility of marriage in what would be the gossip of those who should see them enter the city together. She also tells Odysseus that she isn't interested in marrying any of the Phaeacian men now courting her. This may or may not be true, or have been true, but it seems that Nausicaa is interested in marrying Odysseus. This is what Nausicaa says the Phaeacians might say about Odysseus if they saw him with her:

“one of the nastier types might well say,
if he bumped into us: ‘Who’s the man
who’s following Nausicaa? A stranger —
he’s tall and handsome! Where did she find him?
No doubt he’ll be her husband. She’s brought here
some shipwrecked vagrant, a man whose people
live far away, for no one dwells near us,
or he’s some god come down from heaven,
answering those prayers she’s always making.
She’ll have him as her husband all her days.
It’s better that way, even if she went
and found herself someone to marry
from another place — she has no respect
for those Phaeacians, her own countrymen,
the many noble men who’d marry her.’”

(Johnston 6.350-364)

Nausicaa flatters Odysseus by saying that the Phaeacians in the city who might see them together may think that he is a god. She also expresses her strong interest in him by having the Phaeacian men who might see them together say that he would be able “to answer all her prayers, and to have her all his days” (Fagles 6.308). This is a subtle hint that she is interested in marriage — to Odysseus.

Nausicaa also says that she would like to avoid scandal:

“So they’ll scoff ...
just think of the scandal that would face me then,
I’d find fault with a girl who carried on that way,
flouting her parents’ wishes — father, mother, still alive —
consorting with men before she’d tied the knot in public.”
(Fagles 6.312-316)

Compare:

“That’s what they would say, and their remarks
would injure me. But I would do the same
to some other girl who acted just like that,
who, while her father and her mother lived,
against their wishes hung around with men
before the day she married one in public.”
(Johnston 6.365-370)

Nausicaa has subtly let Odysseus know that she is interested in him, but remarkably, at the end of her speech she says that she would disapprove of anyone who would do what she is doing.

Looking at this speech, we may regard it as a subtle marriage proposal. Nausicaa is letting Odysseus know that she is interested in him. But she is doing it so subtly that he need not respond to the proposal. If he is interested, he can respond, but if he is not interested, he need not respond.

Of course, Odysseus wants to get back to Ithaca and his wife, so he does not respond. Later, in the palace he will also reject marriage to Nausicaa when her father proposes a marriage.

Nausicaa also tells Odysseus how to get to the palace and how to ask her parents for help. The important thing is to ask the Queen, not the King, for help, which is something unusual. Homeric Greece is a patriarchal place — much more patriarchal than the modern United States of America — and so it is unusual to ask the Queen for help. It turns out that the Queen has a lot of power in the kingdom.

Of course, Odysseus is still in a dangerous situation, although Nausicaa has helped him. Now he must go to the palace and get help from Nausicaa’s parents.

• What does Odysseus pray to Athena for?

After Nausicaa goes on ahead, Odysseus wisely prays to Athena and asks her for help because he still needs *xenia* on this island:

“Hear me, child of aegis-bearing Zeus,

unwearied goddess, listen to me now,
 for you did not respond to me back then,
 when I was being beaten down at sea
 and the great Earthshaker destroyed my raft.
 Grant that I come to the Phaeacians
 as a friend, someone worthy of their pity.”

(Johnston 6.411-417)

Of course, Athena hears the prayer, but Poseidon is still angry at Odysseus, so Athena will not appear undisguised before him because she does not want to get Poseidon angry at her.

Odysseus is well aware that Athena does not always answer his prayers or help him. Fortunately, Athena is no longer angry at him.

Conclusion

Odysseus still needs help, but he is in a civilized country where he will get help. Nausicaa is civilized, and she has told Odysseus what he needs to do to get help from her parents.

Odyssey, Book 7:

“Phaeacia’s Halls and Gardens”

“Odysseus at the Court of Alcinous in Phaeacia”

Introduction

Currently, Odysseus is on the island of Scheria, where the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa has given him good *xenia*. She fed him and gave him clothing, and she told him how to get to her parents’ palace. In this book, Odysseus must go to the palace and ask for more *xenia*. Although Odysseus does not know it yet, he will receive excellent *xenia* on this island.

• Where is Odysseus at the beginning of Book 7? Which challenges does he face?

Of course, Odysseus is on the island called Scheria, which is inhabited by the Phaeacians. He did make friends with the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa, but he still must go to her parents’ palace and ask for *xenia*.

Odysseus will be a suppliant to the King and the Queen of the Phaeacians. He needs aid from them. They can do a lot to help him, and they can do a lot to hurt him. Of course, Odysseus prefers that they be his friends rather than his enemies.

• The scene where Nausicaa goes home to her father’s palace forms a contrast to what is happening in Odysseus’ palace. How are the events at the two palaces different?

Nausicaa returns to the palace without Odysseus because she says that she is afraid of gossip.

Nausicaa is loved. She returns to the palace, and it is very comfortable. The wagon of clothing is unloaded by her brothers, and a fire is lit for her and a meal made for her by her chambermaid. All works well in the palace. Nausicaa is in a loving environment. Her society is functional.

This scene serves as a contrast to Odysseus’ palace. There, Telemachus is loved by his mother and respected by loyal servants, but the palace is also filled with evil suitors who are plotting his death. Also, some servants are disloyal to Telemachus and to Penelope. Of course, the society on Ithaca is dysfunctional, as we know because *xenia* is not observed properly.

• How does Athena help Odysseus? Why doesn’t she help him openly?

Athena helps Odysseus to reach the palace of Nausicaa’s parents. She is disguised as a young girl because she does not want Poseidon to see her and become angry at her because she is helping Odysseus. As a goddess, Athena can disguise herself, as she does here. In addition, she has the power of concealing Odysseus in a mist so that no one can see him. It is as if Odysseus is concealed by fog until Athena deems it appropriate to reveal Odysseus’ presence to the Phaeacians.

When Odysseus reaches the palace of Nausicaa’s parents, Alcinous and Arete, he asks them for their assistance.

Later, Athena will show herself openly to Odysseus when she is not trying to keep the peace with Poseidon. That is a great favor to Odysseus. Usually, when the gods and goddesses go among mortals, they are in disguise. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Aeneas’ mother, Aphrodite (her Roman name is Venus) seldom reveals herself to Aeneas.

In this society, the Queen is important. Nausicaa has advised Odysseus to seek help from the Queen.

Odysseus could wonder if he is in some danger from the Phaeacians because Poseidon is one of their ancestors, as we learn from the genealogy that Athena, disguised as a young girl, tells Odysseus. As relatives of Poseidon, the Phaeacians are also related to the Cyclopes. Of course, Poseidon is angry at Odysseus because Odysseus killed Polyphemus, Poseidon's son who is also a Cyclops. However, the Phaeacians moved to Scheria because the Cyclopes were harassing them.

• **The name of the queen of the Phaeacians is Arete. What does “arete” mean in Greek?**

Athena points out that in the society of the Phaeacians, Arete, the queen, is held in reverence almost equal to that of a god. Athena also says that Arete settles disputes even among men. The importance of Queen Arete may be because she is what her name represents. *Arete* in Greek means virtue. A virtuous society such as that of the Phaeacians holds *xenia* in special reverence. Queen Arete is an unusually powerful woman. Odysseus remembers Nausicaa's advice and in fact asks Queen Arete for help.

Here is some information about *arete*::

The most articulated value in Greek culture is *areté*. Translated as “virtue,” the word actually means something closer to “being the best you can be,” or “reaching your highest human potential.” The term from Homeric times onwards is not gender specific. Homer applies the term [to] both the Greek and Trojan heroes as well as major female figures, such as Penelope, the wife of the Greek hero, Odysseus. In the Homeric poems, *areté* is frequently associated with bravery, but more often, with effectiveness. The man or woman of *areté* is a person of the highest effectiveness; they use all their faculties: strength, bravery, wit, and deceptiveness, to achieve real results. In the Homeric world, then, *areté* involves all of the abilities and potentialities available to humans. We can, through the frequent use of this term in Homer's poems, make some tentative conclusions about the early Greek world view. The concept implies a human-centered universe in which human actions are of paramount importance; the world is a place of conflict and difficulty, and human value and meaning is measured against individual effectiveness in the world. — Richard Hooker

Source: <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/GLOSSARY/ARETE.HTM>

Date Downloaded: 18 September 2004

• **What does Athena say about Queen Arete? What is Queen Arete known for?**

Queen Arete is respected and loved because of her “good sense and judgment” (Fagles 7.84).

Disguised as a young girl, Athena says about Arete:

“Alcinous made her his wife and honors her
as no woman is honored on this earth, of all the wives
now keeping households under their husbands' sway.

Such is her pride of place, and always will be so:
 dear to her loving children, to Alcinous himself
 and all our people. They gaze on her as a god,
 saluting her warmly on her walks through town.
 She lacks nothing in good sense and judgment —
 she can dissolve quarrels, even among men,
 whoever wins her sympathies.”

(Fagles 7.77-86)

Compare:

“Alcinous made her his wife and honoured her
 beyond all other women on this earth,
 all the wives who now control their homes
 under the direction of their husbands.
 That’s how much she’s honoured from the heart
 by her dear children, by Alcinous himself,
 and by the people, too, who look on her
 as if she were a goddess, when they greet her
 as she walks through town. She does not lack
 a fine intelligence, and thus for women
 to whom she’s well disposed she can resolve
 disputes they go through with their husbands.”

(Johnston 7.78-89)

Given that Homer lives in a patriarchal society, that Queen Arete “can dissolve quarrels, even among men” (Fagles 7.85) is significant.

• **What does Odysseus do when he reaches the palace?**

When Odysseus arrives at the palace, he admires it and the palace’s orchards that are outside the courtyard. Fruit is always in season, no matter what time of the year it is, because of the climate.

When Athena lifts the mist away from Odysseus and reveals him to the Phaeacians, Odysseus does what Nausicaa advised him to do: He goes to Arete, he clasps her knees, and he beseeches her to help him.

Odysseus is a suppliant. He says all the right things, asking the Phaeacians for mercy, asking the gods to bless them with good fortune, saying that he wants a voyage home, and saying that he has suffered greatly, which of course is true.

• **How does the King react to Odysseus' supplication?**

However, King Alcinous does not immediately raise Odysseus up. Raising Odysseus up from the ground would indicate that the supplication was successful, that the suppliant will be helped.

Everyone is in shock at Odysseus' sudden appearance. An old man and counselor must remind King Alcinous to respect the suppliant. *Xenia* is respected here, and the old man gives good counsel to the King, who is not evil but rather has not spoken and has not raised up Odysseus because he is so surprised by the sudden appearance of Odysseus.

Echeneus tells King Alcinous,

“Alcinous, it's not at all appropriate
or to our credit that this stranger's sitting
at our hearth, in the ashes on the ground.
The people here are holding themselves back,
waiting for your word. Come, tell the stranger
to get up. Then invite the man to sit
on a silver-studded chair. Tell the heralds
to mix wine, so we may make an offering
to thunder-loving Zeus, who accompanies
all pious suppliants. And tell the steward
to provide this stranger with a dinner
from what she has in store.”

(Johnston 7.189-200)

King Alcinous is a good person who respects *xenia*, but even good people need a gentle reminder to do what is right. Note that Echeneus is referred to as “old revered Echeneus” (Fagles 7.185). The old are often wise, and an old wise man is the right person to advise a king.

King Alcinous raises Odysseus up, signifying that he will help the suppliant:

When the strong and mighty Alcinous heard this, he took by the hand Odysseus, the wise and crafty-minded, and raised him from the hearth, and set him upon a bright chair from which he bade his son, the kindly Laodamas, to rise; for he sat next to him, and was his best beloved. Then a handmaid brought water for the hands in a fair pitcher of gold, and poured it over a silver basin, for him to wash, and beside him drew up a polished table. And the grave housewife brought and set before him bread, and therewith dainties in abundance, giving freely of her store. So the much-enduring goodly Odysseus drank and

ate; and then the mighty Alcinous spoke to the herald, and said: “Pontonous, mix the bowl, and serve wine to all in the hall, that we may pour libations also to Zeus, who hurls the thunderbolt; for he ever attends upon reverend suppliants.”

(Trans. A.T. Murray)

Compare:

When he heard these words,
brave and kingly Alcinous stretched out his hand,
reached for Odysseus, that wise and crafty man,
raised him from the hearth, and invited him to sit
in a shining chair, after he had asked his son,
handsome Laodamas, the son he loved the most,
who sat beside him, to stand up and offer it.

(Johnston 7.200-206)

In fact, King Alcinous has his favorite son get out of a chair so that Odysseus can sit in it.

• **How does Odysseus react when King Alcinous wonders if Odysseus might be a god?**

The King and Queen of the Phaeacians offer good *xenia*. Odysseus gets bread and appetizers (in this society, the major food is bread), and he is given wine. In addition, and this gladdens his heart, he is offered passage on a ship that will carry him to Ithaca. This is what he has long wanted, and very soon he will have it. The Phaeacians are renowned for their hospitality.

King Alcinous wonders if Odysseus might be a god in disguise, come to test the Phaeacians and see if they observe *xenia*. Ordinarily, however, the gods don’t do that to the Phaeacians. Instead, they visit them openly, undisguised. This is a great favor to the Phaeacians. This shows us how much Athena likes Odysseus, because she often appears to him undisguised — at least after he returns to Ithaca.

The reference to the test of the gods is interesting. Some myths told of Zeus traveling in disguise, testing people to see if they observed *xenia*. Those who did were rewarded, and those who did not were punished. In one myth, Zeus visits an impoverished elderly couple named Baucis and Philemon, who willingly share with him what food they have, which is little. However, no matter how much wine they poured from the pitcher, the pitcher remained full, and no matter how much bread they took from the breadbasket, more bread remained. Even after Zeus had left, Baucis and Philemon never lacked for wine and bread.

When King Alcinous wonders if Odysseus might be a god, Odysseus forcefully answers no:

“Alcinous, you should not concern yourself
about what you’ve just said — for I’m not like
the immortal gods who hold wide heaven,

not in my form or shape. I'm like mortal men.
 If, among human beings, you know of some
 who bear a really heavy weight of trouble,
 I might compare myself with them for grief.
 Indeed, I could recount a longer story —
 all those hardships I have had to suffer
 from the gods. But let me eat my dinner,
 though I'm in great distress.”
 (Johnston 7.256-265)

Odysseus, of course, accepts the human condition. He has no desire to be a god or to be mistaken for one.

• **How is Odysseus treated at the palace?**

Of course, the king and queen feed Odysseus. He is given food and wine. This helps to show that Odysseus is fully human. Usually, but not always, the gods drink nectar and eat ambrosia. King Alcinous also promises to send Odysseus home.

Odysseus is also fully human in that he wants to go home. He tells King Alcinous,

“But when dawn appears, you should stir yourselves
 so you can set me in my misery
 back on my native soil, for all I've suffered.
 If I can see my goods again, my slaves,
 my large and high-roofed home, then let life end.”
 (Johnston 7.274-278)

• **Which questions does Queen Arete have for Odysseus?**

Queen Arete notices that Odysseus is wearing clothing that she herself and her women had made (women work hard in this culture), and understandably she wonders how Odysseus received the clothing. She asks Odysseus directly about the clothing, and she asks him to tell his story:

White-armed Arete spoke first, for when she saw
 his cloak and tunic, she recognized his lovely clothes
 as ones made by her servant women and herself.
 So she spoke to him — her words had wings:
 “Stranger,

first of all, I'll ask you this: Who are you?
 What people do you come from? And those clothes —
 who gave them to you? Did you not tell us
 you came here wandering across the sea?"

(Johnston 7.286-294)

Since the queen knows that Nausicaa has just done the laundry, she is worried that Odysseus may have come across her and seduced or raped her. The queen is worried about her daughter.

• Again, Odysseus displays his command of rhetoric when he answers Queen Arete's questions. He must be careful not to get himself or Nausicaa in trouble. How does Odysseus answer Queen Arete's questions?

This is another case in which Odysseus must carefully word his answer. He must tell how he received the clothing he is wearing, and he must also reassure the King and Queen of the Phaeacians that he did nothing to harm their daughter.

Odysseus tells the Phaeacians about Calypso, the raft, and his journey to the Phaeacians' island. He also answers the Queen's unspoken question, which is this: Did you do anything to hurt my daughter?

Odysseus tells the Queen how Nausicaa helped him. As he talks about Nausicaa, he is careful not to get her in trouble. After all, she and the other maids have been alone with a strange man, and sexual misconduct could have occurred.

Odysseus says,

"[...] not once did her sense of tact desert her."

(Fagles 7.335)

Compare:

"I entreated her,
 and she revealed no lack of noble sense,
 the sort you would not hope to come across
 in one so young at a first encounter —
 young people always act so thoughtlessly."

(Johnston 7.362-366)

Nausicaa gave proper help to Odysseus. She gave him food, wine, a bath (as we know, Odysseus bathed himself), and clothing — this answers Queen Arete's unspoken question.

In fact, Nausicaa does have a sense of tact. She wanted to avoid gossip, so she had Odysseus enter the city after she had entered the city.

• **How does Odysseus protect Nausicaa when her father criticizes her actions?**

Odysseus is a master liar, and often his use of rhetoric as he speaks involves lying persuasively (especially when he is among the suitors). In addition, when he wishes, he tells only part of the truth.

Odysseus' lying comes into play when King Alcinous says that his daughter was remiss in not bringing Odysseus to the palace herself. Of course, Nausicaa asked that he follow her at a distance until she reached the city, then let her and her maids go on alone, since she did not want to stir up gossip among the townspeople. Here, Odysseus hides part of the truth to protect her.

When King Alcinous faults Nausicaa for not taking Odysseus to the palace, Odysseus lies to protect Nausicaa, saying,

“She urged me herself to follow with her maids.
I chose not to, fearing embarrassment in fact —
what if you took offense, seeing us both together?
Suspicious we are, we men who walk the earth.”
(Fagles 7.349-352)

Compare:

“My lord,
in this you must not criticize your daughter,
I beg you, for she is quite innocent.
She did indeed tell me to follow her
with her attendants, but I was unwilling,
afraid and shamed in case, when you saw us,
you would be angry, for on this earth
groups of men are quick to grow enraged.”
(Johnston 7.375-382)

Odysseus says that she asked him to follow with her maids, but that he chose not to, since he didn't want to cause trouble by being seen with her. What Odysseus says is true, but it is only part of the truth. He leaves out the part when she asked him to wait and let her and her maids enter the palace first so that he would not be seen with her. In fact, Odysseus calls Nausicaa “a flawless daughter” (Fagles 7.447).

Odysseus' lying shows his gentlemanliness, as well as his skill in rhetoric. Odysseus is also intentionally committing the fallacy of suppressed evidence. He suppresses part of the truth in order to protect Nausicaa.

• **In which way is Nausicaa a danger to Odysseus?**

Odysseus has many good qualities, and King Alcinous hints strongly at a marriage between Odysseus and Nausicaa:

“By Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo,
I wish, given the kind of man you are,
with a mind that thinks so like my own,
you’d marry my child and become my son,
and then stay here. I’d give you a home
and wealth, as well, if you chose to remain.
But no Phaeacian will detain you here,
against your will.”

(Johnston 7.387-394)

Although King Alcinous would like Odysseus to marry Nausicaa, he will not force him to do so.

Although Nausicaa is a young girl, she is a danger to Odysseus. Odysseus could be tempted to stay with her and forget his homecoming. However, he does not do that. He remains committed to his homecoming and to his wife and son.

• **Odysseus receives good *xenia* from the Phaeacians. Why does the Phaeacians’ society observe good *xenia*? From whence does it come?**

The Phaeacians are wonderful sailors, and they have wonderful ships. They can sail anywhere in the world and back again in a single day.

Among the Phaeacians, Odysseus finds very good *xenia* and a voyage home. However, we can ask from what source does the *xenia* come.

After all, the ordinary citizens don’t seem to be especially friendly. Athena, disguised as a young girl, says,

“The men here never suffer strangers gladly,
have no love for hosting a man from foreign lands.
All they really trust are their fast, flying ships
that cross the mighty ocean.”

(Fagles 7.36-39)

Compare:

“The people here are not fond of strangers —
they don’t extend a friendly welcome

to those from other lands, but put their trust
 in their swift ships to carry them across
 vast gulfs of the sea, something Poseidon
 has permitted them, for their ships move fast,
 as swift as birds in flight or as a thought.”
 (Johnston 7.36-42)

And in Book 6, according to Nausicaa, the men seem to be gossips:

“one of the nastier types might well say,
 if he bumped into us: ‘Who’s the man
 who’s following Nausicaa? A stranger —
 he’s tall and handsome! Where did she find him?
 No doubt he’ll be her husband. She’s brought here
 some shipwrecked vagrant, a man whose people
 live far away, for no one dwells near us,
 or he’s some god come down from heaven,
 answering those prayers she’s always making.
 She’ll have him as her husband all her days.
 It’s better that way, even if she went
 and found herself someone to marry
 from another place — she has no respect
 for those Phaeacians, her own countrymen,
 the many noble men who’d marry her.’”
 (Johnston 6.350-364)

Why does good *xenia* exist among the Phaeacians? Apparently, it’s because of the King and the Queen. When leaders are civilized, they ensure that the common people observe *xenia*.

The Phaeacian leaders are civilized, and they ensure that the common people observe *xenia*. Also likely important is the influence especially of Queen Arete, whom we already know is respected and loved.

In contrast, Ithaca lacks good leadership, and so the suitors do not practice good *xenia*.

Conclusion

At the end of Book 7, Odysseus and the Phaeacians all go to bed. King Alcinous says that he will send Odysseus back home the very next day, but actually the Phaeacians entertain Odysseus for a while before he makes it back home. In addition, Odysseus will entertain the Phaeacians for a while (by telling them his story).

Odyssey, Book 8:
“A Day for Songs and Contests”
“Odysseus is Entertained in Phaeacia”

Introduction

Odysseus is in a good situation now. The Phaeacians are renowned for their hospitality, and they will entertain him and give him the voyage home that he desires. Odysseus was in a dangerous situation when he landed on the island, naked and without food or possessions. However, he was able to convince the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa to help him, and later he was able to convince the Phaeacian king and queen to help him. At the end of this book, Odysseus will begin to tell the story of his Great Wanderings after the end of Trojan War.

• **How does King Alcinous encourage *xenia* among the common sailors?**

We have heard from two sources that the common Phaeacians are not fond of strangers, and yet the Phaeacians are renowned for *xenia*.

Athena, disguised as a young girl, says:

“The men here never suffer strangers gladly,
 have no love for hosting a man from foreign lands.
 All they really trust are their fast, flying ships”
 (Fagles 7.36-37)

And in Book 6, according to Nausicaa, the men seem to be gossips:

“and one of the coarser sort, spying us, might say,
 “Now who’s that tall, handsome stranger Nausicaa has in tow?
 Where’d she light on *him*? Her husband-to-be, just wait!
 But who — some shipwrecked stray she’s taken up with,
 some alien from abroad? Since nobody lives nearby.
 Unless it’s really a god come down from the blue
 to answer all her prayers, and to have her all his days.
 Good riddance! Let the girl go roving to find herself
 a man from foreign parts. She only spurns her own —
 countless Phaeacians round about who court her,
 nothing but our best.”
 (Fagles 6.302-312)

In Book 8, we see King Alcinous encouraging *xenia* among the common sailors. He points out that the stranger is a guest, and then he rewards the sailors who will take the stranger to his home:

So let us act as we have done before
and assist him with his journey.
No man arriving at my palace stays there long
grieving because he can't return back home.
Let's drag a black ship down into the sea
for her first voyage. Then from the citizens
choose fifty-two young men who in the past
have shown they are the best. Once they've all lashed
the oars firmly in place, they'll come ashore,
go to my house, and quickly make a meal.
I will provide enough for everyone.

(Johnston 8.38-48)

King Alcinous rewards good behavior with flattery and a feast. The sailors who will take Odysseus home are “the best in town, who've proved their strength before” (Fagles 8.42). For them, he will “lay on a princely feast” (Fagles 8.45).

King Alcinous also must encourage the young nobles to respect *xenia*. We will see him educating the young noble Broadsea in how to treat a guest.

• **Which two main kinds of entertainment do the Phaeacians provide for Odysseus?**

The ancient Greeks did have a number of entertainments, including hunting and fishing and dancing. In Book 8 of the *Iliad*, the focus is on two main kinds of entertainment, as shown by the title of this book: “A Day for Songs and Contests.” The songs are poetry sung by the blind bard Demodocus, while the contests are athletic events engaged in by the young Phaeacian men and, in one event, by Odysseus.

The Phaeacians really do treat Odysseus well. They are going to sail him home, but they are also going to entertain him with the songs of a bard and with athletic contests.

In Book 8, the two kinds of entertainment are not treated separately. Instead, we have a song, then athletic events, and then another song, and so on. For the sake of convenience, I will write about them separately.

• **The athletic games show us Odysseus' abilities as a warrior. How is that possible?**

Odysseus, of course, is a warrior, and the athletic games are the games that are played by warriors. In the *Iliad*, we see that warriors amuse themselves when they are not on the battlefield. One way to do that is with epic poetry; we remember that Achilles was singing of ancient heroes and undying *kleos* in Book 9 of the *Iliad* when the embassy sent by Agamemnon came to beseech him to return to battle.

The other way that warriors amuse themselves is with athletic games such as throwing spears. These athletic games involve the practice of skills that are useful on the battlefield. For example, a footrace involves speed, and at times a warrior must be speedy on the battlefield. Other athletic contests involve archery, which is important on the battlefield.

Note that the funeral games for Patroclus in Book 23 of the *Iliad* involve these kinds of games, all of which involve the practice of skills that are useful on the battlefield: racing chariots, throwing a heavy weight, throwing spears, running, and shooting arrows.

• **How is Odysseus insulted by Broadsea (Fagles)/Euryalus (Johnston)? How does he react?**

Note: Broadsea is how Robert Fagles translates the ancient Greek name. Ian Johnston uses the name Euryalus. Robert Fitzgerald uses the name Seareach.

Broadsea insults Odysseus after the Phaeacian prince Laodamas invites him to compete in the athletic contests, but Odysseus declines. Of course, Odysseus has a good reason for declining: he has endured much hardship.

Broadsea hears that and says,

“Oh I knew it!”

Broadsea broke in, mocking him to his face.

“I never took you for someone skilled in games,
the kind that real men play throughout the world.

Not a chance. You’re some skipper of profiteers,
roving the high seas in his scudding craft,

reckoning up his freight with a keen eye out

for home-cargo, grabbing the gold he can!

You’re no athlete, I can see that!”

(Fagles 8.182-190)

Of course, Odysseus is insulted here. When Broadsea says that Odysseus is “no athlete” (Fagles 8.190), he is saying that Odysseus is no warrior. Of course, as we know, Odysseus was one of the foremost warriors in the Trojan War. Instead of regarding Odysseus as a warrior, Broadsea says that Odysseus must be a pirate instead.

Odysseus, of course, has proper pride. He is angered by Broadsea’s insult, and he responds by taking a discus and hurling it further than any of the young Phaeacian men have thrown it.

Odysseus very seldom makes a mistake, but here he says something that would allow an alert person to guess his identity. So far, the Phaeacians don't know who Odysseus is. They know that he was held captive by Calypso on her island, but Odysseus has not yet told them his name. At this time, he is so angered by Broadsea's insult that he says something that could reveal his identity:

"I well understand
 how to use a polished bow with skill.
 I was the first to shoot an arrow off
 and, in a multitude of enemies,
 to kill a man, even as companions
 standing close by me were still taking aim.
 In that Trojan land, when Achaeans shot,
 the only one who beat me with the bow
 was Philoctetes."

(Johnston 8.275-283)

Anyone listening carefully would know that this stranger fought in the Trojan War, and that in archery he was second only to Philoctetes. That is enough to give away Odysseus' identity, assuming that people know who the second-best archer in the Trojan War was.

Actually, in the *Iliad*, Odysseus never uses a bow and arrow. In Book 23 of the *Iliad*, Odysseus seems to be greedy for prizes during the funeral games that are held to honor Patroclus; however, he does not participate in the archery contest. Here we seem to have a minor contradiction with the *Iliad*.

However, we see foreshadowing here. Odysseus' skill with a bow will be important later in the *Odyssey*.

Very seldom does Odysseus give way to anger or other emotions. This is one of those times.

• Broadsea violates *xenia* by insulting a guest: Odysseus. How does Odysseus help educate Broadsea?

Although Odysseus is angry at Broadsea, Odysseus does not violate *xenia*. He challenges all of the male Phaeacians to athletic games, but he exempts Laodamas, the favorite son of King Alcinous. (He doesn't exempt King Alcinous because he doesn't have to — only the young male Phaeacians are participating in the athletic events.) After he hurls the discus farther than anyone else, Odysseus says,

"Equal that, you youngsters.
 I'll quickly send another after it,

which will go as far, I think, even further.
 As for other contests, let any man
 whose heart and spirit urge him, come up here,
 and test himself. You've made me so worked up.
 In boxing, wrestling, or running — I don't care.
 Any one at all from you Phaeacians,
 all except Laodamas, for he's my host.
 And what man fights against another man
 who shows him hospitality? Anyone
 who challenges the host who welcomes him
 in a foreign land is a worthless fool,
 for he is canceling his own good fortune."
 (Johnston 8.257-270)

"Young pups" (Fagles 8.233) is the insult of an old (or at least older) man to young men. A young classicist once wrote in a book that it is not that difficult to read all the extant classical literature in the original Greek and Latin. A crusty old don at Oxford checked the book out of the library, read this passage, and marked in the margin, "Young pup!"

King Alcinous makes it clear that Odysseus has not violated *xenia* by challenging all of the young male Phaeacians to athletic contests:

"Stranger,
 friend — nothing you say among us seems ungracious.
 You simply want to display the gifts you're born with,
 stung that a youngster marched up to you in the games,
 mocking, ridiculing your prowess as no one would
 who had some sense of fit and proper speech."
 (Fagles 8.267-272)

Both Odysseus and King Alcinous are educating Broadsea and the other young male Phaeacians: Don't treat a guest the way that Broadsea did. I think that King Alcinous is grateful that Odysseus has taught the young pup a lesson.

Of course, if the suitors on Ithaca had had such teachers, they would not now be running wild.

• **How does King Alcinous react later in Book 8 to Broadsea's insulting Odysseus?**

Later in Book 8, we see the importance of male authority figures in a society. At the banquet, King Alcinous tells Broadsea (Johnston calls him Euryalus),

“Euryalus must apologize in person
to the stranger, verbally and with a gift,
for what he said is not acceptable.”

(Johnston 8.496-498)

Here, of course, King Alcinous is teaching Broadsea manners. Broadsea insulted Odysseus, so Broadsea must now apologize. Because there are no fathers on Ithaca, the young men there have not learned good manners.

We should note that all of the Phaeacians give gifts to Odysseus. This is part of the protocol of *xenia*: The host will give a guest-gift. Queen Arete brings out a polished chest and puts the gifts of the Phaeacians — clothing and gold — inside, then Odysseus ties the lid with an intricate knot (that Circe taught him) so that no one can steal the treasure. Later, Odysseus will have the chance to get even more guest-gifts when he tells his story to the Phaeacians.

Here is an example of a father educating his son: Showboating — showing off after accomplishing an impressive athletic feat — is a no-no for many serious athletes. When Ken Griffey, Jr., was 12 years old, he was an incredible athlete, but of course he had not matured mentally. He hit a home run in a game, and he showboated as he ran around the bases. When he reached home plate, his father, major-league player Ken Griffey, Sr., was waiting for him and told him, “I’ll talk to you when you get home.” At home, his father told him, “Don’t you ever do that again! You don’t need to do that! That’s not how baseball is played!” As a grown-up major-league player, Ken Griffey, Jr., concentrated on winning games instead of showing off. By the way, for a while, both father and son played for the Seattle Mariners. Ken, Jr., didn’t know what to call his father in front of the other players: Dad or Ken? The other players solved that problem for him — they gave Ken, Sr., a new nickname: Dad. (Source: Jeff Savage, *Sports Great Ken Griffey, Jr.*, pp. 20, 22, 43.)

Of course, mothers can also educate sons, although the *Odyssey* stresses the importance of having a father around to help raise male children. Here’s an example of a mother educating her son: When Ralph Nader was in the 8th grade, one of the boys in his class said about a girl in their class, “What a pig.” The girl — who was friendly and whom everyone liked, at least until the onset of testosterone in this young male — heard him and was hurt. All young Ralph could think about was what his deeply moral mother would have told the boy, “I believe it’s you.” In this particular situation, that sentence means, “There’s nothing wrong with that girl. But there is something wrong with you.” Whenever Ralph or one of his siblings acted in a base manner, their mother would tell him or her, “I believe it’s you.” (Source: Ralph Nader, *The Seventeen Traditions*, pp. 1-3.)

• **The *Odyssey* provides a glimpse into the life of a bard: Demodocus. What kind of a character is Demodocus?**

The other form of entertainment given to Odysseus in Book 8 is the songs of the bard Demodocus, who sings three songs that are important because they involve important themes in the *Odyssey*.

Demodocus is blind, thus we may have the reason that Homer was thought to be blind. However, I find it difficult to believe that Homer was born blind. Some of his images are so visual that it is hard to believe that a blind person could have thought of them. For example, consider the image of the flame-capped Achilles in the *Iliad*, yelling with Athena to get the corpse of Patroclus away from the Trojans. The sun then sets behind Achilles, making his head appear to be on fire. This is very visual, and I don't see how a blind bard could have thought of it. However, being blind may help in the memorization of poetry. A person who saw when young and then lost his sight may become a bard.

Demodocus is a blind bard, a singer of songs and a harpist. As a blind man, Demodocus needed to find a way to be useful and to earn a living. The alternative would be to beg. Fortunately, he was able to develop a gift for words — a gift that others regard as being given to him by the gods.

In this culture, people need to be useful and work. Anyone with a handicap needs to find some way that they can contribute to society. For example, a person with bandy legs but strong shoulders and arms — like Hephaestus, the god of fire — would make a good blacksmith, which is pretty much what Hephaestus is.

Demodocus is a musician as well as a reciter of oral poetry. When young men demonstrate the gift of dance, Demodocus accompanies them on his harp. The Phaeacians are renowned as dancers.

In addition, of course, Demodocus is a singer of songs. He sings three tales in Book 8. One is comic, while the other two concern the Trojan War. The comic tale is a story about adultery. Hephaestus is married to Aphrodite, who has an affair with Ares. Hephaestus, however, traps them during sexual intercourse with a finely woven chain and thus gets revenge.

The two stories about the Trojan War are both about Odysseus. In the first, a quarrel breaks out between Odysseus and Achilles, and Agamemnon rejoices because of a prophecy that said when the best of the Achaeans would quarrel, Troy would soon fall. The second song — given at the request of Odysseus — is about the Trojan Horse, which Odysseus thought up. These songs show that Odysseus has not been forgotten. As he says later, his *kleos* “has reached the skies” (Fagles 9.22).

We see also that a good bard is respected. Odysseus sends over to Demodocus a fat cut of meat — fat tastes good, and is greatly desired in this culture. This is like being rewarded with a tip following a good performance.

Does Demodocus live at the palace all the time? It's possible. As a blind man, he would find it difficult to travel from town to town, giving performances. He would get material by taking folktales and turning them into poetry. Possibly, he would learn stories from other bards as well.

• **Demodocus sings three songs. Which is the first song, and why is it important?**

As a great writer, Homer is able to use small things to make important points or to raise important themes. A lesser writer could have Demodocus sing three songs, but the songs could

be unrelated to the important content of the *Odyssey*. Homer doesn't do that. Two of the songs are about Odysseus, and the other song raises the themes of *xenia* and of adultery.

In the first song, Demodocus tells about a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles. This quarrel made Agamemnon happy because of a prophecy that when the two best Achaeans quarreled, Troy would soon fall.

Note that this song honors Odysseus. It states that he was one of the two best Achaeans fighting in the Trojan War. This means that Odysseus has not been forgotten.

One other point is that this is a myth that we don't find anywhere but the *Odyssey*. Two reasons may account for this:

- 1) The other sources that recounted this myth may no longer be extant. Not all ancient literature survived until the present day. Much of it disappeared.
- 2) Homer may have made up this story in order to glorify Odysseus and to point out what a fine Achaean warrior he was.

This is something that scholars are often faced with. When a myth occurs in only one source, what does that mean? Does it mean the author created the myth, or does it mean that the other sources that contained the myth have disappeared? (An additional problem happens when an ancient Greek word occurs only once in extant literature. Then we have to figure out the meaning of that word by looking at the one place where it occurs in ancient literature.)

It also, of course, lets Odysseus know, and lets us the audience know that the Phaeacians know about the Trojan War and know the name Odysseus.

Odysseus weeps, and no one sees him weeping except King Alcinous. Two points:

- 1) In this culture, strong, brave men cry. In Book 1 of the *Iliad*, strong, brave Achilles cries when Agamemnon insults him by taking away Briseis. At first, Achilles wanted to kill Agamemnon, but Hera sent Athena to tell Achilles not to do that. Agamemnon also cries at the beginning of Book 9 of the *Iliad* after the Trojans have won a victory in battle.
- 2) Because Odysseus weeps at this particular story, King Alcinous is likely able to guess that Odysseus was a warrior at Troy and/or perhaps knew someone who died there.

• **Demodocus sings three songs. Which is the second song, and why is it important?**

The second song recounts the story of an adulterous affair between Aphrodite and Ares. This is a comic song, and it shows that not all songs are about *kleos* and war and homecomings. Hephaestus sets a trap for his wife and Ares. He pretends to be leaving for a while, but he sets a trap. His finely woven net catches Aphrodite and Ares in bed together, stuck together. Hephaestus then calls the other gods and goddesses to come over and laugh at them. The gods come over, but the goddesses are embarrassed and stay home. Poseidon, however, makes peace between Hephaestus and Ares.

This song is important for a number of reasons:

- *The song brings up the theme of xenia and the cause of Trojan War.*

Although the song seems like a comic trifle, it brings up the theme of *xenia* and the cause of the Trojan War. Here Aphrodite and Ares have an adulterous affair, and so did Helen and Paris. Paris, of course, violated *xenia* by running off with Helen.

- *It raises the theme of an unfaithful wife.*

Of course, Aphrodite is an unfaithful wife in the song. Aphrodite is unfaithful to her husband, Hephaestus. Odysseus is wondering whether Penelope has been faithful to him, or (like Clytemnestra to Agamemnon) has been unfaithful to him.

- *It raises the possibility of peace between Odysseus and Poseidon.*

Poseidon becomes a peacemaker at the end of the story. He wants peace between Ares and Hephaestus, and he guarantees that Ares will pay whatever penalty Hephaestus lays on him — and if Ares won't, then Poseidon himself will. This story is welcome to Odysseus because it brings up the possibility that someday there will be peace between Poseidon and him.

Ares and Aphrodite, who are not married to each other, are having an adulterous love affair. Aphrodite, according to the *Odyssey*, is married to Hephaestus. Ares is not married.

A few other points:

- *Apparently, no women are present.*

This song is sung immediately after the athletic games, so it seems that no women are present. We probably think of this song as not being especially bawdy, but perhaps in this culture men did not want women to hear such songs.

- *There is a minor inconsistency between the Iliad and the Odyssey.*

In Homer's two epics, Hephaestus has different wives. In the *Iliad*, he is married to Charis. In the *Odyssey*, he married to Aphrodite. This is a minor point. Homer is probably more interested in telling a good story than in being consistent in details like that.

- *We know nothing about Homer.*

Truly, we know nothing about Homer. We don't even know if he created both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Perhaps Homer created the *Iliad*, and Homer's apprentice created the *Odyssey*.

- *Once again, as in the Iliad, the gods provide comic relief.*

In the *Iliad*, the gods often provide comic relief, as they do here. There is a difference in the way that Homer treats the gods and the way that he treats human beings. The story that Demodocus tells later about the Trojan Horse involves real suffering for human beings. This story involving the gods is nothing more than comic relief. Human beings suffer, grow old, and die. In contrast to our problems, the problems of the gods are minor. Still, in the *Odyssey*, Homer treats the gods with more respect than he does in the *Iliad*. However, it is possible that Homer is an anti-religion poet — that is, he is against the

religions of his day. Certainly, we think that a god who is not omnibenevolent is not worth worshipping.

• *We see a coupling of sex and violence.*

In our culture, we refer to sex and violence as being grouped together, especially in movies. With Aphrodite and Ares, we really have sex and violence grouped together. Aphrodite is the goddess of sexual passion, and Ares is the god of war.

• **Could this song have a basis in real life?**

I have one more point, which may show the origin of the story. In real life, a man and a woman can become stuck together as Ares and Aphrodite were. If a woman is very nervous, her vaginal muscles can clamp down on the man's penis and so they become stuck together. (Search for "penis captivus" on the Web. Also search for a related condition called "vaginismus.") Homer sings about the chains of Hephaestus, but we can imagine a similar real-life situation to that of the story of Ares and Aphrodite.

A man thinks that his wife is having an affair, so he sets a trap for her. He tells her that he is going out of town on business, but he instead waits outside for her lover to arrive. After the husband gives his wife and his lover sufficient time to get in bed together, he enters the house and starts walking upstairs to their bedroom. His wife hears her husband, grows nervous, and suddenly her vaginal muscles clamp down on her lover's penis. The husband enters the bedroom and there before him are his wife and her lover, stuck together and helpless.

The husband thinks about how to get revenge. Killing them both would land him in jail, so he picks up the phone and calls his next-door neighbor:

"Hello, Frank, can you come over? I want to show you what my dumb wife does in her spare time. Oh, by the way, is your wife still the biggest gossip in town? She is? Good, then bring her over, too."

The husband calls several of his next-door neighbors and soon the bedroom is filled with people laughing at his wife and her lover.

By the way, Terence Grey, the owner of a British theater, once heard that his wife was having an affair. He rushed home, grabbed an axe, used it to beat his way through the bedroom door, and stood with the axe raised in front of the bed, on which lay his cowering wife and her cowering lover. Then he lowered the axe and stuck out his tongue at them. (Source: Robert Morley, *Around the World in Eighty-One Years*, p. 33.)

• **Demodocus sings three songs. Which is the third song, and why is it important?**

Odysseus requests that Demodocus sing a third song after they are done eating: the story of the Trojan Horse. While they are eating, he sends to Demodocus a choice cut of meat, which Demodocus is very happy to receive, and after they are done eating, he asks Demodocus to sing the story of the Trojan Horse.

Demodocus sings the song very well, and he is able to tell of Odysseus' idea for the Trojan Horse and how Troy fell. In this song, Odysseus is a major hero and plays a major role.

Again, Odysseus weeps, just as he wept when Demodocus sang about the quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles, the two greatest of the Achaeans.

• **What is remarkable about the simile that Homer uses at Fagles 8.585-597/Johnston 8.657-669?**

The bard uses a truly memorable and memorable simile to describe the weeping of Odysseus. Demodocus sings about the Trojan Horse and about the Sack of Troy. This is how Homer describes Odysseus' reaction:

[...] great Odysseus melted into tears,
 running down from his eyes to wet his cheeks ...
 as a woman weeps, her arms flung round her darling husband,
 a man who fell in battle, fighting for town and townsmen,
 trying to beat the day of doom from home and children.
 Seeing the man go down, dying, gasping for breath,
 she clings for dear life, screams and shrills —
 but the victors, just behind her,
 digging spear-butts into her back and shoulders,
 drag her off in bondage, yoked to hard labor, pain,
 and the most heartbreaking torment wastes her cheeks.
 So from Odysseus' eyes ran tears of heartbreak now.
 (Fagles 8.585-597)

Compare:

Just as a woman cries,
 as she prostrates herself on her dear husband
 who's just been killed in front of his own city
 and his people, trying to save his children
 and the citizens from the day they meet their doom —
 as he dies, she sees him gasping his last breath,
 embraces him, and screams out her laments,
 while at her back her enemies keep beating her,
 with spears across her spine and shoulders,

then lead her off, cheeks ravaged by her grief,
 into a life of bondage, pain, and sorrow —
 that's how Odysseus let tears of pity fall
 from his eyes then.

(Johnston 8.657-669)

This is a remarkable simile because it brings an image from the Fall of Troy. The image is unusual because it takes the point of view of the Trojans, not of the Achaeans. Odysseus weeps as a woman weeps whose husband has died in battle and who is now being led away to become a slave. Of course, this is exactly what happened to the Trojan women in the Fall of Troy. And who caused this hardship to the Trojan women? Odysseus did. He is the one who came up with the idea for the Trojan Horse, which led directly to the Fall of Troy.

War has victors, and it has victims. Homer reminds us of the victims of war. We remember that because of the Fall of Troy, Hector's wife, Andromache, was dragged off to become a slave.

A lesser poet would focus on the victorious Achaeans rather than the defeated Trojans.

• Is Homer an anti-war poet?

Homer does seem to be an anti-war poet. Obviously, he is sympathetic to the Trojans, both here and in the scenes set inside Troy in the *Iliad*. He treats Hector very sympathetically, and the scene with Hector, his wife, Andromache, and their son, Astyanax, is very touching. Obviously, the effects of the Trojan War on the Trojans are disastrous. Their city falls, their men are killed, their women and children dragged off into slavery. The ancient world also lost a civilized city with the Sack of Troy.

In addition, the effects of the Trojan War are disastrous for the Greeks:

- Achilles and Great Ajax and many good men die during the war.
- Agamemnon is killed when he returns home.
- Little Ajax dies during his attempted return home.
- Menelaus reaches home only after suffering during his return journey, and even though he wins back his wife, Helen, we can wonder whether she is worth the winning back.
- Ithacan society is devastated by the lack of fathers.
- Odysseus' homecoming is delayed for 10 years, and then he has to fight and use his wits to secure his kingdom.
- Even Nestor — a very good man — lost a son (Antilochus) during the Trojan War.

No one, not even the victors, seems to have gained anything from the war, except *kleos*, which Achilles rejects as being worthwhile. We do have the two epic poems of Homer, but they are anti-war.

The simile (Fagles 8.585-597/Johnston 8.657-669) also stresses family and the suffering of the wife. Homer's audience may also be thinking of the suffering of Penelope here.

• **Odysseus cries after hearing Demodocus' third song. Why is Odysseus crying?**

An obvious question, of course, is why is Odysseus crying. Because of Demodocus' third song. One reason can be is that he is reminded of the cost of the Trojan War for the Greeks — I would not expect him to worry too much about the cost of the Trojan War for the Trojans. After all, one of the first things he does after the Fall of Troy is to sack another city to get more booty. Odysseus is not crying out of grief for the Trojans; he must be crying for some other reason.

Odysseus could be crying out of relief. He has *kleos*. He has been remembered. Demodocus knows of his exploits in the Trojan War. Two of Demodocus' songs are about Odysseus.

Also, I think, he is crying because he is still not home yet. He has not yet returned to Ithaca and been reunited with his wife, son, and father.

Odysseus' crying is important because it causes King Alcinous to ask him to tell his story.

• **What does King Alcinous do at the end of Book 8?**

King Alcinous says about the Phaeacians' ships,

“Phaeacians have no pilots, no steering oar,
like other boats, for their ships on their own
can read men's hearts and thoughts — they know
all men's cities, their rich estates, as well,
and quickly skim across wide tracts of sea,
concealed in mist and clouds, without a fear
of shipwrecks or disaster.”

(Johnston 8.703-709)

We also see foreshadowing in a prophecy that King Alcinous recounts:

“[...] True, there's an old tale I heard
my father telling once. Nausithous used to say
my lord Poseidon was vexed with us because
we escorted all mankind and never came to grief.
He said that one day, as a well-built ship of ours
sailed home on the misty sea from such a convoy,
the god would crush it, yes,
and pile a huge mountain round about our port.

So the old king foretold ... And as for the god, well,
he can do his worst or leave it quite undone,
whatever warms his heart.”

(Fagles 8.631-641)

Compare:

“Still, my father,
Nausithous, once told me this story —
he used to say we made Poseidon angry
because we carried everyone in safety.
He claimed that one day, as a well-built ship
with a Phaeacian crew was sailing back
from such a trip, over the misty sea,
Poseidon would destroy it and then place
a massive ring of mountains round our city.
That’s what the old man said. It’s up to god
to make that happen or leave it undone,
whatever he finds pleasing to his heart.”

(Johnston 8.709-720)

This is foreshadowing. Exactly that happens in Book 13.

In addition, Alcinous sees Odysseus weeping, and he asks Odysseus who he is.

At the end of Book 8, Alcinous asks Odysseus if he knew someone who had died at Troy.

• **Is this a good place for Homer to stop the first day’s performance of the *Odyssey*?**

Chances are, it would take a bard three days to sing the *Iliad*, and it would take him three days to sing the *Odyssey*.

This is a good place to end the first day’s singing of the *Odyssey*. King Alcinous has asked Odysseus who he is and to tell his story, and the audience would want to return the next day to hear that.

Please note that Book 8 has an emphasis on Demodocus, the bard. We learn quite a bit about bards in Book 8 of the *Odyssey*.

Of course, we remember that Demodocus gets a nice cut of meat that Odysseus sends to him. Chances are, the end of Book 8 is where the bard’s first day of reciting the *Odyssey* would end. The bard could be hinting, Why don’t you guys give me a nice cut of meat, too?

Note that the piece of meat is fatty, thus making it tasty and tender. The ancient Greeks weren't as concerned as us about calories. (No doubt, Odysseus and the other Homeric warriors got more exercise than we do.)

Conclusion

In the next four books, Odysseus will reveal who he is and will tell his story to the Phaeacians. He will tell what happened following the Fall of Troy up to the point that Calypso held him captive on her island. Together, these four books of the *Iliad* are known as the Great Wanderings.

Odyssey, Book 9:

“In the One-Eyed Giant’s Cave”

“Ismarus, the Lotus Eaters, and the Cyclops”

Important Terms

Great Wanderings: The four books (Books 9-12) of the *Odyssey* that tell what happened following the Fall of Troy up to the point that Calypso held Odysseus captive on her island. In these four books, Odysseus tells his own story.

Ismarus: The land of the Cicones

Outis: a common ancient Greek name that is pronounced much like the ancient Greek word for Nobody.

Introduction

Book 9 probably is where the second day of the bard’s performance of the *Odyssey* would start.

• How does Book 9 begin?

As Book 9 begins, Odysseus again praises Demodocus:

“Lord Alcinous, most renowned of men,
it is indeed a truly splendid thing
to listen to a singer such as this,
whose voice is like a god’s. For I say
there’s nothing gives one more delight
than when joy grips entire groups of men
who sit in proper order in a hall
feasting and listening to a singer,
with tables standing there beside them
laden with bread and meat, as the steward
draws wine out of the mixing bowl, moves round,
and fills the cups. To my mind this seems
the finest thing there is.”

(Johnston 2-14)

• Why does Odysseus reveal his identity at this time?

Of course, Odysseus reveals who he is because King Alcinous has asked him to. It is a good time to ask Odysseus to tell his story. Certainly, the Phaeacians have treated him well. They have fed him and entertained him and given him excellent *xenia*. It is time for Odysseus to tell his story. He knows that he is among civilized people. Odysseus can be cautious. One reason to be cautious in revealing your identity to someone is that you don't yet know whether they are trustworthy. By this time, the Phaeacians have shown that they are very trustworthy.

• **What is Odysseus' purpose in telling his story to the Phaeacians?**

Part of the protocol of *xenia* is to send your guest away with a guest-gift. I imagine that if you personally like your guest, you would give a better guest-gift. If you don't especially like your guest, your guest-gift may not be so good. Odysseus would like to get wonderful guest-gifts from the Phaeacians. One way to do that is to entertain them, to tell them his story. If Odysseus can charm and impress the Phaeacians, they will give him great guest-gifts.

As we know from Book 23 of the *Iliad*, Odysseus likes material wealth.

• **How does *kleos* differ in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*?**

Odysseus introduces himself to the Phaeacians by mentioning *kleos*, his reputation, his fame:

“I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known to the world
for every kind of craft — my fame [*kleos*] has reached the skies.”
(Fagles 9.21-22)

Compare:

“I am Odysseus, son of Laertes,
well known to all for my deceptive skills —
my fame [*kleos*] extends all the way to heaven.”
(Johnston 9.24-26)

This is not a boast. In fact, Odysseus knows this claim to be true. He knows that his “fame [*kleos*] has reached the skies” (Fagles 9.22) because of the first song and the third song that Demodocus the blind bard sang about him. The first song was about a quarrel between the best of the Achaeans, who were Odysseus and Achilles, and the third song was about Odysseus and the Trojan Horse.

Kleos is treated somewhat differently in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, the focus is on one's *kleos* after one dies. Will your name and deeds be remembered or not? In the *Odyssey*, the focus is on one's *kleos* while one is alive. Do people know Odysseus' name and deeds, or has he been forgotten? Odysseus is very happy that the Phaeacians know his name and deeds.

• **What must be the reaction of the Phaeacians when they learn who their guest is?**

The Phaeacians must be astonished when they hear that this stranger is actually Odysseus, a famous warrior at Troy who has been missing for the last seven years, without any mortal knowing whether he is alive or dead. A few Phaeacians may have guessed who the stranger was

because he cried while Demodocus was singing two songs about Odysseus and because on the playing fields he let slip that he was the second-best Achaean archer in the Trojan War.

We find out, of course, that Odysseus still wants his homecoming. He is still thinking about his son, Telemachus:

“Mine is a rugged land but good for raising sons —
and I myself, I know no sweeter sight on earth
than a man’s own native country.”

(Fagles 9.30-32)

Compare:

“It’s a rugged island,
but nurtures fine young men. And in my view,
nothing one can see is ever sweeter
than a glimpse of one’s own native land.”

(Johnston 9.36-39)

This is probably the best time for story-telling. Everyone has eaten, and it is time to relax. This is a most excellent time for story-telling.

• **What does the term “The Great Wanderings” refer to?**

For the next four books (Books 9-12), Odysseus will be telling a first-person narrative of his adventures following the Fall of Troy. He will be using the word “I.” These four books are known as “The Great Wanderings” because we read of Odysseus’ wandering the Mediterranean Sea with his comrades, who die during the wanderings.

The Great Wanderings take up three years of Odysseus’ life. Ten years have passed since the Fall of Troy, and for the last seven of those years he has been held captive on Calypso’s Island.

The character of the stories that Odysseus tells changes. At first they are realistic, but soon they enter the realm of mythology. From fighting human warriors, Odysseus begins to tell of fighting mythological monsters such as a one-eyed Cyclops.

These adventures are memorable. Many high school students are familiar with Odysseus’ encounter with the Cyclops.

In addition, our bard exercises wonderful control here. He recounts what Odysseus knows, and when it seems that Odysseus could not know a certain fact, then he tells his audience how Odysseus came to know that fact. For example, one god told another god something that the second god told Calypso, who told Odysseus.

• **What happens early in the Great Wanderings (the more realistic adventures)?**

Odysseus begins his tale with what happened when the Greeks set sail from Troy after having conquered the city. The first thing that Odysseus and his men do is to sack another city to gain more possessions to take home. They sack a Thracian city that the Cicones live in.

Here we find one theme that will be important later: Odysseus' men are hard to control. Odysseus says,

“Then I gave orders we should leave on foot —
and with all speed. But the men were fools.
They didn't listen. They drank too much wine
and on the shoreline slaughtered many sheep,
as well as shambling cows with twisted horns.”

(Johnston 9.60-64)

They have finished sacking the Thracian city that the Cicones live in, and they ought to leave quickly, but the men are rebellious and want to stay longer. This act gives the surviving Cicones time to get help and attack Odysseus and his men. The Cicones succeed in killing six of Odysseus' men on each ship.

• Is Odysseus a bad leader?

Of course, we can ask if Odysseus is a bad leader. Yes, the men won't listen to Odysseus, but if he were a better leader, wouldn't they listen to and obey him? This question will come up frequently during the Great Wanderings.

We can compare Odysseus with Aeneas. Odysseus arrives home alone with all his ships destroyed and all his men lost, but Aeneas arrives in Italy with many of his men and many of his ships. It appears that Aeneas is a better leader than the great individualist Odysseus.

• What danger is offered by the Lotus-Eaters?

Quickly, the story enters mythological territory when Zeus sends a storm that blows the ships of Odysseus and his men off course. Now Odysseus and his men face a series of dangerous adventures.

The Lotus-Eaters seem to be harmless, but nevertheless they are a danger to Odysseus and his men. The Lotus-Eaters offer Odysseus and his men food that is called the Lotus. Whoever eats the Lotus forgets about returning home. All they want to do is to eat the Lotus. They eat the Lotus and do nothing else. Odysseus, of course, desires his homecoming, but other people, including two goddesses, want him to forget his homecoming.

Odysseus does not eat the Lotus, and he drags away the men who have eaten the Lotus and forces them to board the ship.

The Lotus-eaters represent the dangers of drugs (but wine — watered down — is highly thought of), and it represents the danger of turning away from the human condition. The human condition is filled with pain, aging, and death. But it is or can be also filled with spouse, children, and home. To turn to drugs is to give up some very valuable things.

Once again, some of Odysseus' men give in to temptation and do the wrong thing. They eat the Lotus, and they want to stay with the Lotus-eaters. Fortunately, Odysseus rescues them.

• **What is a Cyclops? Who is Polyphemus' father? (Note: The word "Cyclops" is singular, and the word "Cyclopes" is plural. In English, you may also use "Cyclopes" as a plural.)**

A Cyclops is a mythological being with only one eye.

The adventure with the Cyclops Polyphemus also involves danger. Polyphemus offers horrible *xenia* to Odysseus and his men. Instead of giving Odysseus and his men a meal, Polyphemus eats six of Odysseus' men, turning them into meals for himself.

This adventure also involves danger to Odysseus because Polyphemus' father is the god Poseidon. This adventure, in which Odysseus is forced to defend himself against Polyphemus, is the reason why Poseidon becomes so angry at him.

Most college students are probably familiar with Odysseus' adventure with the Cyclops. It is the most famous of his adventures, and the adventure that students are most likely to have read in high school.

• **Why does Odysseus say almost exactly the same words that he said on Scheria (the island where the Phaeacians live)?**

Homer is exploring the theme of *xenia*.

Odysseus and the crew of one ship (at this point, he still has the 12 ships he took to Troy) sail to the Island of the Cyclopes, leaving the other ships safely behind. Odysseus is always ready for an adventure, and when he sees that the Island of the Cyclopes is inhabited — they are close enough to hear the Cyclopes' voices and to smell the smoke from their fires — he is determined to explore their island.

Odysseus wants especially to see the inhabitants of the island and to see whether they are civilized or uncivilized. Of course, if they are civilized, they will observe *xenia*. If they are uncivilized, they will violate *xenia*.

Odysseus will say three times in the *Odyssey* lines that identify *xenia* as the hallmark of civilization. He said them on Scheria, where he received the best *xenia* possible. He says them here on the Island of the Cyclopes, where he will receive the worst *xenia* possible. And he will say them on Ithaca, which he does not recognize because of a fog. Of course, Ithaca is his own home, a place where he ought not to have to rely on *xenia* at all.

This is how Fagles translates the lines that Odysseus says three times in the *Odyssey* — these are lines that identify *xenia* as the hallmark of civilization:

“What *are* they — violent, savage, lawless?

or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?”

(Fagles 9.195-196)

Note: The other two times that Odysseus says these lines, Fagles has “What are they here [...]”

In Book 9, when Odysseus and his ship are about to sail to the island of the Cyclopes, he says,

“My loyal comrades, stay here where you are.
 I’ll take my ship and my own company
 and try to find out who those people are,
 whether they are rough and violent,
 with no sense of law, or kind to strangers,
 with hearts that fear the gods.”

(Johnston 9.223-228)

Once again, as he did on Scheria, he is wondering whether the inhabitants are civilized or savage, whether they will observe *xenia* or violate it.

• **What kind of *xenia* does Odysseus find on the island of the Cyclopes?**

On the island of the Cyclopes, Odysseus receives the worst *xenia* possible, as Polyphemus eats six of his men, and threatens to eat the rest of Odysseus’ men — and to eat Odysseus himself. I doubt that it’s possible to find worse *xenia* than this.

• **Are the Cyclopes civilized?**

The Cyclopes are uncivilized, as we learn from a proem that Homer writes for this adventure. They do not farm. They do not have a council. They do not have laws. Each Cyclops is a law to himself. Odysseus says,

“We sailed away from there with heavy hearts
 and reached the country of the Cyclopes,
 a crude and lawless people. They don’t grow
 any plants by hand or plough the earth,
 but put their trust in the immortal gods,
 and though they never sow or work the land,
 every kind of crop springs up for them —
 wheat and barley and rich grape-bearing vines,
 and Zeus provides the rain to make them grow.
 They live without a council or assembly
 or any rule of law, in hollow caves
 among the mountain tops. Each one of them
 makes laws for his own wives and children,
 and they shun all dealings with each other.”

(Johnston 9.138-151)

And:

“The Cyclopes don’t have boats with scarlet prows
or men with skills to build them well-decked ships,
which would enable them to carry out
all sorts of things — like traveling to the towns
of other people, the way men cross the sea
to visit one another in their ships —
or men who might have turned their island
into a well-constructed settlement.”

(Johnston 9.165-172)

• Why does Odysseus visit the island of the Cyclopes? Do his men behave well when arriving at Polyphemus’ cave?

Odysseus seeks adventure, as always. He does not need to visit the island of Cyclopes. Odysseus takes a ship and some men over to the Island of the Cyclopes.

Odysseus and his men find the cave of Polyphemus and wait there. Odysseus’ men would be very happy to steal from the Cyclops, taking his cheeses and lambs and kids (baby goats), but Odysseus is curious and adventurous and will not leave, although he admits later that it would have been better if he had left. Odysseus’ men want him to act as a pirate or raider and simply steal the Cyclops’ possessions, but Odysseus decides to wait and see the Cyclops.

By the way, Odysseus has no trouble being a raider. Near the end of the *Odyssey*, he says that he can replenish what the suitors took from him by making raids on the mainland.

Odysseus and his men are not good guests. They eat a lot of the Cyclops’ cheeses before the Cyclops returns. This does not justify how the Cyclops treats them, but they could have been better guests by far.

• How does Polyphemus try to trick Odysseus?

When Polyphemus arrives at his cave, Odysseus and his men should quickly realize that the Cyclops will not follow the protocol of *xenia*. He asks immediately who the men are, instead of first offering them food and then asking who they are. (Of course, Odysseus and his men have already eaten many of the Cyclops’ cheeses.)

The Cyclops tries to trick Odysseus. He asks Odysseus where his ship is, but Odysseus is too cautious and wise to fall for that. Odysseus replies that Poseidon wrecked their ship. Hearing that, Polyphemus grabs two of Odysseus’ men, dashes their brains out on the floor, and then gobbles them up.

It's unfortunate that Odysseus says that Poseidon wrecked their ship, although of course Poseidon is the god of the sea and so wrecking ships is something that he probably regards as his prerogative. Poseidon also happens to be the father of Polyphemus, who may think that since Poseidon wrecked Odysseus' ship, Odysseus and his men are enemies to Poseidon, and therefore it is OK for Polyphemus to eat them.

Of course, at this time Poseidon is not especially an enemy to Odysseus. Poseidon does become an enemy to Odysseus after Odysseus hurts Polyphemus in order to escape from the cave with his life. However, it is possible that Poseidon is still angry at the Achaeans for what they did during the Fall of Troy.

After all, we notice that Athena is not around to advise Odysseus. If Athena were over her anger at what happened during the Fall of Troy, she would have advised Odysseus not to land on the island.

Odysseus is fated to return to Ithaca, but with the advice and help of Athena, he could have returned much sooner.

• **Which trick (involving a name) does Odysseus play on Polyphemus?**

Odysseus is, of course, quick-witted, which is one of the reasons Athena likes him when she is not angry at the Achaeans because of what happened during and after the Fall of Troy. Odysseus' adventure with the Cyclops is justly famous because it is an exciting adventure and it shows that Odysseus is able to use his intelligence and wits to escape with his life from a very dangerous situation.

The very dangerous situation is that Odysseus and his men have been trapped in a cave by Polyphemus. The Cyclops lives in a cave. It does not have a door, but each night Polyphemus rolls a boulder to the cave entrance. That way, no one can get in, and Odysseus and his men cannot get out. Because Polyphemus is so big and strong, Odysseus and his men are unable to roll the boulder away from the opening of the cave.

This complicates their escape. Ordinarily, Odysseus and his men would be able to kill Polyphemus. However, if they do that, they will be trapped in the cave. Once the Cyclops' store of food is exhausted, Odysseus and his men will starve to death. Because they must get out of the cave, they cannot kill Polyphemus.

Fortunately, Odysseus is intelligent. Mere strength and courage are not enough to save his life and the lives of some of his men — the men the Cyclops has not eaten. Instead, he must use his intelligence and his wits.

Odysseus thinks ahead. He knows that Polyphemus is not the only Cyclops on the island. If Polyphemus calls for help, other Cyclopes will arrive to help him. Odysseus has to figure out a way to convince these Cyclopes not to help Polyphemus.

He does this by telling Polyphemus that his name is Outis. This is an ancient Greek name that sounds like another Greek word: the word that means "nobody." That way, when Polyphemus cries out for help, and the other Cyclopes ask him "Who is hurting you?," Polyphemus will reply, "Outis is hurting me," which the other Cyclopes will understand as meaning, "Nobody is hurting me."

Odysseus has other parts of his plan. He gets the Cyclops drunk so the Cyclops will fall asleep and not be on his guard. He also has decided to hurt the Cyclops but not kill him. The Cyclops has only one eye, and if Odysseus can blind the Cyclops, the Cyclops will not be able to see him and his men, and they can then devise a way to get out of the cave.

• **The name “Outis” would remind the ancient Greeks of the term “Me Tis” which in turn would remind the ancient Greeks of “metis” (pronounced MAY tis). What do these words mean?**

“Outis” would remind the Greeks of “me tis,” which would remind the Greeks of “metis.” “Outis,” which means “nobody,” would remind the Greeks of “me tis,” which means “not anyone.”

“Me tis,” in turn, would remind the Greeks of “metis,” which means “shrewdness.”

Outis: a Greek name

Ou tis: nobody

Me tis: not anybody

Metis: craft, cunning, shrewdness (words that remind us of Odysseus)

Metis (pronounced MAY-tis) has many meanings: wisdom, skill, craft and a plan. Athena is the goddess of wisdom, and she values *metis*, a quality that Odysseus has in abundance. Later, Athena and Odysseus will meet face to face on Ithaca, and she will tell Odysseus that she likes him because of his *metis*. Together, she and Odysseus think about a plan that will enable Odysseus to defeat the suitors. That plan can also be translated as *metis*.

• **How does Odysseus blind Polyphemus and trick the other Cyclops?**

Of course, another part of the plot is getting the Cyclops drunk. We also see Antinous the suitor getting drunk in the *Odyssey*, and the other suitors get drunk as well. Like the Cyclops, the suitors will pay for their crimes. The Cyclops is not alert when he is drunk, and the suitors will be less alert when they are drinking.

The ancient Greeks mixed their wine with water, usually with a 3:2 or 3:1 ratio (water to wine). However, the wine that Odysseus has is so strong that it is good even mixed with a 20:1 water-to-wine ratio. However, Polyphemus drinks the wine undiluted and so gets very drunk.

Polyphemus likes the wine very much, and he promises Odysseus a guest-gift, but the guest-gift is not good. He promises to eat Odysseus last of all.

This guest-gift is about the worst guest-gift that you could receive. For one thing, you would dread being eaten. It would perhaps be better to be eaten first simply because you wouldn't spend lots of time dreading being eaten.

In some schools that had corporal punishment, when a boy was sentenced to be whipped, the head master would let the boy decide when he would be whipped. It could be early in the morning or it could be later in the evening. Most boys chose to be whipped later in the evening. This, of course, simply increased their punishment because all day they were thinking of being whipped. It would have been better to be whipped quickly and get it over with.

When the Cyclops is drunk and asleep, Odysseus and his men blind him. While the Cyclops was away from the cave tending his herds, they had sharpened a large pole. When the Cyclops is asleep, they heat the pole red-hot in a fire, then they drive it into the Cyclops' eye.

Of course, Polyphemus cries out in pain, and his fellow Cyclopes arrive and ask, "Who is hurting you?" As Odysseus had planned, Polyphemus replies, "Outis is hurting me." The Cyclopes understand that as meaning "Nobody is hurting me," so they think that the god Poseidon must be tormenting Polyphemus with pain.

Odysseus' trick has worked well so far. Polyphemus has been blinded; however, Odysseus and his men still need to get out of the Cyclops' cave.

• Odysseus and his men still need to get out of the cave. How do they do that?

Polyphemus has many sheep. By night, they stay in the cave with Polyphemus. By day, Polyphemus lets the sheep out of the cave so that they can graze.

Once the Cyclops is blinded, Odysseus and his companions escape from the cave by clinging to the bellies of Polyphemus' sheep. Polyphemus rolls the boulder away from the mouth of the cave to let his flock of sheep out to graze, and Odysseus and his men cling to the bellies of the sheep. The blind Cyclops feeling the backs of the sheep doesn't know that the Greeks are escaping.

The Cyclops now exhibits a new sensitivity. Previously, he has acted like a brute. Now he is sensitive, as is shown by what he says to an old ram under which Odysseus is hiding:

‘My lovely ram,
 why are you the last one in the flock
 to come out of the cave? Not once before
 have you ever lagged behind the sheep.
 No. You've always been well out in front,
 striding off to graze on tender shoots of grass
 and be the first to reach the river's stream.
 You're the one who longs to get back home,
 once evening comes, before the others.
 But now you're last of all.”
 (Johnston 9.587-597)

Why the sensitivity? Sometimes suffering can bring about such sensitivity. It can make intelligent beings empathetic. (Or perhaps the Cyclops has always been sensitive regarding animals — but not mortal men.)

• What does Odysseus do right after escaping from Polyphemus' cave? What does he do wrong?

Odysseus and his men steal the sheep, and once Odysseus and his men sail away from the island of the Cyclopes, Odysseus sacrifices to Zeus the old, big ram, which is awarded to him as a prize of honor. Odysseus makes sure that the men who did not go with him to the island of the Cyclopes get a share of the sheep, thus showing that he is a generous leader in this regard. Here Odysseus does the right things.

Odysseus, unfortunately, makes a major mistake as he and his men sail away from the island of the Cyclopes. As he and his men are sailing away from the island of the Cyclopes, he calls to Polyphemus and tells him his name. Why does he do this? Apparently, he is concerned about his *kleos*. In the *Iliad*, before doing battle warriors would tell each other their names as a way of ensuring *kleos*. That way, the victorious warrior would be able to talk about the warriors he had bested in battle. That would increase his *kleos*, especially if a bard came along and wrote an epic poem about the warrior. The losing warrior would also have *kleos* — his name would be remembered — although mainly the losing warrior would increase the *kleos* of the winning warrior.

As Odysseus tells his story to the Phaeacians, he says that he yelled this to the Cyclops as he and his men were sailing away:

[...] “Cyclops —
if any man on the face of the earth should ask you
who blinded you, shamed you so — say Odysseus,
raider of cities, *he* gouged out your eye,
Laertes’ son who makes his home in Ithaca.”
(Fagles 9.558-562)

Compare:

“Cyclops, if any mortal human being
asks about the injury that blinded you,
tell them Odysseus destroyed your eye,
a sacker of cities, Laertes’ son,
a man from Ithaca.”
(Johnston 9.662-666)

• **Why is Odysseus’ telling Polyphemus his real name such a big mistake?**

This is a huge error by Odysseus. Because he has told the Cyclops who it was who put out his eye, Polyphemus is able to pray to Poseidon and curse Odysseus by name. Polyphemus prays,

[...] ‘Hear me,
Poseidon, god of the sea-blue mane who rocks the earth!
If I really am your son and you claim to be my father —

come, grant that Odysseus, raider of cities,
 Laertes' son who makes his home in Ithaca,
 never reaches home. Or if he's fated to see
 his people once again and reach his well-built house
 and his own native country, let him come home late
 and come a broken man — all shipmates lost,
 alone in a stranger's ship —
 and let him find a world of pain at home!"

(Fagles 9.585-595)

Compare:

"Hear me, Poseidon, Enfolder of the Earth,
 dark-haired god, if I truly am your son
 and if you claim to be my father,
 grant that Odysseus, sacker of cities,
 a man from Ithaca, Laertes' son,
 never gets back home. If it's his destiny
 to see his friends and reach his native land
 and well-built house, may he get back late
 and in distress, after all his comrades
 have been killed, and in someone else's ship.
 And may he find troubles in his house."

(Johnston 9.695-705)

The Greek gods are not omniscient. They do have superpowers; for example, Poseidon is able to hear prayers whenever and wherever they are uttered. However, the gods don't know everything. If Odysseus had not told Polyphemus his name, perhaps Poseidon would not have learned who it was who put his son's eye out. At the very least, Poseidon would have had to investigate to discover who had put his son's eye out. However, as soon as Polyphemus prays to Poseidon and says that Odysseus has put his eye out, Poseidon knows immediately what Odysseus has done.

We should point out that there is another way that Polyphemus could have figured out who put out his eye. He has heard a prophecy that Odysseus would put out his eye:

'Alas!

Now an ancient prophecy about me

has truly been fulfilled! Telemus,
 fine, tall son of Eurymus, a seer
 who surpassed all men in prophecy,
 reached old age among the Cyclopes
 as a soothsayer. He said all these things
 would come to pass someday — I'd lose my sight
 at the hand of someone called Odysseus.
 But I always expected he'd be large,
 a noble man, with enormous power.
 But now a puny, good-for-nothing weakling,
 after overpowering me with wine,
 has destroyed my eye."

(Johnston 9.666-680)

Eventually, Polyphemus would have remembered the prophecy, and then he could have prayed to Poseidon, identifying who blinded him. However, Polyphemus does not seem especially quick witted, and so perhaps Odysseus would have made it back to Ithaca before Polyphemus remembered the prophecy.

Note that what Polyphemus prays for is what happens. Odysseus' homecoming is delayed, and when he does finally return to Ithaca, he finds lots of trouble awaiting him there.

Odysseus is a little too concerned about his *kleos* here, in my opinion. He wants the Cyclops to know who wounded him, just as warriors in the Trojan War would identify themselves to each other before fighting. That way, their names would be remembered after their death in epic poetry, whether you won or lost the fight. Here, even though Odysseus' men want him to be quiet, he insists on shouting at the Cyclops, even though it allows the Cyclops to curse him by name to Poseidon (the gods do hear prayers) and even though it allows the Cyclops to know roughly where they are so he can throw boulders at their ship.

There is a change in how Odysseus identifies himself. To the Cyclops, Odysseus identifies himself as a raider of cities, a warrior. Odysseus says,

"Cyclops, if any mortal human being
 asks about the injury that blinded you,
 tell them Odysseus destroyed your eye,
 a sacker of cities, Laertes' son,
 a man from Ithaca."

(Johnston 9.662-666)

In a way, Odysseus raided the Cyclops' cave. He and his men ate most of the Cyclops' cheeses, even sacrificing some of them to the gods. Raiders are not guests.

While introducing himself to the Phaeacians early in this chapter, Odysseus stresses trickery:

“I am Odysseus, son of Laertes,
well known to all for my deceptive skills —
my fame [*kleos*] extends all the way to heaven.”
(Johnston 9.24-26)

Trickery — craft — will save Odysseus' life when he returns home to Ithaca.

• What are the most important points of the story of Odysseus' adventure with the Cyclops?

Odysseus is quick witted.

The most important point in this story, I think, is the way that Odysseus uses his wits to survive and to escape from the cave of the Cyclops, just as he will have to later when he reaches his home island of Ithaca.

Odysseus makes mistakes.

Another important point is that Odysseus is not perfect. He does make mistakes. He will have to be careful not to make mistakes when he is back home on Ithaca.

Violations of xenia are punished.

Xenia is an important theme of Book 9, as it is throughout the *Odyssey*. Apparently, in the *Odyssey*, people must decide whether they are pirates/raiders or whether they are guests. Certainly, Odysseus has raided cities following the Fall of Troy as a way of getting more booty. In Book 23, after he and Penelope are reunited, he tells Penelope that he can replenish the herds of animals that the suitors slaughtered by taxing the Ithacans and by raiding other towns. However, if you are a guest, then *xenia* takes over. You must behave properly. In Book 9, Odysseus' men wanted to be raiders and make off with the Cyclops' cheeses and lambs and kids (baby goats), but Odysseus stopped them because he wants to see who lives in the cave. If he had not stopped them, apparently no ethical principles would have bothered him. It would be OK with Odysseus and perhaps OK with the gods. Odysseus, however, does make a mistake. He and his men sacrifice some of the Cyclops' cheeses and then they eat most of the rest (Fagles 9.260-261). This is a violation of *xenia*, and Odysseus and his men are punished for it. Of course, Polyphemus also violates *xenia*, worse than Odysseus and his men did, and Polyphemus is punished for violating *xenia*.

• Where is Athena? Why doesn't she stop Odysseus from making such a big mistake?

As a result of the blinding of Polyphemus, Poseidon becomes very angry at Odysseus. We can ask why Athena did not help Odysseus. For example, if she had wanted to, she could have warned Odysseus not to go to the island of the Cyclopes. Of course, we know that Athena was angry at all the Achaeans, including Odysseus, because Little Ajax raped Cassandra in her temple during the Fall of Troy.

As the Great Wanderings continue, Odysseus will lose more and more men. In the three adventures related in this book, Odysseus lost men to the Cicones and to the Cyclops, and he nearly lost men to the Lotus-eaters. Eventually, Odysseus will lose all of his ships and all of his men, and he will arrive at Ithaca alone.

Odysseus is telling stories here. Both this book and the next book have the same structure. Each has three stories. The first two stories are told quickly, and the third story is told at greater length.

Conclusion

Polyphemus' curse takes effect almost immediately, as we will see.

Odyssey, Book 10:
“The Bewitching Queen of Aeaea”
“Aeolus, the Laestrygonians, and Circe”

Introduction

Like Book 9, Book 10 has two short adventures followed by a long adventure.

• **What is Polyphemus’ curse against Odysseus (end of Book 9)?**

The Cyclops’ curse is very effective. Just as Polyphemus wants, Odysseus will lose all his men, reach Ithaca very late, and find lots of trouble.

At the end of Book 9, Odysseus told the Cyclops his name. This is a major mistake because it allowed Polyphemus to tell his father, Poseidon, in a prayer just who harmed him. This means that Poseidon knows whom he must torment to exact vengeance for the blinding of his son Polyphemus.

Polyphemus prays to his father, Poseidon,

“Hear me, Poseidon, Enfolder of the Earth,
 dark-haired god, if I truly am your son
 and if you claim to be my father,
 grant that Odysseus, sacker of cities,
 a man from Ithaca, Laertes’ son,
 never gets back home. If it’s his destiny
 to see his friends and reach his native land
 and well-built house, may he get back late
 and in distress, after all his comrades
 have been killed, and in someone else’s ship.
 And may he find troubles in his house.”

(Johnston 9.695-705)

Everything that Polyphemus prays for does come to pass.

Note the line “If I really am your son and you claim to be my father — ” (Fagles 9.587; cf. Johnston 9.696-697). One of the themes of the *Odyssey* is fatherhood. We have already heard Telemachus wonder whether Odysseus is his father. He has had confirmation of that because Menelaus and Helen, who knew Odysseus, had remarked that he looks like Odysseus. They also accepted him as the son of Odysseus. However, the infidelity of women such as Clytemnestra is a theme of the *Odyssey*. If a woman is unfaithful, perhaps her children do not have her husband as a father.

• **How good of a host is Aeolus, King of the Winds?**

Odysseus' first adventure in Book 10 seems to go well. It seems that Odysseus and his men will quickly reach Ithaca because of a gift given to Odysseus by Aeolus, who is the King of the Winds.

Odysseus next stops at the island of Aeolus, King of the Winds, who is hospitable and has a nice, large family:

His twelve children live there in the palace,
 six daughters as well as six full-grown sons.
 He gave the daughters to the sons in marriage,
 and they are always at a banquet feasting,
 beside their dear father and good mother,
 with an infinite supply of tasty food
 set out before them. The smells of cooking
 fill the house all day. The courtyard echoes
 to the sounds of celebration. At night,
 they go to sleep beside their faithful wives,
 on coverlets and beds well strung with cord.

(Johnston 10.6-16)

Aeolus and his family have what Odysseus and his men want. Odysseus and his men want to be back home on Ithaca, sleeping with their wives and eating with their families.

Aeolus receives Odysseus with excellent *xenia*, shows him great and wonderful hospitality. Odysseus and his men stay at the palace of Aeolus for an entire month.

During this visit, Odysseus repays his host with news and stories. Aeolus wants to hear about the Trojan War and about their voyage. Odysseus obliges, and apparently tells Aeolus about the Trojan Horse, the Lotus-eaters, and the Cyclops Polyphemus — all the adventures that he has told the Phaeacians so far. A stranger can be an important source of news in the ancient world.

• **Which parting guest-gift does Aeolus give Odysseus? How does the gift work out?**

As a guest-gift, Aeolus gives Odysseus something wonderful. He hands him a bag that contains all the contrary winds. The only wind that is outside the bag is the one that will blow Odysseus and his men back to Ithaca. Odysseus and his men don't have to worry about a wind blowing them off course. Fairly quickly, they should be able to reach Ithaca.

Of course, things don't work out the way they should. Odysseus pilots his ship almost to Ithaca, then, exhausted, he falls asleep. Odysseus and his men are close enough to see the smoke rising from the fires set on Ithaca. Unfortunately, his men are foolish. They think that Aeolus has given

Odysseus treasure in the bag. They open the bag to see what is inside, and all the contrary winds rush out and blow Odysseus' ships back to the Island of Aeolus, King of the Winds.

We remember what Athena said in Book 1:

“But he [Odysseus], straining for no more than a glimpse
of hearth-smoke drifting up from his own land,
Odysseus longs to die ...”
(Fagles 1.69-71)

Compare:

“But Odysseus yearns to see even the smoke
rising from his native land and longs
for death.”
(Johnston 1.77-79)

Odysseus sees people tending fires on Ithaca. In Book 1, Athena said to Zeus that Odysseus is looking out over the water from Calypso's island, longing to see even the smoke rising from his own country. Odysseus has gotten that close. He's gotten close enough to see fires on the shores of Ithaca, and then because of the foolish action of his foolish men, he's driven back to Aeolus' island.

• Is Odysseus a good leader in this adventure? How does he react to the outcome of this adventure?

As always, we can ask whether Odysseus is a good leader. Here, he is asleep at a crucial time; however, his men must be held responsible for their greed and for opening the bag of winds.

The proem of the *Odyssey* makes Odysseus' men responsible for their own actions:

Muse, speak to me now of that resourceful man
who wandered far and wide after ravaging
the sacred citadel of Troy. He came to see
many people's cities, where he learned their customs,
while on the sea his spirit suffered many torments,
as he fought to save his life and lead his comrades home.
But though he wanted to, he could not rescue them —
they all died from their own stupidity, the fools.
They feasted on the cattle of Hyperion,
god of the sun — that's why he snatched away their chance

of getting home someday.

(Johnston 1.1-11)

Still, it would have been better if Odysseus had stayed awake just a little longer. We will see one other time that he falls asleep and his men behave badly.

Odysseus, disappointed at being so close to Ithaca, yet not managing to land on it, even considers committing suicide:

“And I woke up with a start, my spirit churning —
should I leap over the side and drown at once or
grit my teeth and bear it, stay among the living?
I bore it all, held firm, hiding my face,
clinging tight to the decks
while heavy squalls blasted our squadron back
again to Aeolus’ island, shipmates groaning hard.”

(Fagles 10.55-61)

Compare:

“At that point I woke up. Deep in my heart
I was of two minds — I could jump overboard
and drown at sea or just keep going in silence,
remain among the living. I stayed there
and suffered on.”

(Johnston 10.66-70)

Mention of suicide in a Homeric hero is rare (this is the only place it occurs, unless you count the suicide of Great Ajax). By the way, Aeneas in Virgil’s *Aeneid* becomes so discouraged that he considers suicide.

• Why won’t Aeolus help Odysseus and his men a second time?

After Odysseus is blown back to Aeolus’ island, Aeolus refuses to again help Odysseus and his men. Aeolus regards Odysseus as hated by the gods, and therefore it is impious — and useless — to try to help him.

Aeolus tells Odysseus,

“Of all living men, you are the worst —
so you must leave this island with all speed.
It would violate all sense of what is right

if I assisted or escorted on his way
 a man the blessed gods must hate. So leave.
 You're here because deathless gods despise you."

(Johnston 10.96-101)

• **What happens in the land of the Laestrygonians (Cannibalistic Giants)?**

The second short adventure in Book 10 occurs when Odysseus and his men visit the land of the Laestrygonians, who turn out to be cannibalistic giants. There, Odysseus loses all of his ships but one — the one he is on. When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, he will be without any ships and he will be without any men. He will be alone.

Why will he be alone? It makes a better story if he lands on Ithaca alone and has to face the suitors with very little help. In addition, he loses his men because of their own foolish actions. And, of course, Poseidon is very willing to make Polyphemus' curse come true: Polyphemus wishes that Odysseus — if he is fated to return home — will return late, return alone, and find much trouble there.

In the *Iliad*, we learned in the catalog of ships that Odysseus brought 12 ships to Troy. Here, he loses 11 ships, leaving him with only one.

• **How is Odysseus able to escape the Laestrygonians?**

Odysseus is cautious. He does not moor his ship inside the Laestrygonians' harbor; instead, he moors his ship outside their harbor. This makes it more difficult for the Laestrygonians to reach the ship. However, they are able to reach the other ships and to eat the men on board.

Only Odysseus and his men are moored outside of the harbor:

"All my shipmates brought their curved ships up
 and moored them inside the hollow harbour
 in a tightly clustered group — in that spot
 there were never any waves, large or small.
 Everything was calm and bright around them.
 But I moored my black ship all by itself
 outside the harbour, right against the land,
 tying it to the rock."

(Johnston 10.121-128)

Odysseus also sends some men ahead to scout the land.

We see here a major contrast with the adventure of the Cyclops. Odysseus was eager for adventure when he landed on the island of the Cyclopes. Now, however, he is discouraged and

not eager for adventure. Now, he is cautious and perhaps afraid. Fortunately, his caution works, as he is able to escape from the Laestrygonians.

Odysseus does not attempt to rescue his men. All he does is to pull his sword and cut the ropes that moor his ship, then tell his men to row for their lives. In Odysseus' favor, however, we can say that it is hard to tell what else he could have done. The Laestrygonians are giants. They wade into the water and spear the men on the other 11 ships. If Odysseus had tried to rescue them, chances are he would have died, too.

Polyphemus the Cyclops prayed for Odysseus to return to Ithaca alone and late. The curse is coming true. Already, Odysseus has come close to Ithaca, but he was blown far away from Ithaca. Already, Odysseus has lost most of his men and all but one of his ships.

• **What do Odysseus and his men do when they first land on Circe's island?**

Odysseus and his men don't know where they are when they land on Circe's island. They don't know who, if anyone, lives there. They are discouraged because they have lost so many ships and men. The men, of course, were comrades and friends. They were men they had fought beside at Troy.

As evidence of their discouragement, Odysseus and his men do nothing for two days after landing on Circe's island:

“and for two days and two nights we lay by there,
eating our hearts out, bent with pain and bone-tired.”
(Fagles 10.156-157)

Compare:

“Here, in silence, we brought our ship to land,
inside a harbour with fine anchorage.
Some god was guiding us. Then we disembarked
and laid up in that spot two days and nights,
our hearts consumed with weariness and pain.”
(Johnston 10.186-190)

• **What does Odysseus do when he becomes active again?**

Finally, Odysseus rouses himself from his depression, explores some of the island, and sees smoke rising from a spot on the island (later, he finds out that it is rising from Circe's dwelling), and he kills a stag and drags the meat back to his men so that they can eat it.

The hunting of the big stag is good for Odysseus' men. They are able to eat a big meal, which often makes people feel much, much better. In addition, Odysseus arouses his men with words before they eat:

“Listen to me, my friends, my comrades, brothers in hardship —

we won't go down to the House of Death, not yet,
 not till our day arrives. Up with you, look,
 there's still some meat and drink in our good ship.
 Put our minds on food — why die of hunger here?"

(Fagles 10.191-195)

Compare:

"My friends,
 we're not going down to Hades' house just yet,
 although we're grieving, not until the day
 our fate confronts us. So come on now,
 while there's food and drink in our swift ship,
 let's think of eating, so we don't waste away
 and die of hunger."

(Johnston 10.228-234)

These are things that a good leader would do. Odysseus hunts food for his men, and he says encouraging words to his men.

Odysseus tell his men about the smoke he saw rising from a spot on the island. He wants to explore and find out from where the smoke is coming. The smoke reminds Odysseus' men of the smoke rising from the islands of the Cyclopes and of the Laestrygonians. It does not remind them of the smoke rising on Ithaca:

"That's what I said.
 But their spirits fell, as they remembered
 what Laestrygonian Antiphates had done
 and the violence of great Polyphemus,
 that man-eating Cyclops. They wept aloud,
 shedding frequent tears. But their laments
 were not much help to us."

(Johnston 10.259-265)

• **Why does Odysseus divide his men into two groups?**

Odysseus divides his men into two groups. He leads one group, and Eurylochus (Odysseus' second in command) leads the other group. They draw lots to see who will explore the island,

and especially the spot from which Odysseus saw smoke rising. The other group stays behind at the ships.

As luck would have it, Eurylochus' lot leaps forth, and he and the men under him will explore the island.

The drawing of lots is odd. Normally, Odysseus would be eager for adventure, the way he was eager to see who lived on the island of the Cyclopes. This time, he and Eurylochus throw lots. Apparently, Odysseus is more discouraged and more cautious than he was formerly.

Previously, when Odysseus told Polyphemus his name, he did something foolish. Now, however, he is more cautious. Being cautious, however, does not mean being cowardly. When Odysseus goes back to Ithaca, he will fight to the death 108 suitors. The odds will be against him, but before the battle starts, he does everything he can to tilt the odds in his favor.

• **What happens when Eurylochus and his men visit Circe's home?**

Eurylochus is cautious, but he may also be cowardly. When he and his men visit the house with the rising smoke, Eurylochus stays outside the home, but his men go inside. Eurylochus waits a long time, but the men don't leave the house. Finally, Eurylochus goes to Odysseus and reports what he has seen. As we find out, Circe has turned the men into pigs.

Classics scholar Elizabeth Vandiver jokes that since Homeric society was a sexist and paternalistic society (much more so than the modern US American society), then these were the "original male chauvinist pigs" (*The Odyssey of Homer* 72).

Odysseus, who is brave, decides to go to the house and see what he can do to rescue his men.

When Eurylochus reports back to Odysseus, Eurylochus is afraid and is very willing, even insistent, that they sail away from the island and leave their companions changed into swine behind. Odysseus, however, goes to rescue them. This makes Odysseus look very heroic and helps to show that he wanted to bring all his men back home to Ithaca, even though he failed to do that.

• **What help does Odysseus receive from Hermes?**

In a lot of ways, Odysseus is special. Not only does he have many good human qualities, but he also receives help from the gods. For example, as we have seen, Athena likes Odysseus' ability to think his way out of predicaments. Here, on the island of Circe, Odysseus meets the god Hermes, who looks like a human young man. Hermes gives Odysseus advice in how to behave toward Circe. Hermes also gives Odysseus a plant by the name of moly that will protect him against Circe's spell. When Circe attempts to turn him into a pig like his companions, her spell won't work on him. When that happens, Hermes says, Odysseus needs to draw his sword and rush toward Circe. Circe will then want to go to bed with Odysseus, and he must go to bed with her — he must not decline to sleep with her.

Earlier, we read that Calypso forced Odysseus to sleep with her; this is much the same thing. If Odysseus is going to get Circe to disenchant his men and turn them from swine back into men, he must sleep with her.

In addition, it is dangerous not to do what Circe (or another goddess) suggests. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, which of course was written hundreds of years after the *Odyssey* was created, Picus is

one of the former kings of Latium. The goddess Circe fell in love with him, but he rebuffed her. Because of the rebuff, Circe turned him into a woodpecker with brightly colored wings. “Picus” is Latin for woodpecker.

• **What danger is and has Odysseus been in from seductive females?**

In the Great Wanderings, females are dangerous to Odysseus, even the nonthreatening females. Calypso keeps him captive for seven years, Circe attempts to turn Odysseus into a pig, and Nausicaa and her father would be happy if Odysseus were to marry Nausicaa. Of course, if he were to marry Nausicaa, he would forget about his homecoming. Odysseus also sleeps with Circe and Calypso, and the danger once again is that Odysseus will decide to stay with one of these goddesses (and perhaps become immortal) and forget about returning to Ithaca, Penelope, and Telemachus.

• **How is Circe in some ways similar to Calypso?**

Circe and Calypso are in some ways similar:

Circe is in some ways a doublet of the other goddess, Calypso. They are in many ways repetitions of the same theme:

- Each of them is a very powerful goddess.
- Each of them has sex with Odysseus.
- Each is a danger in that Odysseus could decide to stay with one of them and forget about his homecoming.

• **How is Circe in some ways different from Calypso?**

The goddesses Circe and Calypso are also opposites in some important ways:

Circe is threatening at the beginning, then she becomes helpful.

At first, Circe wants to turn Odysseus into a pig. However, after he resists her enchantments, she becomes sexually interested in him. She disenchants his men, and she feeds everyone for a year, giving them excellent *xenia* on her island. She also helps Odysseus during the next part of his journey, telling him what he has to do and giving him provisions for the journey. When Odysseus wants to leave, she allows him to — it doesn’t take a god sent from Zeus to tell her to let Odysseus leave.

In contrast, Calypso is helpful at first, but then she becomes Odysseus’ captor.

When Odysseus washes up on Calypso’s island, she takes care of and feeds him, but then she refuses to let him leave her island. Odysseus is held captive on her island. Calypso won’t let him go until Zeus sends Hermes to tell her to let Odysseus go.

Other Points

Of course, we see the theme of *xenia* again, although I am not sure to what extent the gods have to obey the protocol of *xenia*.

By the way, Odysseus is happy to stay with Circe, and he does so for a year. It takes his men to grow restless and tell Odysseus that it's time to head for Ithaca before he lets Circe know that he wants to leave.

Of course, it takes 10 years Odysseus to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War although the Mediterranean Sea is small. However, for much of that time he is not sailing. He spends one year with Circe, and Calypso keeps him captive for seven years.

• **What is the sexual double standard we see in the *Odyssey*?**

Obviously, we see a sexual double standard in Homeric society.

Agamemnon was unfaithful to his wife, Clytemnestra, during the Trojan War. He is not criticized for that. Clytemnestra was unfaithful to Agamemnon during the Trojan War, and she and her lover, Aegisthus, murdered Agamemnon when he returned home. Orestes killed both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and for that, Orestes is honored in the *Odyssey*. Nestor speaks highly of Orestes in Book 3 of the *Odyssey*.

Odysseus sleeps with both Circe and Calypso, but we never see any criticism of him doing that. After he has killed all of the suitors, he will tell his adventures to his wife, Penelope, and apparently he tells her everything, including that he slept with the goddesses. (Of course, we are told that he is forced to sleep with them.) Penelope doesn't seem to mind that Odysseus slept with goddesses.

Wives could be jealous, by the way. Odysseus' father bought a female slave, who is now old, but he never slept with her because it would upset his wife.

So men can be unfaithful in Homeric society. However, wives must be absolutely faithful. Penelope must sleep only with Odysseus.

Men, it seems, are not required to be faithful. In the *Iliad*, we read about many spear-brides, or sex-slaves. Agamemnon had a sex-slave, Achilles had a sex-slave, and Patroclus had a sex-slave. (Achilles had more than one sex-slave, as apparently did the other Achaean kings.) At times, Achilles and Patroclus go to their separate quarters, and each has a woman to sleep with. In that society, it is assumed that if you are awarded a young, pretty woman as a *geras*, then you will sleep with her. One reason to conquer Troy is that the Achaeans will be able to make the "deep-breasted" (Fagles' phrase) Trojan women their sex-slaves.

In Odysseus' defense, he is forced to have sex with these two goddesses. In Book 5, we read about Odysseus and Calypso:

[...] In the nights, true,
he'd sleep with her in the arching cave — he had no choice —
unwilling lover alongside lover all too willing ...
(Fagles 5.170-172)

Compare:

The nymph no longer gave him joy.

At night he slept beside her in the hollow cave,
as he was forced to do — not of his own free will,
though she was keen enough.

(Johnston 5.192-195)

And in Book 10, Hermes tells Odysseus to sleep with Circe:

“When Circe
strikes you with her elongated wand,
then draw that sharp sword on your thigh and charge,
just as if you meant to slaughter her.
She’ll be afraid. And then she’ll order you
to sleep with her. At that point don’t refuse
to share a goddess’ bed, if you want her
to free your crew and entertain you.”

(Johnston 10.385-392)

However, in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, we learn that Odysseus has a *geras*, or spear-bride, as Agamemnon threatens to strip away the *geras* of Achilles, Great Ajax, or Odysseus before deciding to take away Briseis from Achilles (Fagles, *Iliad* 1.162-163).

• **How can we explain the existence of the sexual double standard?**

We can explain the sexual double standard, I think. For example, the audience of the Homeric epic poems is probably at least mainly male. Lots of men would like to sleep with lots of women, and perhaps Homer is appealing to that male audience here.

However, a better explanation probably lies in the inheritance of property.

In this society, people marry, have children, and when they die, their sons — this is a patriarchal society, after all — will inherit the property. A husband wants to make sure that his biological sons inherit the property.

• **How would female infidelity in this society threaten the family structure?**

If his wife sleeps around, the husband can’t be sure that his biological sons will inherit the property. No reliable birth control exists. No DNA tests exist. The son that his wife bears may actually be the son of another man. The only way to be certain that it is the husband’s son who inherits the property is if the wife is absolutely faithful and sleeps with no one except her husband.

Of course, if the husband sleeps around, it will have no effect on the sons whom his wife bears. The bastards sired by the husband in far lands will have no effect on the son’s inheritance of

property. Odysseus can sleep with lots of goddesses and women around the Mediterranean, and Telemachus will still inherit his property.

However, if Penelope is unfaithful to Odysseus, then perhaps Telemachus is not Odysseus' biological son.

It is possible that Homeric society would not recognize adultery by a husband (unless he slept with the lawfully wedded wife of another man), although it would recognize adultery by a wife. If the purpose of marriage is to ensure that the husband's biological sons inherit the property, then people in Homeric times may not think of a husband's infidelity as violating a marriage.

• **How does Odysseus assert control over Circe? What does she do in response?**

To get Circe to release his men from the spell, Odysseus must dominate Circe, first with a sword, and then with sex, given that the ancient Greeks believed that in sex the male dominated the female. Odysseus follows Hermes' directions. Odysseus is protected from Circe's enchantments by the moly that Hermes has given him. Odysseus rushes at Circe with his sword drawn, and when Circe suggests going to bed, he goes to bed with her.

By the way, Circe recognizes that this man is Odysseus. Hermes once told her that Odysseus was coming. Circe tells Odysseus,

“You must be Odysseus, man of twists and turns —
Hermes the giant-killer, god of the golden wand,
he always said you'd come,
homeward bound from Troy in your swift black ship.”
(Fagles 10.366-369)

Compare:

“You must be Odysseus,
that resourceful man. The Killer of Argus,
Hermes of the Golden Wand, always told me
Odysseus in his swift black ship would come
on his way back from Troy.”
(Johnston 10.335-339)

Odysseus has told the Phaeacians that his *kleos* “has reached the skies” (Fagles 9.22). We have seen that the Cyclops Polyphemus has heard a prophecy about Odysseus. Now we learn that Circe, a goddess, has heard about Odysseus from Hermes, a god. What Odysseus told the Phaeacians about his *kleos* is true, assuming that he told the truth about Polyphemus and Circe.

After Circe sleeps with Odysseus, breeding “deep trust” (Fagles 10.372) with him, she changes his men from pigs back into men, even making them better looking, younger, and taller than they were.

• **How does Eurymachus react when Odysseus wants him to return to Circe's house?**

Odysseus returns to his men, and he wants them to go with him to Circe's house. In inviting them, he uses many of the same words and phrases that Circe had earlier stated to him (Fagles 10.445-446):

“Let's haul our ship straight up on the shore first
and stow our cargo and running gear in caves.
Then hurry, all of you, come along with me
to see our friends in the magic halls of Circe,
eating and drinking — the feast flows on forever.”
(Fagles 10.467-471)

Compare:

“First of all, let's drag the ship onshore,
stow all our goods and tackle in the caves.
Then you can rouse yourselves and come with me,
see your comrades in Circe's sacred home,
eating and drinking. They have lots of both.”
(Johnston 10.548-552)

Eurymachus does not want to go, but Odysseus and his men go to see Circe, and Eurymachus, not wanting to be left alone, follows them. Of course, Eurymachus is a negative character — a character we dislike. He is being built up as a negative character because of the role that he will play in Book 12 when Odysseus and his men go to the island of the Sungod.

• **Even after Circe becomes friendly to Odysseus, how is she still a danger to Odysseus?**

Circe still is a danger to Odysseus. He could easily stay with her a very long time and maybe forget about returning home to Penelope. I think we see that when Odysseus returns to his men after bedding Circe for the first time:

“I found my trusty comrades at the ship
lamenting miserably, shedding many tears.
Just as on a farm calves frisk around the herd
when cows, having had their fill of grazing,
return back to the yard — they skip ahead,
and pens no longer hold them, as they run,
mooing in a crowd around their mothers,

that's how my shipmates, once they saw me,
 thronged around, weeping — in their hearts it felt
 as if they they'd got back to their native land,
 the rugged town of Ithaca itself,
 where they were born and bred.”

‘You’re back,
 you favourite of Zeus. We [are] glad of that,
 as if we had returned to Ithaca,
 our native land.’

(Johnston 10.530-544)

The men are acting as if they have reached Ithaca, but Ithaca is still a long distance away.

• **What does it take for Odysseus to finally decide to return to his family?**

For one year, Odysseus and his men feast at Circe’s table and drink her wine. However, this is legitimate feasting and drinking. They are welcome guests of Circe, and so they are not like the suitors, who are unwelcome guests on Ithaca.

After one year, at the prompting of many of his crewmen, Odysseus decides to resume his journey. It does take the prompting of his men for Odysseus to return to Ithaca now. He seems perfectly happy to stay longer with Circe, although eventually, I think, he would have wanted to return to Ithaca and his family.

• **How does Odysseus show his command of rhetoric when he talks to Circe and says that he needs to leave her and resume his journey?**

It is not wise to have a goddess angry at you, so Odysseus blames wanting to leave Circe on his men. He says that when Circe is not around, his men tell Odysseus that it is time to leave and go home, and they have worn down Odysseus with their pleading. This is good rhetoric.

• **What does Circe tell Odysseus that he needs to do before he can return home?**

Odysseus still has an adventure ahead of him before he can return to Ithaca. Circe, who as a goddess knows things that Odysseus does not, tells him that he must journey to the Land of the Dead and speak with the wise Theban prophet Tiresias, who will give him advice about returning home quickly and safely.

This dismays Odysseus, of course. He asks,

“[...] Who has ever
 reached the House of Death in a black ship?”

(Fagles 10.551-552)

Compare:

“Circe, who’ll be the guide on such a journey?

No one ever sailed a black ship down to Hades.”

(Johnston 10.641-642)

Circe, however, can give him directions. By the way, many people have reached the House of Death in a black ship — they drowned at sea. As we hear in the *Aeneid*, the problem isn’t entering the House of Death (that’s easy) — the problem is leaving the House of Death and reaching again the Land of the Living.

Note that we are given the detail that Tiresias is wise even in death. Tiresias alone is in his right mind — a gift of Persephone, Queen of the Dead. The other shades in the Land of the Dead are “empty, flitting shades” (Fagles 10.545). In the Underworld, according to Odysseus’ visit to the Underworld in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, the souls do not even know who they are until they have drunk blood. It is as if they have Alzheimer’s disease.

Odyssey, Book 11:
“The Kingdom of the Dead”
“Odysseus Meets the Shades of the Dead”

Important Term

Nekuia: A work describing a visit — usually by a living person — to the Land of the Dead.

• **What does Odysseus have to do before returning home?**

Odysseus must go on another adventure before he can return to Ithaca. Circe tells him that he must journey to the Land of the Dead so that he can consult the soul of the dead Theban prophet Tiresias, who will give him important information about his journey home.

• **Who are some other ancient heroes who have visited the Underworld?**

A journey to the land of the dead is something that the greatest heroes of Greek and Roman antiquity have in common; Theseus, Heracles, and Orpheus all undertook journeys to the Land of the Dead and were able to return to the Land of the Living again. Now Odysseus will undertake the same adventure.

In the great Roman epic the *Aeneid*, Aeneas, many of whose adventures parallel those of Odysseus, will also travel to the Land of the Dead and back again.

By journeying to the Land of the Dead, Odysseus puts himself in the company of some truly great heroes.

• **Which psychological reading can we give to Odysseus’ trip to the Underworld?**

Odysseus’ journey to the Land of the Dead is often called the *Nekuia*, a word that is based on the Greek word for “the dead.” In it, he goes to the Land of the Dead and then returns to the living world.

One plausible psychological reading we can give this is that it marks a kind of death and rebirth for Odysseus. Once this journey is over, Odysseus is ready to head home and see his wife and son. One part of his life is over — the life of a warrior in the Trojan War — and another part of his life is beginning — the part of his life that is devoted to his *nostos* or homecoming.

Of course, he does have the adventure of landing on the island of the cattle of the Sun god left, and he will spend seven years in captivity on Calypso’s island, but Odysseus is ready to return home, and his visit to Tiresias will make him eager to return home quickly.

• **What are the purposes of the *Nekuia*?**

The *Nekuia* serves some important narrative purposes:

Purpose No. 1: Odysseus Gains Knowledge of Home

Very importantly, Odysseus learns knowledge of what is happening on Ithaca now and of what will happen on Ithaca if he returns late. He learns that his mother has died because he sees her in the Land of the Dead, and she is able to give him information of what happened on Ithaca before she died.

The Theban prophet Tiresias is able to tell Odysseus what will happen if he returns to Ithaca later rather than sooner. If he returns to Ithaca late, he will find a world of trouble there, just as the Cyclops Polyphemus prayed to his father, Poseidon, to happen. Because of the information that he has gotten from Tiresias, Odysseus becomes very eager to get back home. When the goddess Calypso holds him captive, Odysseus mourns all day on the seashore for seven years.

Purpose No. 2: Odysseus Sees a Few Heroes of the Trojan War

Odysseus also sees a few heroes of the Trojan War in the Land of the Dead. Odysseus sees Achilles, and he sees Great Ajax, who declines to talk to him. Very importantly, he sees Agamemnon, whose unfaithful wife, Clytemnestra, murdered him. Of course, knowledge that Clytemnestra has been unfaithful to Agamemnon makes him realize that women can be unfaithful to their husbands. He hopes that Penelope has remained faithful to him, but he cannot know that until he returns to Ithaca.

Purpose No. 3: Odysseus' Story is Entertaining to His Phaeacian Audience

Of course, Odysseus is telling this story to the Phaeacian audience, whom he hopes to charm with his stories so that they will give him excellent guest-gifts. By telling wonderful stories, of which the *Nekuia* is one, Odysseus may be able to convince the Phaeacians to give him excellent guest-gifts.

Purpose No. 4: Story Entertaining to Homer's Audience — Then and Now

We also find the story entertaining, as did Homer's original audience. None of us has ever been to the Land of the Dead, and we are interested in what Odysseus will see there.

• How would the Phaeacians react to Odysseus' tale?

Odysseus is a very good speaker and a very good rhetorician. He knows something that speakers and rhetoricians should know (and something that authors should know) — what is interesting.

The Phaeacian audience has to be astonished at what they are hearing. This stranger whom they have been feeding and entertaining turns out to be a great hero of the Trojan War who has been missing for seven years. No one has known whether this hero is alive or dead. And then the stranger, Odysseus, tells wonderful stories about such things as landing on the island of the Cyclopes. And now the Phaeacian audience finds out that Odysseus journeyed to the Land of the Dead and has returned to the Land of the Living.

Odysseus, of course, is telling his story in order to convince the Phaeacians to give him wonderful guest-gifts. He is going to be effective in achieving his goal, as we will see.

As always, Odysseus wonderfully crafts his speech to be effective in achieving his purpose.

• Which instructions does Circe give for reaching the Land of the Dead?

One way to get to the Land of the Dead is to commit suicide or to die in another way. Of course, that means that you stay permanently in the Land of the Dead, and Odysseus is not ready to do that.

Fortunately, he has a goddess to tell him what to do. He is to sail past what we call the Strait of Gibraltar into what we call the Atlantic Ocean. By sailing west, Odysseus will arrive at the Land of the Dead.

Sailing into the Atlantic Ocean is dangerous for ancient Greek sailors. The Mediterranean Sea is small in comparison to the Atlantic Ocean. The Mediterranean is dangerous enough for ancient sailors, and the Atlantic, which is so huge, is much, much more dangerous for ancient sailors.

By the way, what we call the Strait of Gibraltar is what the ancients called the Pillars of Hercules. Supposedly, Hercules set up pillars there to warn ancient sailors not to sail any further than that because of the danger involved.

What we call the Atlantic Ocean is what the ancients called Ocean. According to the ancients, the Mediterranean Sea and the surrounding land was the habitable world. All else was water, or Ocean. Of course, the ancient Greeks and Romans did not know about North America and South America and Antarctica (home of the South Pole). They knew something about the nearest parts of Asia.

By the way, the Medi-terrean Sea means the sea in the middle of land. *Terra* means land.

• **The Underworld is also known as Persephone's Land. Who was Persephone?**

Persephone is the wife of Hades, King of the Underworld. As his wife, Persephone is the Queen of the Land of the Dead.

According to mythology, Hades wanted a wife and so he kidnapped Persephone, who was the daughter of Demeter, goddess of the Earth. Demeter caused living things to grow, but because of her grief, she stopped the growth of plants. This caused people to grow hungry. They prayed to Zeus, and eventually Persephone was allowed to return to the living world and to Demeter for most months of the year, but for a few months she had to stay with Hades in the Land of the Dead. When Persephone is with Demeter, Demeter is happy and plants grow, but when Persephone is with Hades, Demeter is unhappy and plants do not grow and winter covers the face of the Earth.

• **What is the purpose of the blood that Odysseus pours in a pit?**

Among the instructions that Circe gives Odysseus is that when he reaches Persephone's Land, he must sacrifice a couple of sheep and pour their blood into a pit. Most of the ghosts whom Odysseus will speak to will drink that blood, then speak to Odysseus.

Apparently, the Land of the Dead is a horrible place. Most of the ghosts need to drink that blood before they can speak to Odysseus. Blood is equated with life here. By drinking the blood, the ghosts will become enough like the living that they are able to speak.

It seems that in the Land of the Dead, most ghosts don't have their wits unless they drink some blood. Circe tells Odysseus that the ghost of Tiresias is an exception, however:

“But first another journey calls. You must travel down
to the House of Death and the awesome one, Persephone,
there to consult the ghost of Tiresias, seer of Thebes,

the great blind prophet whose mind remains unshaken.
 Even in death — Persephone has given him wisdom,
 everlasting vision to him and him alone ...
 the rest of the dead are empty, flitting shades.”
 (Fagles 10.539-545)

Compare:

“But first you must complete another journey —
 to the home of Hades and dread Persephone.
 Consult the shade of that Theban prophet,
 blind Teiresias. His mind is unimpaired.
 Even though he’s dead, Persephone
 has granted him the power to understand —
 the others flit about, mere shadows.”
 (Johnston 10.629-635)

• **What is Elpenor’s story?**

The first shade whom Odysseus talks to is one of his own men, Elpenor, who has recently died but has not yet been buried. Odysseus was in so much of a hurry that he did not bury Elpenor before undertaking this voyage to the Land of the Dead. Odysseus mentions the death of Elpenor before he undertakes the voyage to the Land of the Dead (Fagles 10.608-617). Odysseus says,

“The first shade to appear out of the pit
 was my companion Elpenor, whose corpse
 had not been buried in the broad-tracked earth.
 We’d left his body back in Circe’s house,
 without lament or burial — at the time
 another need was driving us away.”
 (Johnston 11.59-64)

Elpenor dies in a silly way. He had drinking, and he had been sleeping on the roof of Circe’s house. Why would he sleep there? Air conditioning did not exist, and apparently it would be cooler on the roof. Unfortunately, because he had been drinking he fell off the roof and died.

Elpenor does not need to drink the blood before he speaks to Odysseus. Elpenor is not yet in the Land of the Dead. It is those ghosts who need to drink the blood before they acquire the ability to speak to Odysseus.

Elpenor is like Hector and Patroclus were in the *Iliad* after they died and before they were buried. He is dead, but he is yet not allowed to enter the Land of the Dead because he has not been buried. The ghost of Elpenor, like the ghost of Patroclus did to Achilles, begs Odysseus to quickly bury him when he returns to Circe's island.

• **What are the main functions of the character Elpenor?**

One of Elpenor's main functions is to stress the importance of burial in this culture.

Elpenor's other main function is to illustrate by his silly way of dying the stupidity of Odysseus' crew, who have done many stupid things following the Fall of Troy. The bard wants us to know that Odysseus' men perished because of their own stupidity. With crew members as dumb as Elpenor, what else can you expect?

• **Who was Tiresias?**

Tiresias is a wise Theban prophet who had much wisdom. One of the interesting myths about him is that he has lived life as a man and as a woman. He once saw two snakes having sex, and he struck the female snake with his staff. He then became a woman and lived as a woman, including becoming the mother of a sorceress named Manto. Later, he again saw two snakes having sex and this time he hit the male snake with his staff. This transformed him into a man again.

One day, Zeus and Hera, his wife, had an argument about whether the man or the woman enjoyed sex more. Hera thought that men enjoyed sex more than women, and Zeus thought that women enjoyed sex more than men. Because Tiresias had had sex as both a man and as a woman, they asked him who enjoyed sex more. Tiresias answered that women enjoy sex more. This made Hera so angry that she blinded him. To make up for the loss of Tiresias' eyesight, Zeus made him a prophet.

However, in the Land of the Dead Tiresias may not be blind. We read that he knew Odysseus at once, even before drinking the blood.

• **Which information does Odysseus receive from Tiresias?**

Although Odysseus sees his mother among the dead, he speaks to Tiresias first. That is his main task there: to question Tiresias and to learn about his journey home.

Tiresias still has his mind. In Book 10, we read that Circe tells Odysseus,

“But first you must complete another journey —
to the home of Hades and dread Persephone.
Consult the shade of that Theban prophet,
blind Teiresias. His mind is unimpaired.
Even though he's dead, Persephone
has granted him the power to understand —
the others flit about, mere shadows.” (Johnston 10.629-635)

Tiresias recognizes Odysseus even without drinking the blood. He drinks some blood, and then he is able to answer Odysseus' questions. Apparently, Tiresias needs the blood in order to prophesy. He tells Odysseus:

“Stand back from the trench — put up your sharp sword
so I can drink the blood and tell you the truth.”
(Fagles 11.106-107)

Compare:

“Move from the pit and pull away your sword,
so I may drink the blood and speak the truth.”
(Johnston 11.113-114)

Once he drinks the blood, Tiresias knows why Odysseus has come even though Odysseus does not tell him. Before Tiresias drank the blood, he asked Odysseus,

“Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of exploits,
man of pain, what now, what brings you here,
forsaking the light of day
to see this joyless kingdom of the dead?”
(Fagles 11.102-105)

Compare:

‘Resourceful Odysseus,
Laertes’ son and Zeus’ child, what now,
you unlucky man? Why leave the sunlight,
come to this joyless place, and see the dead?
(Johnston 11.112-115)

After drinking the blood, Tiresias is able to tell Odysseus what he needs to do to get home quickly and safely with all of his men. Yes, Poseidon is angry at Odysseus because Odysseus blinded his son the Cyclops Polyphemus; still, Odysseus and his men can make it home quickly and safely. To do that, however, they must not harm the cattle of the Sun god. If they do that, there will be trouble.

Tiresias says,

“If you leave them unharmed and keep your mind
on your return, you may reach Ithaca,
though you’ll have trouble. But if you touch them,

then I foresee destruction for your crew,
 for you, and for your ship. And even if
 you yourself escape, you'll get home again
 in distress and late, in someone else's ship,
 after losing every one of your companions."
 (Johnston 11.134-142)

The Cyclops' curse had been this:

"[...] let him come home late
 and come a broken man — all shipmates lost,
 alone in a stranger's ship —
 and let him find a world of pain at home!"
 (Fagles 9.592-595)

Compare:

"[...] may he get back late
 and in distress, after all his comrades
 have been killed, and in someone else's ship.
 And may he find troubles in his house."
 (Johnston 9.702-705)

Tiresias' words are almost exactly the same words of the Cyclops. The content is exactly the same. However, Tiresias also warns Odysseus about the suitors. Tiresias adds a little detail about these troubles in Odysseus' household:

"crude, arrogant men devouring all your goods,
 courting your noble wife, offering gifts to win her."
 (Fagles 11.133-134)

Compare:

"There'll be trouble in your home — arrogant men
 eating up your livelihood and wooing
 your godlike wife by giving courtship gifts."
 (Johnston 11.143-145)

Odysseus seems to have two fates here. He can lead his men home if they do not harm the cattle of the Sungod. However, if they do harm the cattle of the Sungod, then Odysseus will return to Ithaca late and alone, and he will find suitors trying to get his wife to marry one of them.

Tiresias also tells Odysseus that yet another adventure is in store for him. He must undertake another journey before he dies. He must carry an oar on his shoulder and journey until he comes across someone who thinks that the oar is a winnowing fan. Then he must sacrifice to Poseidon. The idea is that Odysseus will carry the worship of Poseidon to a people far inland who have no knowledge of the sea. Once Odysseus does this, Odysseus can return home and offer more sacrifices to the gods. Odysseus will die “a gentle, painless death far from the sea” (Fagles 11.154).

• **What are the souls of the dead like?**

Being dead is not good. Odysseus refers to “the drifting, listless spirits of their [dead people’s] ghosts” (Fagles 11.33). Apparently, Odysseus’ own mother does not and cannot recognize him until she has a drink of blood. Odysseus asks Tiresias, “How, / lord, can I make her know me for the man I am?” (Fagles 11.164-165).

Tiresias answers,

“One rule there is,” the famous seer explained,
 “and simple for me to say and you to learn.
 Any one of the ghosts you let approach the blood
 will speak the truth to you. Anyone you refuse
 will turn and fade away.”
 (Fagles 11.166-170)

Compare:

“It’s easy. Whichever shadow of the dead
 you let approach the blood will speak to you
 and tell the truth, but those you keep away
 will once again withdraw.”
 (Johnston 11.180-183)

Tiresias speaks truly. As soon as Anticleia drinks the blood, Odysseus says, “She knew me at once and wailed out in grief” (Fagles 11.175).

Later, when Odysseus tries three times to embrace his mother, but cannot, she tells him,

“My child, of all men most unfortunate,
 no, Persephone, daughter of Zeus,
 is not deceiving you. Once mortals die,

this is what's set for them. Their sinews
 no longer hold the flesh and bone together.
 The mighty power of blazing fire
 destroys them, once our spirit flies from us,
 from our white bones. And then it slips away,
 and, like a dream, flutters to and fro."

(Johnston 11.268-276)

• **Which information does Odysseus learn from Anticleia, his mother?**

Odysseus' mother is named Anticleia. He sees her among the ghosts of the Land of the Dead, and this is how he learns that his mother is dead. Before his visit to the Land of the Dead, he had no way of knowing that she had died. This is an emotional trial for Odysseus. Since Odysseus has been away from Ithaca for many years, he knew that it was possible for one of his loved ones on Ithaca to die, but this still must be a shock to him. Of course, we remember that in the *Iliad* Achilles did not know whether his aged father was alive or dead. No modern communications systems existed back then.

Odysseus speaks to his mother, hoping to hear news of his family on Ithaca. He wants news about Penelope, Telemachus, and Laertes. He also wants to know how she died.

Odysseus' mother apparently does not recognize her son and is not able to speak to him. Only after drinking the blood of the sacrificed animals does she recognize and speak to her son.

Anticleia tells Odysseus about Penelope, Telemachus, and Laertes. Penelope is still faithful to him, Telemachus is growing up well, but his father grieves over Odysseus and stays at a farm where he works very hard. Laertes is working as a poor farmer.

• **What does Anticleia, Odysseus' mother, tell him about the reason she died?**

Odysseus finds out why his mother died. She tells him that she suffered the same longing for Odysseus that Laertes suffered:

"I was not attacked and killed in my own home
 by gentle arrows of the keen-eyed archer,
 nor did I die of some disease which takes
 the spirit from our limbs, as we waste away
 in pain. No. It was my longing for you,
 glorious Odysseus, for your loving care,
 that robbed me of my life, so honey sweet."

(Johnston 11.246-252)

This has to have a major impact on Odysseus. Why did his mother die? She died because she was longing for him to come home.

Odysseus cannot speak after hearing this. He tries to embrace his mother three times, but she is an insubstantial ghost, and he cannot touch her.

In this passage, we have a reference to the “sharp-eyed Huntress” (Fagles 11.226) shooting arrows and killing people. The Huntress is Artemis, and both she and her brother, Apollo, were thought to shoot people to kill them. The ancient Greeks would have known people who seemed to be perfectly healthy but who died suddenly. Today we would say that these people died of a heart attack or a stroke, but the ancient Greeks said that either Artemis, in the case of the death of a woman, or Apollo, in the case of the death of a man, had shot an arrow and killed them.

As the ghost of his mother leaves, she tells Odysseus to tell Penelope what she has told him. He does this (Fagles 23.368).

• Why do you think Odysseus breaks off his narrative after describing heroines he saw from the old days?

Next, Odysseus speaks of all the famous women from the old days that he saw. Because of the patriarchal society of ancient Greece, these women are mothers, wives, and daughters. Among these famous women whom he saw were these women:

Megara, the wife of Heracles (Hercules).

Epicaste: the mother of Oedipus. Readers of Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* know that she married her son, Oedipus, who had killed his father, her husband.

Leda: mother of the twins Castor and Polydeuces (Pollux). These two take turns being alive. When one is alive for a day, the other is dead, and vice versa.

However, Odysseus stops suddenly, saying

“But the time has come for sleep, either with friends
Aboard your swift ship or here in your own house.
My passage home will rest with the gods and you.”
(Fagles 11.375-377)

Compare:

“It’s time to sleep, in my swift ship or here.
How I am escorted from this place
is now up to you and to the gods.”
(Johnston 11.418-420)

Why does Odysseus stop at this point in the story? We remember where Odysseus is. Odysseus is in the palace of the Phaeacians. We also remember what Odysseus is doing. He is trying to tell a remarkable story that will interest the Phaeacians and convince them to give him magnificent

guest-gifts. We will see that stopping here is a wise move by Odysseus. The Phaeacians are mesmerized by Odysseus' story, and they don't want him to stop. Therefore, Queen Arete, the old lord Echenus, and King Alcinous want all the Phaeacian lords to give guest-gifts to Odysseus. That way, they can convince Odysseus to continue to tell his story. Smart man, that Odysseus.

King Alcinous mentions Odysseus' "whole array of shining gifts" (11.399) that the Phaeacians will give him, and Odysseus tactfully mentions more gifts:

"Lord Alcinous, of all men most renowned,
if you asked me to stay for one whole year,
to organize my escort and give splendid gifts,
then I would still agree. It's far better
to get back to one's own dear native land
with more wealth in hand. I'll win more respect,
more love from anyone who looks at me,
whenever I return to Ithaca."

(Johnston 11.448-455)

By the way, I doubt that Odysseus wants to stay an extra year with the Phaeacians — we know that he is eager to get back home to Ithaca. But Odysseus does want extra gifts. He knows that he will finish his story soon, and he is hoping that the Phaeacians will give him extra gifts and then send him home.

As we will see, when Odysseus finishes his story, the Phaeacians do give him extra gifts.

• Given that ancient Greece was a sexist world, why do you suppose Odysseus has described the heroines he saw from the old days?

As always, Odysseus is a good rhetorician. As always, he crafts his speech carefully. When Odysseus met Nausicaa, she told him to ask the Queen for help. In this particular society, the Queen is held in very high regard. Who would the Queen be most interested in hearing about? She would be most interested in hearing about other women, and so Odysseus tells about all the famous women whom he saw in the Land of the Dead.

• How do the Phaeacians react to the break in the narrative?

The Phaeacians react the way that Odysseus wants them to react. Their response is that they want to hear more of the story. To persuade Odysseus to stay up late and tell more about whom he saw in the Land of the Dead, they promise to gather impressive guest-gifts for him.

Think of the situation. Odysseus is speaking to the Phaeacians. He has told part of the story of his adventure to the Land of the Dead. He then stops and says that it is time for bed. In the morning, he will leave and the Phaeacians will most likely never see him again. That means that the Phaeacians will never hear the rest of his story. Not often does someone enter the Land of the Dead and then return to the Land of the Living. The Phaeacians' reaction is, "Don't stop now."

We want to hear the rest of the story.” Because of that, the Phaeacians are willing to give wonderful guest-gifts so that Odysseus will continue to tell his story.

• **What does Odysseus learn from Agamemnon?**

At the request of the Phaeacian VIPs, Odysseus resumes his narrative. He speaks about the dead heroes of the Trojan War whom he saw in the Land of the Dead, including Agamemnon, Achilles, and Great Ajax.

Odysseus speaks to Agamemnon first. Agamemnon’s story has already been referred to a number of times in the *Odyssey*. When Telemachus visited the mainland in the *Telemachy*, both Nestor and Menelaus referred to the story.

Odysseus is surprised to find that Agamemnon is dead. He had not heard this news before. He asks Agamemnon how he died.

Of course, Agamemnon returned home to Mycenae after the Trojan War, only to be killed by Clytemnestra, who had not remained faithful to him.

Therefore, Agamemnon tells Odysseus to be careful about women. He acknowledges good things about Penelope, but he says,

“so even your own wife — never indulge her too far.
Never reveal the whole truth, whatever you may know;
Just tell her a part of it, be sure to hide the rest.
Not that you, Odysseus, will be murdered by your wife.”
(Fagles 11.500-503)

Compare:

“That’s why you should never treat them kindly,
not even your own wife. Never tell her
all the things you’ve determined in your mind.
Tell her some, but keep the rest well hidden.
But in your case, Odysseus, death won’t come
at your wife’s hand, for wise Penelope,
Icarius’ daughter, is a virtuous woman,
with an understanding heart.”
(Johnston 11.557-564)

Fortunately, Odysseus does find out that Penelope has been faithful to him, and he does tell her the whole truth. Odysseus has a good relationship with his wife.

• **In which ways are Penelope and Clytemnestra similar?**

Penelope and Clytemnestra are similar in that they are wives who remained home while their husbands went off to the Trojan War. Both of them have sons.

Of course, we are meant to compare these two wives and mothers. Clytemnestra was separated from Agamemnon for the ten years of the Trojan War. She took a lover while he was away, and she murdered him when he returned home.

By the time Odysseus gets back to Ithaca, 20 years have passed. He is wondering whether Penelope is another Clytemnestra.

• **Does Odysseus have good reason to be worried while he is held in captivity on Calypso's island?**

Odysseus has excellent reason to worry during the seven years he spends in captivity on Calypso's island.

Tiresias has told him that if he returns to Ithaca late he will find suitors besieging his house and his wife.

Agamemnon has pointed out to him that women can be treacherous. Women can choose to be unfaithful, and women are capable of murdering their husband.

It's no wonder that while Odysseus is spending seven years in captivity on Calypso's island that he longs to be home on Ithaca.

The longer he is away from home, the more trouble he is likely to find when he returns home.

• **Can Odysseus give Agamemnon news about his son, Orestes?**

Fathers are concerned about their sons, and so Agamemnon asks about his son, whose name is Orestes. However, Odysseus has not returned to Achaea yet, so he has no information to share with Agamemnon. Of course, Telemachus has learned that Orestes avenged the murder of his father, Agamemnon, by killing his mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover.

• **What does Odysseus learn from Achilles?**

The next hero of the Trojan War whom Odysseus talks to is Achilles, whose magnificent funeral Odysseus mentions. However, Achilles does not respond well to this description of his funeral. Quite simply, Achilles does not like being dead.

Odysseus says,

“But as for you, Achilles, there's no man
in earlier days who was more blest than you,
and none will come in future. Before now,
while you were still alive, we Argives
honoured you as we did the gods. And now,
since you've come here, you rule with power

among those who have died. So Achilles,
you have no cause to grieve because you're dead."

(Johnston 11.613-620)

Achilles responds that he would prefer to be alive:

"No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus!

By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man —
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive —
than rule down here over all the breathless dead."

(Fagles 11.555-558)

Compare:

"Don't try to comfort me about my death,
glorious Odysseus. I'd rather live
working as a wage-labourer for hire
by some other man, one who had no land
and not much in the way of livelihood,
than lord it over all the wasted dead."

(Johnston 11.622-627)

• Is the character of Achilles as depicted in the *Odyssey* inconsistent with the way he is depicted in the *Iliad*?

We can ask if the character of Achilles as depicted in the *Odyssey* is inconsistent with the character of Achilles as depicted in the *Iliad*. In the *Iliad*, Achilles has a choice of two fates. One fate was to fight at Troy, die while he was still young, and have everlasting *kleos*. The other fate was to return home to Achaea, live a long life, but not be remembered after his death.

Of course, in the *Iliad*, Achilles chose to die young and to earn everlasting *kleos*. Here, however, he says that it is better to be the slave of an impoverished farmer than to be the foremost among the dead.

Is this a contradiction?

Alternate Interpretation No. 1: Kleos is a Compensation for Death in the Minds Of the Living

It's possible that Achilles is saying that *kleos* means nothing to the dead. *Kleos* may be important to the living, but it has no value at all for the dead. Of course, Achilles rejected *kleos* in the *Iliad*, so it is not a surprise that he rejects it here, too,

Alternate Interpretation No. 2: This Is Achilles Still Being Achilles, Torn Between Desires

In the *Iliad*, it took Achilles a long time to make up his mind which fate to choose. Not until his best friend, Patroclus, died in battle did Achilles make his decision.

For much of the *Iliad*, Achilles seemed to be torn between his two fates. In Book 9, Agamemnon sent an embassy to him to ask him to return to battle. After Odysseus, the first speaker, has finished his speech, Achilles said that he will return to Achaea in the morning, but with each successive speaker, Achilles softened his stance. Of course, he stayed at Troy and eventually made his decision that resulted in everlasting *kleos* for him.

Possibly, Achilles is still conflicted. He may be thinking that he made the wrong decision. Personally, I reject this because at the end of the *Iliad*, Achilles is not conflicted. He is at peace with himself and with the world.

Alternate Interpretation No. 3: Take Statement at Face Value — Death Sucks

What I see here is a rejection of *kleos*, which Achilles also rejected in the *Iliad*, so I see this statement as being consistent with Achilles' character. Early in the *Iliad*, Achilles' ultimate concern was *kleos* — *kleos* was the most important thing to him. Next, after the death of Patroclus, revenge became his ultimate concern. Finally, at the end of the *Iliad* friendship and reintegration into the human community became most important to him. We should not be surprised that Achilles detests both whatever honor is found in the Underworld and that he detests death itself. In death, there is no friendship and human community, which are the things that Achilles valued most at the end of his life. Basically, Achilles is saying that he values life and that being dead sucks. In Book 9 of the *Iliad*, he also said that he loves life.

• Is Achilles giving Odysseus a warning? Is he advising Odysseus not to value *kleos* too highly?

In addition, we should remember that Achilles is speaking to Odysseus. Achilles has learned two things in the *Iliad*: to value friendship and the human community, and to reject *kleos* as his ultimate concern. There is no need to tell Odysseus to value friendship and the human community. Odysseus already does so. On Calypso's island he will spend seven years weeping for home and he will reject Calypso's offer of immortality. However, Odysseus does need a warning not to value *kleos* so highly. After all, it is Odysseus' overvaluing of *kleos* that led him to tell the Cyclops his name and thus led to his troubles in returning home. (It also almost got him killed, as the Cyclops threw boulders into the sea at his ship.) If Odysseus had valued *kleos* less, he would have arrived home sooner. Achilles here is telling Odysseus not to value *kleos* so highly that it gets you killed unnecessarily because the Underworld is not a pleasant place. (Of course, Achilles does not know about the Cyclops.)

Odysseus is usually level-headed, but at times he does value *kleos* too highly, so he needs to hear this warning.

• What does Odysseus tell Achilles about his son, Neoptolemus?

Odysseus tells Achilles about his son, Neoptolemus, whom Odysseus himself brought to the Trojan War after Achilles' death. Odysseus praises Achilles' son highly, and Achilles goes away happy for two reasons:

- 1) His son is growing up a courageous man.
- 2) His son is still alive to take care of Peleus, Achilles' aged father.

Achilles does not say these things, but he earlier said that he was worried about his father, so it seems plausible to think that Achilles is happy that his son is still alive — and willing and able — to take care of Peleus.

• **What happens when Odysseus sees the ghost of Great Ajax? Why?**

The meeting of Odysseus and Great Ajax is a very famous scene that later authors took note of. We remember that Great Ajax committed suicide. After the death of Achilles, Thetis wanted to give away his armor. Both Odysseus and Great Ajax wanted it. The judges were “Pallas [Athena] and captive Trojans” (Fagles 11.625). They voted, and they awarded Odysseus his armor. Of course, Pallas Athena favors Odysseus — she is his patron goddess — so perhaps it is no surprise that he is awarded Achilles' armor.

This made Great Ajax angry, and in a fit of insanity he slaughtered sheep that he thought were Odysseus and Agamemnon. After recovering from his insanity, Great Ajax was so ashamed that he committed suicide.

In the Land of the Dead, Great Ajax is still angry at Odysseus, and he does not speak to him. Instead, he returns to the Land of the Dead.

This scene is echoed in Virgil's *Aeneid*. After the Trojan War, Aeneas and the other Trojan survivors of the war build ships and seek a new homeland. They journey to Carthage, where Aeneas has a love affair with Dido, the Carthaginian Queen. To fulfill his destiny, Aeneas must go to Italy, where he will become an important ancestor of the Roman people, who will have a great empire. When Aeneas leaves her, Dido commits suicide.

Later, just like Odysseus, Aeneas visits the Land of the Dead. He sees Dido there, and he speaks to her, but she ignores him, just like Great Ajax ignores Odysseus.

• **Odysseus mentions some people, including Tantalus, who are being punished in the Land of the Dead. Who is Tantalus, and how is he punished?**

Odysseus has been standing outside Hades and letting the ghosts come to visit him and drink the blood, but now he begins to speak as if he is inside Hades. At this point, he mentions some people who are being punished for the transgressions that they committed while they were alive.

Tantalus is Agamemnon's grandfather, and he was allowed to drink nectar and eat ambrosia, the gods' drink and food. However, he committed a crime. One myth states that he wanted to share the gods' nectar and ambrosia with other mortals. Another myth states that he killed and cooked his own son and served him to the gods to show that they were not omniscient. However, only one goddess (Demeter) took a bite of the food. She ate a bit of Tantalus' son's shoulder. The gods brought the son back to life (going against fate?), replacing the bit of shoulder with ivory, and punishing Tantalus forever. By the way, Tantalus' son was Pelops, who started the Olympic Games.

Because of Tantalus' transgression, he is punished by standing in a stream of water forever while being forever hungry and thirsty. Above his head are branches with ripe fruit, but whenever he raises his hands to reach the fruit so that he can eat it, the wind blows the branch and its fruit out

of his reach. And whenever he bends down to drink the water, the water recedes from him. So Tantalus is always hungry and thirsty, and he is always looking at fruit and water that he cannot eat or drink.

From the name Tantalus, we get our word “tantalizing,” which is a desire for something that we can’t have.

We should note that the Land of the Dead is not a good place to be. Even the ghosts who are not punished have a bleak afterlife. They do not have human intelligence until they have a drink of blood.

In later human history, the afterlife is thought of as a more desirable state of being. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the good souls are in the Elysium Fields, which is a happy place to be.

• **Who is Sisyphus, and how is he punished?**

Sisyphus is a trickster who even managed to use trickery to get out of the Land of the Dead after he had died. When he was on his deathbed, he told his wife not to perform his funeral rites. In the Land of the Dead, he complained about his wife to Hades, the god of the Underworld. Hades allowed Sisyphus to return to the Land of the Living, with the understanding that he would return to the Land of the Dead after his funeral rites were performed. Sisyphus, however, stayed in the Land of the Living for a very long time. Sisyphus is punished with meaningless work. He rolls a boulder up a hill, and just when he is about to push it over the hill and down the other side, the boulder rolls back down the hill again. Sisyphus is condemned to never reach his goal of rolling the boulder down the other side of the hill. The Existentialist philosopher Albert Camus wrote a famous essay titled “The Myth of Sisyphus,” in which he argued that Sisyphus is in the same situation as normal, living human beings. What we do is essentially meaningless, Camus argues, but nevertheless, we — and Sisyphus — can find happiness.

• **How does the ghost of Heracles (Hercules) greet Odysseus?**

Heracles is an ancient hero whom you may know better under his Roman name, Hercules. Heracles is the last ghost whom Odysseus speaks to in the Land of the Dead. Apparently, Heracles, because he is such a great hero, does not need to drink blood to recognize Odysseus.

Heracles now recognizes Odysseus and calls him by name, and he treats Odysseus with respect. In Homer’s (also Odysseus’) words,

“His eyes saw me and knew just who I was.

With a mournful tone he spoke to me —

his words had wings:

‘Resourceful Odysseus,

son of Laertes and a child of Zeus,

are you now bearing an unhappy fate

below the sunlight, as I, too, did once?’”

(Johnston 11.793-798)

This is remarkable. Heracles is a major hero, and Odysseus must be very special if the ghost of Heracles is treating him with such great respect.

After Odysseus speaks with Heracles, he is overcome with dread of the ghosts, and he leaves the Land of the Dead.

• Who was Heracles (Hercules)?

A Panhellenic Hero

Hercules is a Panhellenic hero — he is a hero throughout Greece. (“Pan” means everywhere.)

Heracles is THE ancient hero. He appears in myth after myth. I imagine that Homer must have thought about writing an epic hero about Heracles, but the Trojan War captured his imagination and so he created two epic poems about that war and its aftermath instead. It’s too bad that Homer did not live longer. Maybe he would have created an epic poem about Heracles, too.

Heracles, under the name of Hercules, is probably the ancient hero whom most people would name if they were asked to name an ancient hero. He pops up in many movies, including the Disney animated movie. A few years ago, there was also a TV series about Hercules.

Heracles is often referred to as a Panhellenic hero, meaning that he and his exploits are not associated with one particular city. We associate Theseus with Athens, Agamemnon with Mycenae, Menelaus with Sparta, and so on. Heracles is not associated with one particular Greek city, and he was worshipped throughout Greece. Heracles appears often in ancient Greek literature.

Heracles has a divine father, Zeus, and a mortal mother, Alcmena. Hera, the wife of Zeus, hates the women with whom Zeus has affairs, and she hates the children who are born from those affairs. In the case of Heracles, she hates him even before he is born.

When Alcmena was about to give birth to Heracles, Zeus announced that on a certain day a boy would be born who was both a descendant of Perseus, an ancient hero, and who would rule over the city of Mycenae, which later Agamemnon ruled.

Unfortunately, this news allowed Hera to interfere. Hera is the goddess of childbirth, and she was able to delay the birth of Heracles. She also was able to speed up the birth of Eurystheus, who was a descendant of Perseus. By doing this, Hera brought it about that Eurystheus, not Heracles, ruled Mycenae. Hera made sure that Eurystheus was born on that day, and not Heracles. After all, Zeus had sworn an inviolable oath that a descendant of Perseus born on that day would rule Mycenae, and the gods, including Zeus, cannot go back on their inviolable oaths.

Although Heracles was not born to become the ruler of Mycenae, he did show remarkable powers even as a baby. Hera still hated him — she was very good at hating people — and she sent two snakes to strangle Heracles while he was still in a crib. Fortunately, Heracles was so strong that he strangled the snakes.

Heracles was also remarkable for his appetite for food and drink. Sometimes, he appears as a buffoonish character in ancient plays. In these plays, he is shown as someone who eats and drinks way too much.

Unfortunately, Heracles was also known for his anger. Sometimes, he kills people when he is angry. Sometimes, he is mad with rage, and as you might guess, Hera sends him this madness.

Once, Heracles even killed the children he had with Megara, his first wife, and according to some ancient sources, he even killed Megara, too. (The Disney animated movie is for kids, and it leaves out all this negative stuff. In the Disney movie, Hera loves Heracles, and Heracles does not suffer from fits of madness.)

Of course, Heracles is famous for his 12 labors. After he killed his children, which is a horrible misdeed in any culture, in a fit of madness, he went to the Delphic Oracle (a truth-telling prophetess at Delphi) in order to find out what he has to do to be cleansed of this terrible sin. The Delphic Oracle told him that he must serve for 12 years his cousin Eurystheus, who is ruling Mycenae. If Hera had not interfered, Heracles would be ruling Mycenae.

Eurystheus gave Heracles 12 labors to perform. The Delphic Oracle told Heracles that if he successfully performs the 12 labors he will be granted immortality.

Labor #1: Killing the Nemean Lion

Heracles' first labor was killing the Nemean lion. Heracles set out for Nemea and the lion. In Nemea, he met a shepherd named Molorchos whose son the lion had killed, and Heracles told him to wait thirty days. If Heracles returned with the carcass of the lion, then Molorchos would make a sacrifice to Zeus, but if Heracles had not returned with the lion's carcass in thirty days, that meant that Heracles was dead and Molorchos should make a sacrifice to Heracles — the Greeks sometimes made sacrifices to heroes as well as to gods. Heracles found the lion and tried to kill it by shooting arrows at it, but he discovered that weapons could not penetrate the lion's fur. Heracles forced the lion into its cave, which had two entrances. Heracles trapped the lion by blocking one entrance and then going into the cave through the other entrance. Because ordinary weapons could not penetrate the lion's skin, Heracles killed the lion by strangling it. To skin the lion, Heracles used one of the lion's claws. For the rest of his life, Heracles wore the skin of the lion. On the thirtieth day, he found Molorchos ready to make a sacrifice to Heracles, whom he thought had died, but Molorchos happily made the sacrifice to Zeus instead.

Labor #2: Killing the Lernaean Hydra

Heracles' second labor was killing the Lernaean Hydra. In accomplishing this labor, Heracles had the help of a nephew named Iolaus. The Hydra of Lerna had nine heads, the middle of which was immortal. Heracles and Iolaus traveled to Lerna and found the Hydra's lair. Heracles forced the Hydra to leave its lair by shooting flaming arrows into the lair. Heracles fought the Hydra, but he discovered that each time a mortal head was cut off, two more heads grew in its place. Hera gave Heracles even more trouble by sending an enormous crab to fight him, but Heracles crushed the crab. Heracles then got help from Iolaus. Each time Heracles cut off one of the Hydra's mortal heads, Iolaus cauterized it with a torch, thus preventing more heads from growing. Heracles then cut off the immortal head and placed it under a boulder. The blood of the Hydra was poisonous, and before leaving, Heracles dipped the heads of his arrows into the Hydra's blood.

Labor #3: Capturing the Fire-Breathing Ceryneian Hind

Heracles' third labor was capturing the fire-breathing Ceryneian Hind — the golden deer — of Artemis that lived in Ceryneia. Eurystheus ordered Heracles to bring back this deer, whose horns were made of gold. Because the deer belonged to the goddess Artemis, Heracles did not want to kill it, so he chased it for a year — the deer was so swift that it could outrun arrows. Finally, Heracles captured the deer while it was asleep. Artemis confronted Heracles as he was taking the deer to Eurystheus, but Heracles promised to release the deer as soon as he had shown the deer to Eurystheus. Eurystheus, however, wanted the deer to be a part of his zoo — Eurystheus was hoping that Artemis would become angry at Heracles and kill him. Heracles said that Eurystheus could put the deer in his zoo, and then he released the deer, which immediately fled back to Artemis. Eurystheus complained, but Heracles said that Eurystheus should have caught the deer before it fled.

Labor #4: Capturing the Erymanthian Boar

Heracles' fourth labor was capturing the Erymanthian boar. Boars are dangerous, and this especially dangerous boar lived on Mount Erymanthus. While traveling to Mount Erymanthus, Heracles became the guest of a Centaur named Pholus. The Centaur ate his meat raw, and Heracles ate his meat roasted. The Centaurs had a jar of wine, and Pholus and Heracles drank from it. The other Centaurs smelled the wine, and they also drank, but they did not mix the wine with water and so became drunk and unruly. Heracles fought the Centaurs and chased them, and he discovered Prometheus, who had given the knowledge of how to control fire to mortals. Zeus had punished him by chaining him to a rock on a mountain and by sending an eagle each day to eat his liver, which grew back each night so it could be eaten again the following day. Heracles shot the eagle and released Prometheus, and then he consulted the wise Centaur Chiron, seeking advice about how to capture the Erymanthian boar. Chiron advised Heracles to drive the Erymanthian boar into deep snow and then capture it. After following Chiron's advice, Heracles took the Erymanthian boar to Eurystheus, who ordered it to be thrown into the sea. The Erymanthian boar swam to Italy, where it died. Its tusks were put on display in the temple of Apollo at Cumae.

Labor #5: Cleaning the Augean Stables

Heracles' fifth labor was cleaning the Augean Stables. Augeas was an ancient Greek King, and he had a large number of cattle. Unfortunately, he was not good at keeping the cattle's stables clean. In fact, for all the many years that he had had his cattle and stables, he had never cleaned the stables even once. Of course, cattle aren't housetrained, and the stables were filled with manure. Heracles was given the task of cleaning the stables in a single day. Fortunately, Heracles was a problem-solver. He diverted the course of two rivers so that they flowed through the stables, and the rivers cleaned the stables for him. After the stables were cleaned, Heracles diverted the course of the rivers so that they flowed in their regular channels.

Labor #6: Killing and Chasing Away the Stymphalian Birds

Eurypylus' shield showed Heracles' sixth labor, which was to kill and chase away the Stymphalian birds. To escape wolves, they had migrated to a marsh in Arcadia. These birds killed human beings. Heracles could not go into the marsh because the soggy land would not support his weight, so Athena gave him some castanets. Heracles clicked the castanets, making

noises that frightened the birds. He shot many of the birds, and the others flew away, never to return. Arcadia became much safer for mortals.

Labor #7: Capturing the Fire-Breathing Cretan Bull

Eurypylus' shield showed Heracles' seventh labor, which was to capture the fire-breathing Cretan bull. This bull had been plaguing Crete, and King Minos wanted to be rid of it. Heracles choked the bull into submission and took it to Eurystheus, who released it. It wandered to Marathon and resumed its evil ways. Eurystheus lost an opportunity to help mortals when he released the dangerous bull instead of killing it. He should have sacrificed it to the gods.

Labor #8: Capturing the Man-Eating Mares of Diomedes of Thrace

Eurypylus' shield showed Heracles' eighth labor, which was to capture the man-eating mares of Diomedes of Thrace. Heracles took a few companions with him during this labor. He captured the horses, but they ate human flesh. While Heracles was fighting Diomedes, Heracles' companion Abderus watched the mares; unfortunately, they attacked and ate him. To avenge the death of Abderus, Heracles fed Diomedes to the mares. Heracles took the mares to Eurystheus, who ordered them to be taken to Mount Olympus and sacrificed to Zeus. Zeus did not want such a sacrifice, so he sent wild animals that killed the mares.

Labor #9: Getting the War-Belt of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons

Eurypylus' shield showed Heracles' ninth labor, which was to get the war-belt of Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were war-like women who learned the skills of war such as archery from birth. Heracles sailed with other warriors to the Amazons, and Hippolyta met him. Heracles was in a hurry to get her war-belt, and he attempted to drag her by her hair from her horse. She respected Heracles' strength and daring, and she willingly gave him her war-belt. However, Hera caused trouble. She told the Amazons that Heracles was planning to kidnap Hippolyta, and the Amazons attacked Heracles, who sailed away with Hippolyta's war-belt. Penthesilea, Hippolyta's sister, later killed her with a spear in a hunting accident.

An Additional Adventure: Conquering Troy

Heracles visited Troy after he got the war-belt of Hippolyta. The gods Poseidon and Apollo had displeased Zeus, so he forced them to disguise themselves as mortals and work for Laomedon, King of Troy, for one year. Laomedon promised the two gods payment if they would build the walls of Troy; however, after the two gods had worked for a year and built the walls, Laomedon refused to give them the agreed-upon fee and even threatened to sell them into slavery. Poseidon and Apollo did not want to reveal themselves as gods because it would be humiliating if it became known that they had worked for a mortal, so they left. But Apollo sent a plague and Poseidon sent a sea-monster to Troy. Laomedon consulted seers, who told him that the plague would stop and the sea-monster would leave if he sacrificed Hesione, his daughter, to the sea-monster, so Laomedon chained Hesione by the sea. At this time, Heracles arrived and said that he would rescue Hesione if Laomedon would give him the valuable mares that Zeus had given to Laomedon when Zeus kidnapped Laomedon's son Ganymede and took him to Olympus to be his cupbearer. Heracles fought off the sea-monster with arrows and rescued Hesione, but Laomedon refused to give Heracles the mares that he had promised as payment. Heracles sailed away, but he promised to return later with more ships and conquer Troy. After he completed his twelve labors, he did return to Troy and conquer the city. He and his warriors killed all of Laomedon's

sons except for Podarces, who saved his life by giving Heracles a golden veil that Hesione, Podarces' sister, had embroidered. Afterwards, Podarces used a new name that in his language is related to the word for "ransomed": Priam.

Labor #10: Stealing the Cattle of a Monster Named Geryon

Heracles' tenth labor was to steal the cattle of a monster named Geryon, who was three men joined together at the waist. Because of this, Geryon was called "triple-bodied Geryon." To get to Geryon's island, Heracles had to cross a desert. Heracles became so hot that he shot an arrow at Helios the Sun-god. Helios respected Heracles' daring, and he lent him a golden cup. Helios used the cup each night to sail from west to east on the ocean, and Heracles used it now to sail to the land of Geryon. Heracles was attacked there by a two-headed dog named Orthrus; the three-headed dog of Hades, Cerberus, was his brother. Heracles killed Orthrus with his club, and when Geryon's cowherd, Eurytion, attacked Heracles, Heracles also killed him with the club. Geryon then attacked Heracles, who shot and killed him with an arrow whose head had been dipped into the poisonous blood of the Hydra. Heracles put the cattle of Geryon into the golden cup of Helios, sailed back to the desert, and returned the golden cup to Helios. Heracles then took the cattle to Eurystheus.

Labor #11: The Apples of the Hesperides

The Hesperides live on an island in the far West. Hesperides means Daughters of the West. They are three goddesses who are daughters of the Night. The Hesperides have a tree on which golden apples grow. Heracles' task was to get those apples. To do that, he had to find a way to get past the dragon that guards that tree. Fortunately, Heracles found a way to get someone else to do that for him. Atlas is the brother of Prometheus, and he is condemned to hold up the sky. Heracles made a deal with him. Heracles will hold up the sky for him while Atlas gets the golden apples. This deal will give Atlas a break, and it will get Heracles the apples. Unfortunately, after Atlas got the golden apples he decided to renege on his deal. He didn't want to take the sky back on his own shoulders. However, again Heracles was a problem-solver. He asked Atlas to hold up the sky for a moment while Heracles adjusted his robe to provide padding on which to hold up the sky. Atlas held up the sky, and Heracles left with the golden apples.

Labor #12: Cerberus the Three-Headed Dog

Cerberus is the three-headed dog of the Underworld, and Eurystheus ordered Heracles to fetch Cerberus from the Underworld and bring it to the Land of the Living. Heracles did this, strangling the three-headed dog until it submitted to him. (Also, Heracles rescued Theseus, who had been held captive in the Underworld.) After Heracles demonstrated that he had Cerberus, he apparently released it, and it found its way back to the Underworld. Cerberus is in the Underworld when Dante visits it in his *Inferno*.

Heracles' Marriage to Deianira

Heracles married again, this time to Deianira (DAY-a-ner-a). In order to marry, he wrestled with a river-god who has the head of a bull. To get Deianira back home, he had to cross another river, and this time a Centaur named Nessos tried to rape her. (A Centaur has the body of a horse, but instead of a horse's head, the torso and head and arms of a human man take its place.)

Heracles shot Nessos with one of his arrows that had been dipped in the poisonous blood of the Hydra.

While dying, Nessos told Deianira to save some of his blood. If Heracles ever appeared to fall out of love with her, Nessos said, she could restore his love for her by giving Heracles a robe soaked in Nessos' blood. Later, Heracles did appear to be falling out of love with Deianira, so she gave him a robe soaked with Nessos' blood.

Heracles put on the robe, and the blood of Nessos began to eat away at his flesh, causing him agony. In order to stop the agony, Heracles had a funeral pyre built. He climbed on the funeral pyre and set it on fire. The fire ate away at his mortal part, leaving the part that is immortal. Left behind is the immortal part, which is a god and is on Mount Olympus with the other gods. However, Odysseus sees the mortal part in the Land of the Dead, and it is that part with whom Odysseus speaks:

“And then I noticed mighty Hercules,
or at least his image, for he himself
was with immortal gods, enjoying their feasts.

(Johnston 11.775-777)

On Mount Olympus, Heracles has another wedding — he marries Hebe, the goddess of youth.

• **What effect would Odysseus' greeting by Heracles (Hercules) have on the Phaeacian audience?**

The Phaeacian audience must be impressed by the speech of Odysseus. When a great hero of the past recognizes Odysseus and treats him as almost an equal, then Odysseus must be someone special indeed. Certainly, Odysseus has been interacting with some VIPs: Tiresias, Circe, and now Heracles. Odysseus must be a special man to have these adventures and to know these VIPs.

The effect of Odysseus' greeting by Heracles on the Phaeacian audience must be to make them say, “Wow!”

• **Is Odysseus (a gifted liar) telling the truth?**

We can ask whether Odysseus is telling the truth. We are aware, of course, that Odysseus is telling his own story here. Normally, Homer would be telling the story. Since Homer is an omniscient narrative, he knows everything, including what the gods are doing. The Great Wanderings, however, are told by a first-person narrator: Odysseus.

We know that Odysseus is trying to convince the Phaeacians to give him wonderful guest-gifts by telling them a wonderful story. Could Odysseus be exaggerating here? Could he be lying?

Later in the *Odyssey*, we will find out that Odysseus is a skilled liar. His lying will be justified because it is necessary to save his life. If the suitors knew that the disguised Odysseus was Odysseus, then they would kill him.

Some scholars think that yes, Odysseus is lying here. Of course, we realize that Odysseus is carefully crafting his speech to appeal to and to impress the Phaeacians. By doing so, he can receive wonderful guest-gifts, and he can be sure that the Phaeacians remember his visit and so

perpetuate his *kleos*. I imagine that Demodocus the blind poet is storing his memory with the adventures that Odysseus tells.

However, we do some confirmation of what Odysseus says here:

In Book 1, Zeus and Athena are aware that Poseidon is angry at Odysseus.

In Book 15, Eumaeus confirms what Odysseus learned from his mother in the Land of the Dead — she died of grief for him:

“She died of grief for her boy, her glorious boy,
it wore her down, a wretched way to go.
I pray that no one I love dies such a death,
no island neighbor of mine who treats me kindly!”
(Fagles 15.399-402)

Compare:

“She died a wretched death
grieving for her splendid son. May no man
who lives here as my friend and treats me well
die the way she did!”
(Johnston 15.457-460)

In Book 23, Odysseus tells Penelope what the ghost of Tiresias told him in the Land of the Dead. In addition, Odysseus tells all his adventures, apparently exactly as he told them to the Phaeacians. Chances are, Odysseus would not lie to his own wife. Odysseus would not do what Agamemnon advised him to do:

“That’s why you should never treat them kindly,
not even your own wife. Never tell her
all the things you’ve determined in your mind.
Tell her some, but keep the rest well hidden.”
(Johnston 11.557-560)

• What is the purpose of Odysseus’ speech to the Phaeacians?

Of course, Odysseus is telling his story to the Phaeacians in order to get wonderful guest-gifts. He is very effective at doing that. He still has more adventures to relate, including the adventure of the cattle of the Sun god. After he has finished telling of the Great Wanderings in Books 9-12, we read in Book 13 that the Phaeacians decide to give him even more guest-gifts than they had originally promised him.

Alcinous tells the Phaeacian nobles,

“But come now,
 let’s give him a large tripod and a cauldron,
 each one of us. We can repay ourselves —
 we’ll get the people to provide the cost.
 It’s too expensive for one man to give
 without receiving any money back.”

(Johnston 13.15-20)

It is possible that Odysseus has exaggerated to some extent in order to impress the Phaeacian audience, but some of what he says is apparently true.

Odysseus is acting as a bard here. A bard can choose which stories to tell. A good bard will tell the stories that his audience will be interested in. Because Queen Arete is a powerful woman on the island, Odysseus started by telling about all the famous women he saw after speaking with Tiresias. Then he started telling about the heroes of the Trojan War he saw in the Underworld because he knew that King Alcinous and the male lords would be interested in hearing about them.

• **The *Nekuia* interweaves news for Odysseus with reminders of his past.**

Odysseus learns a lot during his visit to the Underworld:

- He learns news about his mother, father, wife, and son.
- He has heard warnings about what he will face on Ithaca if he returns home late.
- He has learned that he ought to avoid landing on the island where the Sungod keeps his cattle.
- He has seen Agamemnon and learned that wives can be unfaithful and treacherous.
- He has seen Achilles and learned not to overvalue *kleos*.
- He has learned how horrible “life” in the Underworld is.

After going to the Underworld, Odysseus fights for life. Previously, in Book 10, he was so discouraged that he considered committing suicide. At that time, after being blown back to Aeolus’ island after seeing the smoke rising from the fires on Ithaca, he had most of his men and ships, but was still discouraged. In Book 12, after he loses all of his men and ships, he clings to life.

Odyssey, Book 12:

“The Cattle of the Sun”

“The Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, The Cattle of the Sun”

Introduction

Odysseus has been downhearted after the contrary winds blew him from the island of Ithaca back to the island of Aeolus; however, his visit to the Underworld has encouraged him. Odysseus is now active again.

In Book 12, Odysseus finishes his narrative of his Great Wanderings. He has one final ship left at the beginning of Book 12, but in Book 12 he loses that ship and the rest of his crew. Homer tries to show, however, that this is not Odysseus' fault. The men are killed because of their stupidity and disregard of the Sungod. After all of his men are killed, Odysseus washes up on the island of the goddess Calypso, who holds him captive for seven years.

• When Odysseus returns to Circe's island to bury Elpenor, how does Circe greet him and his comrades?

When Odysseus returns to Circe's island, she greets him and his companions as men “doomed to die twice over” (Fagles 12.24). In other words, they have been to the Land of the Dead once, and because they are mortal, they are doomed to return there again — permanently.

Odysseus also keeps his promise and buries the body of his crewman Elpenor.

• Which advice does Circe give Odysseus about the Sirens he will face?

Having a goddess as a friend is very useful. They are knowledgeable, and they can give you good information and good advice.

Odysseus still has a number of adventures ahead of him, as Circe points out. Many dangers lie ahead.

The Sirens are a grave danger to sailors. They have beautiful voices, and they sing to sailors. The sailors, wanting to hear the song of the Sirens, sail too close to the Sirens' beach and shipwreck and die.

Odysseus is going to be able to hear the Sirens' song and live. To do that, he must be tied to the mast so that he can't jump overboard and attempt to swim to the island of the Sirens. His companions' ears will be closed with beeswax so that they can't hear the Sirens' song. Again, Odysseus is trying (and succeeding) to impress the Phaeacians with what an extraordinary man he is. He may be the only man who has heard the song of the Sirens and not died.

• Which advice does Circe give Odysseus about the Clashing Rocks he will face? Are the Clashing Rocks icebergs?

The next adventure in store for Odysseus and his men is dependent upon his choice. He can choose one of two routes. One route is between the Clashing Rocks. The other route is between Scylla and Charybdis.

The Clashing Rocks are huge rocks that clash together and sink any ship that is in between them. If Odysseus chooses to go that route, he will have to time perfectly the passage of his ship between the Clashing Rocks so that it will not sink. Jason and the Argonauts succeeded in sailing between the Clashing Rocks, but they had the help of the goddesses Hera and Athena.

It is possible that the Clashing Rocks may be icebergs. I imagine that some brave sailors sailed out past the Pillars of Hercules and went North. They may have seen icebergs. When they returned to the Mediterranean, they told other people what they had seen. Over time, the icebergs became the Clashing Rocks of mythology.

Odysseus does have a choice to make. He does not have to go between the Clashing Rocks; instead, he can go between Scylla and Charybdis.

• **Can we map Odysseus' journey?**

Occasionally, in books about the *Odyssey* you can see maps of his journey. Scholars attempt to guess where a certain adventure could have taken place. For example, the island of the Cyclopes is often thought to be Sicily.

Actually, we are talking about mythology here, and I don't see much sense in trying to draw a map of Odysseus' journey. It may be fun doing that, so do that if you want to, but mythology is not literally real. Mythological geography is much different from real geography.

• **Which advice does Circe give Odysseus about the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis?**

If Odysseus wishes to avoid the Clashing Rocks, he must choose to sail between Scylla and Charybdis, both of which are dangerous.

Chances are, you have heard about Scylla and Charybdis even if you have not read the *Odyssey* before. A reference to being between Scylla and Charybdis has the same meaning as being between a rock and a hard place.

Scylla is a six-headed monster that feeds on human beings. If Odysseus sails too close to Scylla, he will lose six of his men because each head will seize and eat one of his men.

Charybdis is a Whirlpool. If Odysseus' ship sails into the Whirlpool, it will go down into the sea and be destroyed along with anyone on board.

Circe does give Odysseus advice — to sail closer to Scylla and lose six of his men rather than sail closer to Charybdis and lose all of his men, as well as his own life and his ship.

• **What does Odysseus do when confronted with the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis?**

Odysseus lies to his men. He tells them, "I'll tell you all" (Fagles 12.169), but he doesn't tell him about Scylla. He mentions only Charybdis.

However, Odysseus does well in the encounter with Scylla. Circe has told him that he will lose six of his men no matter what he does, but Odysseus tries to save his men anyway.

Odysseus asks Circe,

“Deadly Charybdis — can’t I possibly cut and run from her
and still fight Scylla off when Scylla strikes my men?”
(Fagles 12.123-124)

Compare:

“Goddess, please tell me this, and speak the truth —
is there some way I can get safely through,
past murderous Charybdis, and protect
me and my crew when Scylla moves to strike.”
(Johnston 12.141-144)

Circe replies to Odysseus,

“You reckless man, you think you’re dealing here
with acts of war or work? Why won’t you yield
to the immortal gods? She’s not human,
but a destroyer who will never die —
fearful, difficult, and fierce — not someone
you can fight. There’s no defense against her.
The bravest thing to do is run away.
If you linger by the cliff to arm yourself,
I fear she’ll jump out once more, attack you
with all her heads and snatch away six men,
just as before. Row on quickly past her,
as hard as you can go. Send out a call
to Crataeis, her mother, who bore her
to menace human beings. She’ll restrain her—
Scylla’s heads won’t lash out at you again.”
(Johnston 12.146-160)

Odysseus puts on his armor and grabs his weapons. He looks out for Scylla, but she gets her six men anyway, grabbing them while everyone is looking at Charybdis. Odysseus says that seeing the men hoisted screaming into the air by Scylla is the sight that “wrenched my heart the most” (Fagles 12.282).

• **Which advice does Circe give Odysseus about the cattle of the Sungod?**

Circe also gives Odysseus a warning not to harm the cattle of the Sungod.

Of course, this is the second time that Odysseus has heard this warning. When he visited the Land of the Dead, Tiresias gave him the same warning.

• **In general, Odysseus follows or tries to follow Circe's advice.**

In general, Odysseus follows or tries to follow Circe's advice. As she told him he could, he does hear the voice of the Sirens.

Odysseus does care for his men. He compares the men taken by Scylla to fish being hooked by a fisherman, then he makes this rare personal aside:

“Of all the pitiful things I’ve had to witness,
suffering, searching out the pathways of the sea,
this wrenched my heart the most.”

(Fagles 12.280-282)

Compare:

“Of all things
my eyes have witnessed in my journeying
on pathways of the sea, the sight of them
was the most piteous I’ve ever seen.”

(Johnston 12.334-337)

• **Why do Odysseus and his men stop at the island of the Sungod Helios? After all, they have been warned not to by Circe and Tiresias.**

With all of the warnings that Odysseus has had from reputable sources — a dead Theban prophet and a live immortal goddess — you wouldn’t think that he would stop at the island where the Sungod has pastured his cattle. However, his men, and especially Eurylochus, persuade him to stop there so that they can cook a meal. Odysseus gives in to his men, but he makes them promise not to harm the cattle of the Sungod.

• **Why don’t Odysseus and his men sail away from the island the next day?**

Odysseus and his men have planned to stop only overnight at the island of the cattle of the Sungod, but the winds blow in the wrong direction for an entire month, and they can’t leave the island. They eat all the food that they have with them, and they are hungry. Eventually, his men are so hungry that they kill and eat the cattle of the Sungod while Odysseus is away.

• **Is Odysseus responsible for what happens to the Sungod’s cattle?**

One problem that Homer is faced with is that his story will have more of an impact if Odysseus returns to Ithaca absolutely alone. That way, he will face a major challenge in ridding his palace

of his suitors. If he lands on Ithaca with all of his ships and his warriors, they can simply march to the palace and drive out the suitors.

However, Odysseus is also the leader of these men, and Homer does not want his audience to think that Odysseus is a terrible leader. After all, wouldn't a good leader be able to get his men back to Ithaca?

Therefore, Odysseus in telling his story to the Phaeacians (and Homer in telling his epic poem to us) takes care to show that Odysseus' men perish because of their own actions — Odysseus is not responsible for what happens to them.

Odysseus is not present when his men sacrifice the cattle of the Sungod and then eat the meat. He had gone off to be alone to pray to the gods, and then he had fallen asleep. The men acted badly when he was asleep and could not stop him.

We notice that this is the second time that Odysseus has been asleep while his men acted badly. The first time was when King Aeolus had given him a gift of the contrary winds trapped in a bag. His men thought that the bag contained treasure, and while Odysseus was asleep, they opened the bag. Instead of returning to Ithaca, having gotten so close that they could see the smoke arising from fires on the island, the men are blown back to the island of King Aeolus.

Now, again, Odysseus is asleep when his men do something stupid and dangerous. While he is asleep, Eurylochus and his other men sacrifice the cattle of the Sungod and roast the meat. Odysseus is horrified when he wakes up and smells the meat being roasted.

• **Odysseus does not eat the meat. What happens to the meat as it is being roasted?**

Odysseus is intelligent. Although he is hungry, he does not eat the meat of the cattle of the Sungod.

Odysseus describes the scene of the immortal cattle being roasted:

“Then I bitterly attacked my crewmen,
each of them in turn, standing by the boat.
But we couldn't find a single remedy —
the cattle were already dead. The gods
immediately sent my men bad omens —
hides crept along the ground, while on the spits
the meat began to bellow, and a sound
like cattle lowing filled the air.”

(Johnston 12.514-521)

Because the cattle are immortal, they cannot be truly killed; therefore, although they have been slaughtered and are being roasted on spits, they keep bellowing.

• **What happens to Odysseus' men after they sail away from the island? How does Odysseus escape death?**

The Sungod, or Helios, is angry because Odysseus' men have slaughtered his cattle, and he wants vengeance. Zeus obliges by wrecking the ship with lightning and a storm. Once again, Odysseus is blameless. He was not a poor pilot/captain who got all of his men killed; instead, Zeus himself wrecked his ship.

• **How in control is Homer of his narrative? (How does Odysseus know what Zeus said to Helios the Sungod?)**

Homer knows what he is doing. He is able to keep track of his characters and what they know and don't know. Right now, Odysseus is telling his own story in his own words, and Odysseus can report only what he knows. He is not an omniscient narrator like Homer is, and therefore Odysseus can't know what the gods are doing unless he happens to be present or is told what they are doing.

However, here Odysseus is reporting on a conversation between the Sungod and Zeus. I doubt that most of Homer's audience is going to ask, "Uh, how does he know that?" Nevertheless, Homer lets us know how Odysseus knew that.

Odysseus tells his Phaeacian audience (and us) how he knows what Helios said to Zeus:

“ — Or so I heard from the lovely nymph Calypso,
who heard it herself, she said, from Hermes, god of guides.”
(Fagles 12.419-420)

Compare:

“I learned of this
from fair Calypso, who said she herself
had heard it from Hermes the Messenger.”
(Johnston 12.510-512)

Homer keeps track of even the smallest details.

• **Explain the meaning of the simile at Fagles 12.471-477 / Johnston 12.571-579: the judge goes home at the end of the day.**

Odysseus' last ship is wrecked by the thunderbolt and the storm of Zeus. Odysseus manages to cling to some of the wreckage and stay afloat. The wreckage floats back to the whirlpool known as Charybdis and is sucked down into the sea. Odysseus clings to a fig tree until the whirlpool vomits up the wreckage again. He then clings to the wreckage and floats to the island of Calypso.

As Odysseus clings to the fig tree, waiting for timbers from his ship to be vomited from Charybdis, he says,

“But I held on, dead set ... waiting for her

to vomit my mast and keel back up again —
 late but at last, at just the hour a judge at court,
 who's settled the countless suits of brash young claimants,
 rises, the day's work done, and turns home for supper —
 that's when the timbers reared back up from Charybdis.”
 (Fagles 12.471-477)

Compare:

“I hung there,
 staunch in my hope that when she spewed again,
 she'd throw up keel and mast. And to my joy
 they finally appeared. Just at the hour
 a man gets up for dinner from assembly,
 one who adjudicates the many quarrels
 young men have, who then seek judgment,
 that's when those timbers first came into view
 out from Charybdis.”

(Johnston 12.571-579)

In the simile, the judge is going home. Now that Odysseus' story is finished, he is ready to be taken home by the Phaeacians. Part of a king's duty is to judge disputes. Odysseus will bring justice to the suitors, and then he will take over his duties as king.

• What has been the main purpose of Book 12?

The main purpose of Book 12 is to kill off Odysseus' remaining comrades — but without making Odysseus appear to be a poor leader who got his men killed. Homer and Odysseus make it clear that the men are responsible for their deaths. They sacrificed the cattle of the Sun god and ate the meat; Odysseus did not.

To repeat, we can't have Odysseus be a bad leader. His comrades die because of their own actions. They killed and ate the cattle of the Sun god, and therefore they die. Odysseus had nothing to do with the killing of the cattle of the Sun god. Therefore, Odysseus' comrades die, and Odysseus lives. Homeric epic stresses personal responsibility.

Odysseus barely escapes with his life. He clings to some of the wreckage of the ship and washes ashore on Calypso's island, where Calypso rescues him and then keeps him a prisoner for seven years.

However, we know that Odysseus will be returning to Ithaca very quickly. He has been telling his story to the Phaeacians, who will very soon take him to Ithaca. The second half of the *Odyssey* will be about Odysseus' return to Ithaca and what happens there.

• **As Odysseus' story ends, we are back to where we were at the beginning of the *Odyssey*: Odysseus is trapped on the island of Calypso.**

We are now halfway through the *Odyssey*, and we have circled back to its beginning. The *Odyssey* started with Odysseus being held captive on Calypso's island, and Odysseus ends the story he tells the Phaeacians with him washing up on the shore of Calypso's island.

We now have all the information we need to understand why Odysseus ends up on Ithaca alone, with no ships and no men. In Book 13, the Phaeacians give Odysseus a journey home to Ithaca.

Odyssey, Book 13:

“Ithaca at Last”

“Odysseus Leaves Phaeacia and Reaches Ithaca”

Important Terms

Polutropos

Proem

Metis (Pronounced May-Tis): wisdom, skill, cleverness, craft, and plan

Introduction

The first 12 books of the *Odyssey* are over. Odysseus has completed telling to the Phaeacian audience the story of his Great Wanderings. Now he is ready to return to Ithaca. His Phaeacian hosts will sail him home at the beginning of this book.

Of course, when he returns to Ithaca, he is alone. The Phaeacians will unload him and his guest-gifts, and he — with the help of Athena — will have to find a way to rid his palace of the suitors and to become the King of Ithaca again. When Odysseus told the story of his Great Wanderings, he explained how he lost his men and his ships. His men behaved foolishly, and they died because of their own foolishness.

• Important events and themes in Book 13:

- 1) Odysseus’ arrival on Ithaca.
- 2) The significance for the concept of *xenia* of the formulaic lines he speaks here for the third time in the *Odyssey*.
- 3) His encounter with the disguised Athena and how they plot together the way in which he can take vengeance on the suitors.

• Is Odysseus’ story-telling successful? (Do the Phaeacians give him more guest-gifts?)

We find out that Odysseus’ storytelling is successful. The Phaeacians are impressed by his story, and they give him more guest-gifts. Alcinous tells the Phaeacian nobles that each of them — and himself — should give Odysseus a tripod and a cauldron in addition to the gifts that they have already given him.

I find it interesting that guest-gifts will be paid with taxes on the people. Alcinous says,

“Then recover our costs with levies on the people:

it’s hard to afford such bounty man by man.”

(Fagles 13.15-16)

Compare:

“We can repay ourselves —

we’ll get the people to provide the cost.

It's too expensive for one man to give
without receiving any money back."

(Johnston 13.17-20)

• **How does Odysseus get home to Ithaca?**

Odysseus, of course, is eager to return to Ithaca. He is like a farmer who has been working all day plowing the fields and who is now eager to go home at the end of a long, hard day. As soon as the sun sets, he asks to be sent on his journey home and he gives good wishes to King Alcinous and the Phaeacians.

The Phaeacians sail Odysseus home, and they carefully drop him off on Ithaca while he is still asleep. The Phaeacian sailors are honest. They carefully unload all of Odysseus' guest-gifts; nothing is missing, as Odysseus discovers when he wakes up.

It's interesting that the Phaeacians take care that Odysseus will be not robbed while he is asleep:

They put these gifts
against the trunk of the olive tree, in a pile,
some distance from the path, in case someone came by,
before Odysseus could wake up, stumbled on them,
and robbed him. Then they set off, back to Phaeacia.

(Johnston 13.143-147)

• **How are the Phaeacians punished by Poseidon for helping Odysseus?**

Poseidon punishes the Phaeacians for their encounter with Odysseus. Here we see the *menis* (anger) of the gods, which can frequently be excessively strong and get innocent people hurt.

Because Poseidon is angry at Odysseus for blinding his son the Cyclops Polyphemus, he harms the Phaeacians.

In this case, the extant manuscripts of the *Odyssey* have different lines, which result in two different interpretations. The line with the variant readings occurs in Zeus' reply to Poseidon.

Poseidon asks Zeus for permission to do two things to the Phaeacians.

- 1) Poseidon wants to crush the Phaeacian ship that brought Odysseus home to Ithaca.
- 2) Poseidon wants to "pile a huge mountain round about their port" (Fagles 13.173). This may mean that he wants to place a huge mountain on top of the Phaeacian city, killing all the Phaeacians who live there. Another way to interpret the line is to say that a mountain will cut off their city from the sea. The mountain may not be on top of the city. This is the way that Robert Fagles interprets the line.

Here are some definitions of "port":

"A place on a waterway with facilities for loading and unloading ships."

“A city or town on a waterway with such facilities.”

“The waterfront district of a city.”

“A place along a coast that gives ships and boats protection from storms and rough water;
a harbor.”

Source: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/port>

Zeus’ response is the line that reads two different ways in different manuscripts of the *Odyssey*. Either Zeus says, Turn the ship to stone in the harbor of the Phaeacians and do pile a huge mountain round about their port, or he says, Turn the ship to stone and do not pile a huge mountain round about their port (Vandiver, *The Odyssey of Homer* 135-136).

Most editors don’t have Poseidon pile the mountain on top of the city. Nausicaa is a very charming character, and editors don’t want her to die simply because her parents helped Odysseus.

In addition, because Poseidon is angry at the Phaeacians for using his waters to help people, he may simply want to destroy their port and so the mountain is placed in such a way that it destroys the port only and not the Phaeacian city and its citizens. By this, I mean that the mountain is placed in the water of the harbor.

In Robert Fagles’ and Ian Johnston’s translations, the ship is turned into a rock, and Poseidon plans to place a huge mountain round about their port or town. This is Zeus’ advice to Poseidon:

Cloud-gatherer Zeus

then answered him and said:

“Brother, listen now
to what my heart thinks best — when all of them
are in the city looking out, as that boat
speeds on her way, then turn her into stone
close to the shore, a rock that looks just like
some fast ship, so all men will be amazed.

Then raise a massive mountain round their town.”

(Johnston 13.184-192)

At the very least the ship is turned to stone. Perhaps the sailors who helped Odysseus return to Ithaca have not been turned to stone. Perhaps when their ship was turned to stone, they were able to swim to the city (before the mountain was placed in the port). However, the Phaeacians’ port has perhaps only been blocked and not the city crushed. Actually, we aren’t sure about the mountain. King Antinous prays to Poseidon and offers sacrifices to him, so perhaps Poseidon does nothing with the mountain and is satisfied with turning the Phaeacian ship to stone.

Bernard Knox, the great scholar who wrote the Introduction to Robert Fagles’ translation of the *Odyssey*, makes a few important points:

1) Bernard Knox is convinced that Zeus does want Poseidon to pile a huge mountain round about their port, which he interprets as cutting off the Phaeacian city from the sea, thus not killing Nausicaa.

2) Zeus is the god of *xenia*, and yet he wants Poseidon to punish the Phaeacians, who are renowned for their *xenia*. Salving the wounded pride of a god is more important than not harming human beings who are renowned for their *xenia*. Homer may be an anti-religion poet. He may have realized or believed that the gods of the ancient Greeks are not worthy of being worshipped. (To me, the only god or God worth worshipping is an omnibenevolent one.)

3) Like classics scholar Elizabeth Vandiver (*The Odyssey of Homer* 136), Mr. Knox believes that all the Phaeacian sailors on the ship that Poseidon turns to stone are dead. I prefer to believe that the sailors were able to swim to shore after Poseidon turned their ship to stone.

Note: Mr. Knox discusses this part of the *Odyssey* in his Introduction to Robert Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey* on pp. 43-47.

• **Odysseus did not mean to harm the Phaeacians, but he caused them great harm.**

We should bear in mind that although the ship is turned to stone, Poseidon may change his mind about his plan to “pile a huge mountain round about their port” (13.173). After the ship is turned to stone, King Alcinous prays to Poseidon not to “pile a huge mountain round about their port” (13.173). He prays,

“Hurry, friends, do as I say, let us all comply:
stop our convoys home for every castaway
chancing on our city! As for Poseidon,
sacrifice twelve bulls to the god at once —
the pick of the herds. Perhaps he'll pity us,
pile no looming mountain ridge around our port!”
(Fagles 13.203-208)

Compare:

“But come, let all of you
attend to what I say. You must now stop
escorting mortal men when any man
comes to our city. And let's sacrifice
twelve choice bulls as offerings to Poseidon,
so he'll take pity and not ring our city
with a lofty mountain range.”

(Johnston 13.217-223)

With luck, Poseidon will be happy with the sacrifice and will not hurt the Phaeacians any more.

However, we should note that although Odysseus has meant the Phaeacians no harm, his visit to their city has changed their society. The Phaeacians were renowned for hospitality to strangers. Any strangers who needed a passage home could count on the Phaeacians for aid. Now, however, to save their port, King Alcinous says that the Phaeacians will no longer offer such wonderful hospitality to strangers.

In the *Odyssey*, we will see Odysseus often causing people pain, including even when he doesn't want them to.

• **Is Homer against the religion of his time?**

Homer does seem critical of the ancient Greek gods. In the *Iliad*, they are used for comic relief, as when Hera seduces Zeus so that he will go to sleep and then the Achaeans can rally strongly. Here, Zeus may be the god of *xenia*, but he does not want Poseidon's pride hurt. Because Poseidon is upset about the Phaeacians showing wonderful *xenia* to Odysseus by taking him home in a ship, he wants to sink their ship and ruin their harbor.

Bernard Knox points out the irony of Odysseus' complaint against the Phaeacians in Book 13 when he awakes on Ithaca but does not know where he is:

“Alas! All those Phaeacians,
those counselors and leaders, weren't so wise
or just — they led me to a foreign land.
They said they'd bring me to bright Ithaca,
but that's not what they've done. I pray that Zeus,
god of suppliants, who watches everyone
and punishes the man who goes astray,
will pay them back.”

(Johnston 13.252-259)

Of course, the Phaeacians were entirely honest and upright. They did exactly what they said they would do, and they are punished by Zeus and Poseidon because they were entirely honest and upright.

Today, if we believe in God, we almost certainly believe in an omnibenevolent God. We think that only an all-good God is worth worshipping. (To worship means to adore.)

• **How does the second half of the *Odyssey* differ from the first half? (Pace of the narrative.)**

The second half of the *Odyssey* differs from the first half in many ways. For example, the pace of the second half is much slower than the pace of the first half. In the Great Wanderings, Odysseus has a number of adventures that are very quickly told. If Homer had wanted to, he could have

taken one book to tell the story of Odysseus' adventure on Ithaca instead of the 12 books that he takes to tell it. Similarly, if Homer had wanted to, he could have taken several books to tell about the adventure with the Lotus-eaters instead of the small section of one book that he actually took to tell the story. Note: See Elizabeth Vandiver, *The Odyssey of Homer*, p. 99, for more information.

• **How does the second half of the *Odyssey* differ from the first half? (Chronology of the narrative, and location.)**

The story of the second half of the *Odyssey* is told in chronological order. We don't have flashbacks the way we had in the first half of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus tells the four books of the Great Wanderings in flashback form. In addition, these books are set on Ithaca, with the exception of Athena going to Sparta to tell Telemachus that it is time to return home. The only other change of location is that news of the suitors' death spreads to their families, some of whom live on other islands. Previously, of course, Odysseus wandered around the Mediterranean. Note: See Elizabeth Vandiver, *The Odyssey of Homer*, pp. 99-100, for more information.

• **How does the second half of the *Odyssey* differ from the first half? (New challenges and dangers.)**

In the first half of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus faced odd challenges and had odd adventures. In the Great Wanderings, he faced danger from mythological creatures such as the Cyclopes, the Sirens, the Lotus-Eaters, Scylla and Charybdis, and so on. Now, he is on his home island, but he still faces challenges and dangers. However, the dangers he faces now are realistic. Odysseus doesn't have to worry about a Cyclops eating him, but he does have to worry about the suitors murdering him.

The suitors will murder Odysseus if they get a chance. His only hope is to not reveal who he is until he is ready to fight the suitors.

We remember what the suitors were doing at the end of Book 4. They were plotting to kill Telemachus. In fact, some of the suitors are in a boat right now waiting for Telemachus to return home so they can murder him before he reaches the palace.

The suitors are very willing to murder Telemachus, and they are very willing to murder Odysseus.

Odysseus will have help on Ithaca. He will receive the help of his patron goddess, Athena. However, although he will talk to Athena, he will not face any mythological creatures on Ithaca.

Note: See Elizabeth Vandiver, *The Odyssey of Homer*, p. 100, for more information.

• **How are the first half and the second half of the *Odyssey* similar? (Odysseus must still be the man of twists and turns.)**

Even on Ithaca, Odysseus must be *polutropos* — the man of twists and turns. He is one man against over 100 suitors. If he is going to succeed in driving the suitors out of his palace, he must use his wits — if he were to go to the suitors immediately and fight them, he would lose. When it's one man against over 100 other men, the one man had better find ways to increase his

chances of succeeding, whether by convincing other men to fight for him or by some other means.

Odysseus' intelligence, as well as his courage, will help a great deal on Ithaca.

Note: See Elizabeth Vandiver, *The Odyssey of Homer*, p. 100 for more information.

• **How does the second half of the *Odyssey* differ from the first half? (Focus on Odysseus' emotions.)**

One very important change is that in the books set on Ithaca, Homer focuses on Odysseus' feelings.

Once back on Ithaca, Odysseus has a number of emotional trials. Of course, the first thing he would like to do is to run to the palace and shout, "I'm back!" However, if he does that, the suitors will kill him. Instead, he does something different. He accepts hospitality from a swineherd, a slave, who works for Odysseus but who of course does not recognize his master, whom Athena has disguised as an old beggar. There he meets his son, Telemachus, who of course cannot recognize that this old beggar is his father. Odysseus would love to run up to his son, hug him, and say, "I'm your father!" But he can't do that because the swineherd is present and Odysseus is not ready to reveal his identity yet. Similarly, when Odysseus sees Penelope, he can't reveal his identity to her because servants, some of whom are loyal to the suitors rather than to Penelope, are present and would run to the suitors, announce his presence, and get him killed.

All of Odysseus' emotional challenges take a toll on him. He is in a very dangerous place although he ought to be safe in his own island kingdom.

Odysseus' cautiousness will help him a great deal on Ithaca.

Note: See Elizabeth Vandiver, *The Odyssey of Homer*, pp. 100-101, for more information.

• **Book 13 signals a new beginning.**

If you like, you can regard Book 13 as being a new beginning for Odysseus and for the bard. We will be reading about a new kind of adventure, one much more realistic than the adventures in which he fought mythological creatures.

Homer even gives us what amounts to a second *proem* or introduction, telling us about Odysseus' hardships, the way he did in Book 1.

Near the beginning of Book 13, as the Phaeacians carry the sleeping Odysseus to Ithaca, Homer sings,

Just as four stallions yoked together charge ahead
across the plain, all running underneath the lash,
and jump high as they gallop quickly on their way,
that's how the stern of that ship leapt up on high,
while in her wake the dark waves of the roaring sea

were churned to a great foam, as she sped on her path,
 safe and secure. Not even a wheeling hawk,
 the swiftest of all flying things, could match her speed,
 as she raced ahead, slicing through the ocean waves,
 carrying a man whose mind was like a god's.
 His heart in earlier days had endured much pain,
 as he moved through men's wars and suffered on the waves.
 Now he slept in peace, forgetting all his troubles.
 (Johnston 13.98-110)

• **Does Odysseus SEE his day of homecoming?**

We notice that Odysseus is asleep when he returns to Ithaca. The Phaeacians lift him and carry him off the ship to the shore. There they lay him and all his guest-gifts on the ground, being careful to hide his guest-gifts so that he is not robbed while he is asleep. Odysseus has lost everything he took to Troy and won at Troy, but he does have the treasure that the Phaeacians gave him as their guest-gifts to him.

One thing that we heard in Book 1 is that Odysseus longed to see his homecoming. Athena said to Zeus that Odysseus is “straining for no more than a glimpse / of hearth-smoke drifting up from his own land” (Fagles 1.69-70). However, Odysseus never does *see* his day of homecoming. He sleeps through it. He misses out on the excitement of seeing the smoke rising from the cooking fires, of seeing Ithaca come into view, of recognizing the landmarks of Ithaca, of finally being able to disembark from the ship and set foot on solid Ithacan ground.

All of that Odysseus misses because he sleeps through it. In fact, when he wakes up he does not even recognize Ithaca because Athena has made it foggy until she can disguise Odysseus so he is not recognized by other people.

Of course, Odysseus has missed out on a lot by going to the Trojan War. He has missed seeing his son, Telemachus, grow up. He and Penelope have only one child. If Odysseus had stayed at home instead of going to Troy to fight, he and Penelope could have had more children.

In the second half of the *Odyssey*, we often have a tone of sadness, a recognition of everything that Odysseus has missed out on by going to the Trojan War. We get that tone of sadness right at the beginning, when Odysseus asks where he is and whether the people who live here are civilized or savage. Odysseus has missed seeing the day of his homecoming, and he ought not to have to ask whether the people on his home island are civilized or savage. Of course, they ought to be civilized, but the suitors turn out to be uncivilized and savage.

• **Why does Athena cover Ithaca in mist (fog)? Are her reasons good?**

Athena does have a good reason for covering the island with mist, or actually a few good reasons. Number one, she wants to tell Odysseus about the situation in the palace and the

dangerous suitors. Number two, she wants to disguise him so that no one knows that this stranger is Odysseus, the rightful King of Ithaca. In addition, she wants to make a plan with Odysseus.

So yes, Athena does have a good reason for covering Ithaca with mist (fog), but doing so helps Odysseus to miss *seeing* his day of homecoming.

• **Odysseus again repeats his formulaic lines about *xenia*. Why is it ironic that he says them on this island?**

Odysseus again repeats his formulaic lines about *xenia*. These are the same words that he spoke when he landed on the island of the Cyclopes (but when he landed on the island of the Cyclopes, he did not say the word “here,” perhaps an oversight by the translator, Robert Fagles), and when he landed on the island of the Phaeacians. On one island, he received very bad *xenia*, and on the other island he received very good *xenia*. Here are the lines he says when he wakes up on Ithaca and does not know where he is:

“Man of misery, whose land have I lit on now?
What *are* they here — violent, savage, lawless?
or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?”
(Fagles 13.227-229)

Compare:

“Where am I now?
Whose country have I come to this time?
Are they violent, unjust, and cruel,
or do they welcome strangers? Do their minds
respect the gods?”
(Johnston 13.240-244)

These lines are repeated three times in the *Odyssey*, and Homer picks those three places very carefully. Homer is exploring the theme of *xenia*, and each of the three places where Odysseus speaks these lines tells us something about *xenia*:

1) When Odysseus Arrives on Scheria (the Island of the Phaeacians)

The Phaeacians give Odysseus excellent *xenia*: food, drink, clothing, entertainment, guest-gifts, and passage back to Ithaca.

2) When Odysseus Arrives on the Island of the Cyclopes

The Cyclops Polyphemus gives Odysseus and his men terrible *xenia*. He eats many of Odysseus’ men, and his guest-guest to Odysseus is that he will eat him last. Fortunately, Odysseus is able to escape before Polyphemus gives him his guest-gift.

3) When Odysseus Arrives Back on Ithaca

When Odysseus arrives back on Ithaca, he says these lines again, but now these lines are ironic. Odysseus is on his home island, where he is the king. He ought to be able to return to his own palace and get whatever he needs. Instead, he is forced to beg for food like the beggar he is disguised to be. Odysseus should not be forced to rely on the *xenia* of others while he is on Ithaca. Unfortunately, the society on Ithaca is in disarray. The suitors are running wild. They are uncivilized, as shown by their abuse of *xenia*.

• Why does Homer have Odysseus repeat those formulaic lines at these particular three places?

Homer has shown his audience the way that *xenia*, good and bad, functions. We have seen good *xenia* from the Phaeacians and bad *xenia* from Polyphemus. Now we will see how the suitors treat the old beggar who suddenly appears at the palace of Odysseus one day.

To me, it is clear that Homer very carefully chose where to put these lines in his epic poem. Homer wanted his audience to think about these lines and about why they appear in these particular places in the epic poem. Homer, in my opinion, was hoping that his audience would pick up on the irony of Odysseus saying these lines when he was on Ithaca.

• How does Odysseus react when Athena tells him that he is on Ithaca? (This is his first emotional trial.)

When Athena appears in disguise as a young male shepherd and tells him that he is on Ithaca, Odysseus displays his caution. His heart is joyful, but he does not show that joy. Instead, he restrains his emotions. He also doesn't give this shepherd boy his real name, but instead he tells a lie. In his lie, he is a stranger to Ithaca. He has killed a man, a son of Idomeneus, King of Crete, and has fled. This lie pleases Athena, who reveals herself to Odysseus and says that she has been his protector. (By the way, in ancient times, the Cretans were known for being liars.)

When Odysseus restrains his emotions, he is showing his usual caution. He does not know the situation on Ithaca, although he has heard prophecies that if he returns late to Ithaca, he will face trouble. Certainly, we and he would say that returning to Ithaca after 20 years is indeed coming home late. Odysseus is protecting his life here by not showing how happy he is to be on Ithaca.

We also note that Odysseus is a wonderful liar. In the second half of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus must lie many times. If Odysseus were to reveal who he is to the suitors or to someone who would tell the suitors who he is, the suitors would kill him.

• When happened in ancient Greece when a man killed another man? Why does Homer have Odysseus say that he is a fugitive who has killed another man?

Interestingly, all of Odysseus' lies on Ithaca involve his saying that he came from Crete. Here, he has killed a man on Crete and has fled.

In the ancient world, when a man killed — or murdered — another man, two main things could happen:

- 1) The killer would pay a fine to the family of the dead man.
- 2) The family of the dead man would try to kill the killer.

Often, the killer would not or could not pay the fine, so he would flee for his life, becoming a fugitive. This is what Odysseus says he has done.

What will happen after Odysseus kills the suitors? One possibility is that Odysseus will have to flee for his life. Once the suitors are dead, Odysseus may face additional troubles. The relatives of the suitors may try to kill Odysseus.

Two stories are very important as comparandums in the *Odyssey*. For the first half of the *Odyssey*, we hear over and over again the story of Agamemnon and his murder by Clytemnestra when he returned home from Troy. The audience — and Odysseus — wonders if Penelope will be another Clytemnestra.

The second story is that a man — actually, several men, since we hear this story over and over — has killed another man and is forced to flee for his life. The audience, of course, wonders if Odysseus will be forced to flee for his life after killing the suitors.

The ancient world did not have our laws and law courts and especially our police. These days, if we had Odysseus' troubles, we could call the police and rid our home of suitors. In Odysseus' day, the only law and justice is what the king enforces. Odysseus has to be his own police force here. He will be judge and jury, too.

This is actually an important theme in the *Odyssey*. When someone kills a man, that man's family feels bound to get revenge for that death. One way to get justice is to kill the murderer. Odysseus will kill all of the suitors. When that happens, what will the adult male relatives of the suitors do? They will want revenge and come after Odysseus.

• **We will see Odysseus tell many, many lies in the second half of the *Odyssey*. What was Odysseus' reputation in later antiquity?**

In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a hero we are supposed to admire. In later antiquity, he is thought to be devious. In Athens in the 5th B.C.E., playwrights wrote great tragedies, and in them, Odysseus is often an unsympathetic character, a deceiver. After all, he came up with the idea for the Trojan Horse, and he lies a great deal in the *Odyssey*. The Romans also regarded him as being evil; of course, for the Romans the Achaeans are the bad guys. Aeneas, one of the defenders of Troy, led the Trojan survivors to Italy, where they became important ancestors of the Roman people. The Romans would be on the side of the Trojans when they read the *Iliad*. For them and for the Trojans, the Fall of Troy was evil. And even later, when the Italian Dante writes his *Inferno* about a journey through Hell, Odysseus and Diomedes end up in Hell together.

Of course, in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a hero, and he must lie to save his life. Homer wanted his audience to approve of Odysseus and to approve of his use of lies.

• **Why does Athena care so much for Odysseus? (What is *metis*?)**

Athena likes Odysseus in part because of his *metis* (pronounced may-tis) — which means wisdom, skill, cleverness, and craft. It can also mean a plan. Athena also likes the lie that Odysseus tells to her. Athena is the goddess of wisdom, and she likes Odysseus because of his intelligence. Athena is known for her divine *metis*, just as Odysseus is known for his human *metis*. Athena apparently does not tolerate fools gladly.

Athena tells Odysseus,

“[...] We’re both old hands
 at the arts of intrigue. Here among mortal men
 you’re far the best at tactics, spinning yarns,
 and I am famous among the gods for wisdom,
 cunning wiles, too. [...]”
 (Fagles 13.335-339)

Compare:

“Of all men you’re the best in making plans
 and giving speeches, and among all gods
 I’m well known for subtlety and wisdom.”
 (Johnston 13.360-362)

• **When Athena says that she has been looking out for Odysseus, how does he respond?**

Athena also says that she is the goddess who “always / stands beside you, shields you in every exploit” (Fagles 13.341-342). This is interesting because Odysseus could have used divine help after the Fall of Troy. He has lost all his ships and men. Why didn’t Athena warn him of the dangers of such cannibalistic monsters as the Laestrygonians? Also, Odysseus got into trouble on the island of the Cyclopes. Why didn’t Athena tell him not to land on that island so he could avoid blinding Polyphemus and making Poseidon angry? And what about all those years he was held captive by Calypso on her island? Where was Athena then?

Obviously, Athena has not always been helping Odysseus, although yes, she did help him when he was at Troy, and she did help him after he spent seven years on Calypso’s island.

Odysseus criticizes Athena a little, here. He points out the truth to her. He is able to criticize her a little without making her angry at him. (Helen reproaches Aphrodite in the *Iliad* in Book 3 when Aphrodite makes her go to Paris’ bed, but by so doing she makes Aphrodite angry at her.)

Odysseus says,

“But I know well
 that in years past you’ve been kind to me,
 when we sons of Achaea fought in Troy.
 But when we’d ransacked Priam’s lofty city
 and sailed off in our ships and then some god
 scattered the Achaeans, I never saw you,
 daughter of Zeus. I didn’t notice you
 coming aboard our ship to keep me safe

from danger. So I kept on wandering,
 my heart always divided in my chest,
 until the gods delivered me from trouble.”

(Johnston 13.382-392)

Odysseus is pointing out that Athena has been absent from his life for quite a while — ever since the Fall of Troy — even though he could have used her help. If she had been helping him, he could have returned to Ithaca much sooner. As it happens, he could have returned to Ithaca before the suitors moved into his palace and started to try to force Penelope to marry one of them.

• **Why didn't Athena help Odysseus before he blinded the Cyclops?**

Athena says a couple of things in her defense. One thing she says is that Poseidon is angry at him and she did not want to go against the desires of Poseidon. If she had helped Odysseus, Poseidon would have been angry at her.

Fine, but why is Poseidon angry at Odysseus? He is angry because Odysseus blinded Polyphemus, his son. So why didn't Athena look out for Odysseus before he landed on the island of the Cyclopes? Why didn't she warn Odysseus and tell him not to land on that particular island?

A knowledge of the Fall of Troy will tell us the answer to that question. We remember that the Achaeans committed atrocities during the Fall of Troy. Among them was the rape of the virgin Cassandra in the temple of Athena, a place of sanctuary. When Cassandra sought refuge in the temple of Athena, she was under the protection of Athena. Little Ajax disrespected Athena by raping Cassandra in the temple. True, Little Ajax drowned on his way back home to Achaea, but Athena was angry at all the Achaeans, apparently including Odysseus. That is why she has not been helping him for the past ten years.

• **In what different ways do mortals and immortals regard time and fate?**

Athena says one more thing in her defense:

“I never had doubts myself, no, I knew down deep
 that you would return at last, with all your shipmates lost.”

(Fagles 13.386-387).

Athena knew that Odysseus would return to Ithaca eventually, but what about Odysseus? He doesn't have a god's-eye view of things. He had no way of ever knowing that he would eventually make it back home to Ithaca.

Of course, gods and human regard time and fate differently.

The gods know the fates of human beings. Athena knows when Odysseus is fated to die, but Odysseus does not know that. When Zeus throws a thunderbolt at Odysseus' ship because Odysseus' men sacrificed the cattle of the Sungod, Odysseus thinks that he has a real chance of drowning, but Athena knows that he will survive and eventually make it to Ithaca.

In addition, the gods regard time differently from the way that human beings regard time. We humans know that life is not long, and that we ought to use time wisely. If we are going to accomplish something, we have something like 70 years to do it in, although some of us die later and some of us die much earlier than that.

The gods can waste 1,000 or 2,000 years watching TV (assuming TV lasts that long), and still have eternity left.

For Athena, whether Odysseus makes it home three years after the Trojan War or 10 years after the Trojan War is not important. For Odysseus, it is very important. If he had returned home seven years earlier, he would have been able to watch and help Telemachus grow up to become a young man. If he had returned home seven years earlier, he and Penelope would perhaps have had more children. If he had returned home seven years earlier, he would have been able to take care of his father, who would not now be living like a poor farmer in the country. If he had returned home seven years earlier, the suitors would not now be living in his palace.

Odysseus doesn't respond to Athena. He is intelligent enough not to make a goddess angry at him. He is also intelligent enough to know that he must deal with reality, not with wishful thinking.

The gods in the *Odyssey* have faults, but they are more worthy of respect than the gods in the *Iliad*. Certainly Athena regards time differently from the way that Odysseus does. For her, 20 years is not a big amount of time. For Odysseus, it is a big amount of time, because an absence of 20 years is enough time that he can entirely miss watching his infant son grow up. When Odysseus leaves for Troy, his son is an infant. When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, his son is on the verge of being an adult. In addition, 20 years was enough for Odysseus and Penelope to have had many more children.

Nevertheless, Homer portrays the gods more sympathetically than he portrays them in the *Iliad*. In the *Iliad*, the gods often provide comic relief and act in undignified ways. For example, in Book 14 of the *Iliad*, Hera seduces Zeus so that he will go to sleep. This allows the Achaeans to rally even more than they have been rallying.

• Which information does Athena give Odysseus?

One of the good things that Athena does is to give Odysseus information, some of it good. The bad news, of course, is that suitors are besieging his palace and his wife. However, Athena does have good news about Penelope and Telemachus.

Athena lets Odysseus know that although suitors are besieging Penelope, she has remained faithful to him. Athena says,

“Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, old campaigner,
think how to lay your hands on all those brazen suitors,
lording it over your house now, three whole years,
courting your noble wife, offering gifts to win her.

But she, forever broken-hearted for your return, builds up each man's hopes —

dangling promises, dropping hints to each —
 but all the while with something else in mind.”
 (Fagles 13.429-436)

Compare:

“Resourceful Odysseus, Laertes’ son
 and child of Zeus, think how your hands may catch
 these shameless suitors, who for three years now
 have been lording it inside your palace,
 wooing your godlike wife and offering her
 their marriage gifts. She longs for your return.
 Although her heart is sad, she feeds their hopes,
 by giving each man words of reassurance.
 But her mind is full of other things.”
 (Johnston 13.460-468)

Now that Odysseus knows that Penelope is faithful to him, we will not hear the story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra over and over again. Instead, we will hear stories of men who are fugitives because they have killed other men.

Of course, Odysseus is worried about Telemachus, but Athena explains that she has helped him to win *kleos* by going to Sparta to seek news of his father.

• **Which plan of action do Athena and Odysseus formulate?**

Together, Athena and Odysseus plot under an olive tree how he will regain his kingdom. The olive tree is significant because it is a tree that is sacred to Athena.

They don’t plan every detail; they just plot what Odysseus and Athena will do next. This is what they decide:

- 1) Athena will disguise Odysseus as an old beggar. That way, no one on Ithaca will recognize him — if he is recognized, he will be killed.
- 2) Odysseus will go to the swineherd Eumaeus, with whom he will stay for a while.
- 3) Athena will go to Telemachus and bring him back to Ithaca. Of course, by doing that, Athena will make it possible for Odysseus and Telemachus to meet. In fact, the two will meet in the hut of the swineherd. Athena will make sure that the suitors do not kill Telemachus when he returns home.

• **Why is Athena's disguising Odysseus as an old beggar such a good idea?**

Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus will be able to move around Ithaca freely. No one is expecting Odysseus to return home looking like and dressed as a beggar. They are expecting him to look like a king, with men and ships and treasure.

Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus can enter the palace. This is something that a beggar can do. A beggar might ask for *xenia* from a slave — the swineherd will show the disguised Odysseus excellent *xenia*. However, poor people and slaves are unlikely to have much food to spare, unless like the swineherd they herd animals for a living. That is why beggars would show up at a palace to ask for *xenia*. Kings and rich people can offer hospitality to beggars because kings and rich people have enough food to share.

As I understand it, many people do not look closely at beggars when they live in a city that is full of beggars. Many people will give spare change to beggars without actually looking at the beggars. Homeric society would have had many beggars, I think. No one would look closely at Odysseus when he is disguised as a beggar.

Athena uses her supernatural powers to help disguise Odysseus as a beggar:

She wrinkled the fair skin on his supple limbs
and took the dark hair from his head. His arms and legs
she covered with an old man's ancient flesh and dimmed
his eyes, which had been so beautiful before.
She dressed him in different clothes — a ragged cloak,
a dirty tunic, ripped and disheveled, stained
with stinking smoke. Then she threw around him
a large hairless hide from a swift deer and gave him
a staff and a tattered leather pouch, full of holes
and with a twisted strap.

(Johnston 13.531-540)

Conclusion

In Book 14, Odysseus visits the loyal swineherd, Eumaeus, who he finds is loyal to Odysseus.

Odyssey, Book 14:
“The Loyal Swineherd”
“Odysseus Meets Eumaeus”

Introduction

In Book 13, Odysseus returned to Ithaca, courtesy of the Phaeacians, whom Poseidon punished for their generosity to Odysseus. On Ithaca, Odysseus met Athena, and they plotted together what Odysseus’ next moves should be. Athena disguised Odysseus as an old beggar and told him to seek hospitality at the hut of Eumaeus the swineherd. Meanwhile, Athena will ensure that Telemachus is able to return safely to Ithaca.

In Book 14, Odysseus receives good *xenia* from Eumaeus.

• How does Book 14 open? (High praise for Eumaeus.)

At the end of Book 13, Athena sends Odysseus to stay with his loyal swineherd Eumaeus. Book 14 opens with high praise for Eumaeus. Homer sings,

So up from the haven now Odysseus climbed a rugged path
 through timber along high ground — Athena had shown the way —
 to reach the swineherd’s place, that fine loyal man
 who of all the household hands Odysseus ever had
 cared the most for his master’s worldly goods.

(Fagles 14.1-5)

Compare:

Odysseus left the harbour, taking the rough path
 into the woods and across the hills, to the place
 where Athena told him he would meet the swineherd,
 who was, of all the servants lord Odysseus had,
 the one who took best care of his possessions.

(Johnston 14.1-5)

We find out very early that Eumaeus does protect his master’s property. Eumaeus has built walls and sties (pigpens) with his own hands. Because Odysseus is away, Eumaeus could slack off if he wanted to, but instead he is working hard, taking care of Odysseus’ property.

Eumaeus is making a pair of sandals when Odysseus arrives. Like Odysseus (who built a raft on Calypso’s island), Eumaeus is good with his hands. We read that he is fitting sandals to his feet and carving away at an oxhide when Odysseus arrives.

Both Eumaeus and Odysseus are competent, practical men. Both of them care about property.

• **Does Eumaeus observe proper *xenia* when welcoming Odysseus?**

Although Eumaeus is only a slave and a swineherd, he receives Odysseus with proper *xenia*. Homer's characters tend to be the aristocracy — and we will learn later that Eumaeus was born the son of a king — but Homer shows us that even a person of the lowest class possible — a slave — can be civilized and observe good *xenia*.

Eumaeus is a slave of Odysseus, and his job is to take care of Odysseus' swine, aka pigs and hogs. We — and Odysseus — find out almost immediately that he is loyal to Odysseus. When Odysseus arrives at Eumaeus' hut, the dogs snarl at him, and he drops to the ground — an old trick to keep from being attacked. The dogs could have savagely attacked Odysseus, but Eumaeus arrives and makes the dogs leave Odysseus alone. Of course, the dogs do not know Odysseus. A dog can — at least in the *Odyssey* — live to be 20 or 21 years old, but that is a very old dog. The dogs in Book 14 are younger than that.

• **Is Eumaeus loyal to Odysseus?**

The dogs show that Eumaeus takes good care of the pigs. The dogs prevent the pigs from being stolen by men or slaughtered by wild animals.

Eumaeus calls off the dogs and tells Odysseus that he is lucky to be alive. He then tells Odysseus,

“I’m full of sorrow for my noble master,
who’s probably going hungry somewhere,
as he wanders through the lands and cities
where men speak a foreign tongue, if, in fact,
he’s still alive and looking at the sunlight.”

(Johnston 14.45-49)

Eumaeus' very first words let Odysseus know immediately that the swineherd is loyal to him, although other servants will not be.

Eumaeus' character is excellent. He knows and practices proper *xenia*. When Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, arrives at his home, Eumaeus gives him a place to sit, food, and later, after Odysseus has hinted a little, something to keep him warm during the night. And, of course, he gives Odysseus a place to sleep.

Like a good host, Eumaeus feeds Odysseus first, and then he asks him to tell his story:

“But follow me, old man. Come in the hut.
When you’ve had enough to eat and drink
and your heart’s satisfied, you can tell me
where you come from, what troubles you’ve endured.”

(Johnston 14.50-53)

Two of Eumaeus' characteristics are that he is loyal, and he is a swineherd (a swineherd takes care of pigs). In addition, he is a slave, and he is very competent. Also, he respects the laws of Zeus and gives good *xenia* to Odysseus, who is "delighted" (Fagles 14.59) by the hospitality and by the words of loyalty that he hears.

Eumaeus has Odysseus sit down and tells him,

"It's wrong, my friend, to send any stranger packing —
even one who arrives in worse shape than you."

(Fagles 14.64-65)

Compare:

"It would be wrong,
stranger, for me to disrespect a guest,
even if one worse off than you arrived,
for all guests and beggars come from Zeus,
and any gift from people like ourselves,
though small, is welcome."

(Johnston 14.63-68)

This short speech shows that Eumaeus is a moral man. He wants to do what is morally right. Only after Odysseus has eaten does Odysseus tell Eumaeus his story. Eumaeus slaughters a couple of pigs, roasts the meat, coats it with barley groats, then serves it with wine mixed with honey. (Eumaeus properly sacrifices the pigs to the gods.)

• **Eumaeus is a slave. Has he missed his master, Odysseus? Does he think Odysseus is alive or dead?**

Eumaeus is a slave, but of course he would prefer not to be. Apparently, in ancient Greece, a slave could work his way out of slavery. If the slave worked hard, the master could reward the slave both with freedom, and with a means of supporting himself.

Eumaeus does miss Odysseus a lot, and he feels that Odysseus would have treated him well if he had returned to Ithaca. In this quotation, we find out what Eumaeus desires:

"The gods are holding up the journey home
of the man who would've loved me kindly
and given me possessions of my own,
a home, a plot of land, a wedded wife
worthy of being wooed by many suitors,
the sorts of things a generous master gives

a servant who has toiled so hard for him,
 whose work the gods have helped to thrive and grow,
 the way the tasks I put my mind to here
 have prospered.”

(Johnston 14.71-80)

Although Eumaeus is a slave, he wants what all of us want: a family and a means of making a living and good treatment from other people. Although Eumaeus does not specifically mention freedom here, I am assuming that along with the gifts that Odysseus would give him, freedom would be included.

We find out that Eumaeus strongly suspects that Odysseus, his master, is dead. This is not something that he can know for sure, but, after all, Odysseus has been gone for 20 years:

“My master, I tell you, would have repaid me well
 if he’d grown old right here. But now he’s dead ...”

(Fagles 14.77-78)

Compare:

“If my master was at home
 and growing old, he would’ve given me
 so many things. But he has perished.”

(Johnston 14.80-82)

At this point, after giving Odysseus lots of evidence that he is a loyal slave, Eumaeus sacrifices a couple of pigs, then feeds Odysseus. Odysseus then finds out that Eumaeus hates the suitors. In a long speech, Eumaeus strongly criticizes the suitors:

“Eat up now, my friend. It’s all we slaves have got,
 scrawny pork, while the suitors eat the fatted hogs —
 no fear of the gods in their hard hearts, no mercy!”

(Fagles 14.93-95)

Compare:

“Eat now, stranger, what a servant offers,
 meat from a young pig, for the suitors take
 the fatted hogs. Their hearts have no pity
 and don’t ever think about gods’ anger.”

(Johnston 14.99-102)

Clearly, Eumaeus is loyal to Odysseus and dislikes the suitors. Eumaeus is aware that the suitors are violating *xenia* and showing “no fear of the gods in their hard hearts” (Fagles 14.95).

Eumaeus is proud of his master’s former wealth, although of course the suitors have done a lot to eat up that wealth. The suitors eat a hog, a goat, a sheep, a cow a day. The feasting is immense.

Clearly, Eumaeus is capable. He is a foreman who gives orders to other men. He ensures that the pigs are kept safe, although he is forced to send pigs to the palace each day for the suitors to slaughter. Because he is capable, he knows what is happening in the palace and on Ithaca, and he will be a good source of information for Odysseus.

Of course, we should note that although the two men are talking together, it is Eumaeus who is providing information to Odysseus. It would be impolite for Eumaeus to ask Odysseus to tell his story until after Odysseus has eaten.

• **Eumaeus is a loyal slave who serves as a foil to the disloyal slaves and the suitors. What is a “foil”?**

Here is a good definition of “foil”:

A foil is “a character who serves as a complete contrast to another character, thereby setting the qualities of each in high relief.”

Source: www.cwru.edu/artsci/engl/marling/hardboiled/Glossary.HT

A few other servants will be loyal to Odysseus, but many servants are disloyal to him. Eumaeus serves as a foil or contrast to the disloyal servants. Eumaeus longs for Odysseus’ return to Ithaca; the other, disloyal servants hope that Odysseus is dead.

In addition, Eumaeus serves as a foil to the suitors. Eumaeus observes the rules of *xenia*; the suitors violate the rules of *xenia*.

Odysseus asks who Eumaeus’ master is. Of course, Odysseus is playing the part of a stranger in Ithaca, and this is a question that a stranger would naturally ask, because Eumaeus has not mentioned his master’s name, saying merely that “*he* went off to the stallion-land of Troy / to fight the Trojans, save Agamemnon’s honor” (Fagles 14.82-83).

When Odysseus asks who Eumaeus’ master is, Odysseus points out that as a traveler, he may have met Eumaeus’ master.

• **Why is Eumaeus suspicious of strangers who claim to have seen or to have heard news about Odysseus?**

Eumaeus is suspicious of strangers who claim to have seen or to have heard of news about Odysseus. Penelope has had a problem with fakers. Penelope is eager to hear news of Odysseus, so many people tell her that they have seen Odysseus and that he was alive recently. However, they are lying in order to be well treated by her. For that reason, Eumaeus refuses to believe Odysseus when he says that Odysseus is alive and will be home soon.

We read:

“Whoever moves around and reaches here,

this land of Ithaca, goes to my mistress
 with some made-up tale. She receives him well,
 with hospitality and questions him
 about each detail. Then she starts to grieve,
 and tears fall from her eyes, as is fitting
 when a woman's husband dies far away."

(Johnston 14.161-167)

These false reports show us that rumors have been spreading about the return of Odysseus, but the reports have been false. Penelope has had her hopes raised high, then dashed.

Eumaeus is afraid that Odysseus — still disguised as an old beggar — will bring false reports about Odysseus to Penelope in order to get a gift of clothing:

"Even you, old codger, could rig up some fine tale —
 and soon enough, I'd say,
 if they gave you shirt and clothing for your pains."

(Fagles 14.152-154)

Compare:

"You too, old man, would make up a story
 quickly enough, if someone offered you
 a cloak and tunic and some clothes to wear."

(Johnston 14.168-170)

• How much does Eumaeus love Odysseus?

Eumaeus again says that Odysseus is dead:

"But by this time swift birds and dogs have ripped
 the flesh from off his bones, and his spirit's
 slipped away. Or else in the sea the fish
 have eaten him, and his bones now lie
 on shore somewhere, buried in deep sand.
 Anyway, he died out there."

(Johnston 14.171-176)

Eumaeus is heartbroken over Odysseus. He even says that his heart is broken more than anyone else's:

“He’s dead and gone. Aye, leaving a broken heart
 For loved ones left behind, for *me* most of all.”
 (Fagles 14.159-160)

Compare:

“From now on,
 it’s the fate of all his friends to grieve,
 especially me — ”
 (Johnston 14.176-178)

This is a strong statement, as we know how bad Penelope and Telemachus feel because Odysseus is not home.

Eumaeus even says that he loves Odysseus more than his own long-lost parents:

“I’ll never come across another man
 who’d match him as a gentle master,
 not even if I went back home again
 to where my mother and my father live,
 where I was born, where they reared me themselves.”
 (Johnston 14.179-183)

It takes him a long time, but Eumaeus finally mentions Odysseus’ name after praising him and missing him. It seems that Eumaeus does not even like mentioning Odysseus’ name. Perhaps it is painful to him to say Odysseus’ name.

• What does Odysseus — in disguise as the old beggar — predict? Why does he predict that?

Odysseus — in disguise as the old beggar — predicts that Odysseus will return soon. In fact, Odysseus swears that Odysseus will return this very month. Of course, Odysseus is aware that Eumaeus will think that the beggar is trying to get a new suit of clothing as a reward for bringing good news to Penelope, but Odysseus counters that by saying that he will welcome a new suit of clothing AFTER Odysseus has returned.

Again, Eumaeus says that Odysseus is dead:

“Odysseus, he’ll never come home again. Never ...”
 (Fagles 14.194)

Compare:

“Odysseus won’t be coming back.”
 (Johnston 14.217)

Odysseus is very intelligent. He knows that Ithaca is a dangerous place for him to be. He knows that the suitors are dangerous. He knows that loyal servants who are willing to fight for him would be a big help for him to regain his palace. Odysseus would like to spread reports of Odysseus' imminent return among the loyal servants so that they will be anticipating his return and will be willing to fight for him when they learn that he has returned. However, Odysseus learns here that doing this will be very difficult. Eumaeus is certainly loyal to Odysseus; unfortunately, he is certain that Odysseus is dead. Unless Odysseus can find a way to make Eumaeus and any other loyal servant know that he is Odysseus, they are not going to be willing to fight for him.

• **Which information does Eumaeus convey to Odysseus (and to us)?**

Because Odysseus is posing as a stranger to Ithaca, he is able to ask Eumaeus questions about Ithaca. This is consistent with his disguise. As a stranger to Ithaca, of course he would want to know something about the island and the people who live there.

Of course, this is a way for Odysseus to get information about the suitors, about Penelope, about Telemachus, and about his father, old Laertes. It is also good for Odysseus and Eumaeus to bond over conversation.

Eumaeus does give Odysseus some good news. Odysseus learns that Eumaeus thinks well of Telemachus, so Telemachus has been raised properly. Eumaeus also says that Telemachus will treat the old beggar well when he returns home — he will give Odysseus, who is disguised as an old beggar, a cloak. Of course, this means that Telemachus observes the rules of *xenia* and is civilized. Penelope has done a good job of rearing him.

Odysseus also learns from Eumaeus that his wife and father miss him and long for him to return home.

The rest of the news is about the suitors and how evil they are. Clearly, Odysseus will have a challenge in trying to regain his palace from the suitors.

• **Odysseus lies to Eumaeus. As always, Odysseus is a good rhetorician.**

Odysseus is a truly skilled liar. In Book 14, Odysseus tells more lies. He tells Eumaeus the loyal swineherd what is supposed to be his history. In addition, later he tells a story that is intended to get him a cloak to keep him warm.

Now that Odysseus has eaten, it is time for him to tell Eumaeus his story. Again, Odysseus, in disguise as an old beggar, says that he is from Crete. (In ancient times, the Cretans were known for being liars.)

We do see some humor in this scene. A common joke on Ithaca is to ask for a stranger's story and how they got to Ithaca, then say,

“I hardly think you came you came this way on foot.”

(Fagles 14.218)

Compare:

“For I don't think

you reached this place on foot.”

(Johnston 14.248-249)

Of course, Ithaca is an island, so no one would arrive on Ithaca on foot. This is a joke that Eumaeus says to the old beggar. Later, other people, including Telemachus, say this joke.

As always, Odysseus is a good rhetorician. When he tells a story, he thinks about how to make it appeal to his audience. Here, with Eumaeus as his audience, he does two things:

1) He tells an adventure story that will interest Eumaeus. If Odysseus is able to tell a story that interests Eumaeus, Eumaeus is more likely to extend further *xenia* to him. He will want to keep Odysseus around so that he can hear more of his stories.

2) He makes his story similar to the life story of Eumaeus. Of course, Eumaeus is Odysseus' slave, so Odysseus knows Eumaeus' life story. Odysseus knew Eumaeus before Odysseus went off to the Trojan War, leaving Eumaeus behind. By making his story similar to Eumaeus' life story, he can make Eumaeus sympathetic to him.

• In which ways are the stories of the old beggar (Odysseus in disguise) and of Eumaeus similar? (Eumaeus will tell his story in Book 15; however, Odysseus, of course, already knows Eumaeus' story.)

In the next book, Eumaeus will tell the old beggar his own story. However, the old beggar — who is really Odysseus — already knows that story. After all, Odysseus is Eumaeus' king.

Similarity #1: Both Eumaeus and the Old Beggar Originally Came from Well-Off Parents

Similarity #2: Both Eumaeus and the Old Beggar Suffer Treachery from Phoenicians

• Which story does Odysseus tell Eumaeus?

Odysseus tells Eumaeus these things:

- He is from Crete, where his father was a rich man but his mother was a slave. (Idomeneus is a king on Crete, and Odysseus really did know Idomeneus in the Trojan War.)
- His father died and he got little as an inheritance, but from his own efforts he got a wife and a house.
- However, he enjoyed the sea and fighting, and when the Trojan War started, he went to Troy.
- After Troy fell, he returned home for a month and then sailed for Egypt.
- In Egypt the crew went berserk and started killing and looting, but he pled for mercy from the Egyptian king, and got it, although his crew was killed.
- Staying for seven years in Egypt, he amassed a fortune, then set sail with a treacherous Phoenician.

- The Phoenician's ship was hit by a lightning bolt, but Odysseus grabbed hold of the mast and was saved, eventually coming ashore on the island of Thesprotia, whose king treated him well and gave him news of Odysseus, who is returning soon.
- From there, he set sail with a Thesprotian cutter, whose crew stripped him, gave him rags, and tied him up while they went ashore on Ithaca.
- However, Odysseus (that is, the old beggar) managed to escape, went ashore and hid, and the sailors could not find him, so they went away.

Is there any truth in what Odysseus tells Eumaeus? Yes. Odysseus tells about a life of hardship, and he has certainly had that. Also, Odysseus tells about a treacherous crew, and his crew was treacherous when they opened the bag of winds that was a gift from King Aeolus. In addition, Odysseus tells about a Phoenician who wished to enslave him, and Odysseus really was practically enslaved by Calypso, who of course is a goddess and not a Phoenician.

Again, Odysseus, who is disguised as an old beggar, says that Odysseus will return home to Ithaca soon. The old beggar says that he visited Thesprotia (in northwestern Greece), where Phidon, the King of Thesprotia, gave him news about Odysseus. Phidon was taking care of Odysseus' treasure while Odysseus was consulting an oracle of Zeus at Dodona:

“Odysseus, he said, had gone to Dodona,
to hear from the massive towering oak tree,
sacred to the god, what Zeus had willed
about his own return to that rich land
of Ithaca, after being away so long —
whether he should do so openly or not.
As he poured libations in his house,
he swore to me a ship had been hauled down
and a crew prepared to take Odysseus
to his native land.”

(Johnston 14.422-431)

• **How does Eumaeus respond to Odysseus' story?**

Odysseus is a good rhetorician, but his story is only partially successful. He succeeds in interesting Eumaeus in his story, and he succeeds in arousing the sympathy of Eumaeus. After all, clearly this old beggar who is telling the story to Eumaeus has had some rough times in his life.

Unfortunately for Odysseus, Eumaeus still makes it clear that he does not believe that Odysseus is coming home. This means that Odysseus will have a hard time convincing any slaves that he is the real Odysseus returned to Ithaca. After all, if Eumaeus, who clearly would love for Odysseus to return to Ithaca, does not believe that Odysseus will ever do so, despite the testimony of the

old beggar, the other slaves are unlikely to think that Odysseus will ever return. After all, Odysseus has been gone for 20 years. Some of the slaves were born after he left, and some of the slaves were very young when he left, so they have no memory of him. These slaves will find it easy to believe that Odysseus will never come back to Ithaca. These slaves are very unlikely to fight and risk losing their lives for an old beggar who claims to be Odysseus.

One thing to notice here is that Odysseus raises the idea of Odysseus coming back to Ithaca in secret rather than openly. He is making it easier for Eumaeus later to believe that the old beggar really is Odysseus, come back to Ithaca in secret.

Eumaeus thinks that the old beggar is lying when he says that Odysseus will return soon to Ithaca:

“But one part’s off the mark, I know — you’ll never persuade me —
what you say about Odysseus. A man in your condition,
who are *you*, I ask you, to lie for no good reason?”
(Fagles 14.411-413)

Compare:

“But I don’t think it’s all just as you said,
and what you mentioned of Odysseus
does not convince me. Given who you are,
why must you tell such pointless falsehoods?”
(Johnston 14.470-473)

Eumaeus says once more that Odysseus is dead and will not return to Ithaca.

Eumaeus is so skeptical of the old beggar because he himself was fooled by a rumor once. An Aetolian who had killed a man and was therefore wandering over the face of the Earth told Penelope that he had seen Odysseus on Crete with King Idomeneus. He also said that Odysseus would be home by summer or at harvest-time; however, Odysseus did not return.

As we know from Odysseus’ story of the Great Wanderings, Odysseus did not go to Crete.

Once again, we have a story about a man killing another man, then wandering the Earth, no doubt forced to flee his homeland because of the relatives of the dead man — relatives who would want to revenge his death by killing the man who had killed him. Again, we can wonder what will happen to Odysseus if he succeeds in killing the suitors. Their families will want to kill him in revenge — will Odysseus be forced to flee his homeland and wander the face of the Earth?

• Which wager does Odysseus offer Eumaeus? How is Eumaeus affected by the wager and by Odysseus’ story?

After hearing Eumaeus call him a liar because he says that Odysseus will return soon, Odysseus offers a wager. If Odysseus returns, then give the old beggar a shirt and cloak and send him

away. However, if Odysseus does not return, then throw him from a cliff and kill him as a warning to other wanderers who spread rumors about the return of Odysseus.

Note that Odysseus says that *after* Odysseus returns, then give the old beggar a shirt and cloak. Odysseus, who is disguised as an old beggar, does not want good clothing now because it may ruin his disguise and people may recognize him. Also, Odysseus wants Eumaeus to believe that he is telling the truth, not lying to get good clothing.

Eumaeus is unwilling to accept the wager. He observes *xenia*, and it is against *xenia* to kill a guest.

Eumaeus may be affected more by Odysseus' story than he lets on. We see this at the next meal. Previously, he had slaughtered two pigs and they had eaten them. That he considered a poor meal in comparison with the fat hogs that the suitors eat. However, at this second meal, Eumaeus does two things:

- 1) Eumaeus orders that a fat hog be slaughtered for the meal. Usually, the suitors get fat hogs to eat, but this time the slaves and the guest will eat a fat hog.
- 2) Eumaeus gives Odysseus a prime cut of meat. He honors Odysseus with the boar's long loin — the cut of honor. Odysseus is cheered by this mark of honor.

In this meal, we again see that Eumaeus honors the gods. Part of the meal is given to a local cult of wood nymphs, and part is given to Hermes, who is the patron saint of herdsmen.

We learn something about slavery in ancient Greece. Although Eumaeus is a slave, he has used his own money to purchase a slave for himself:

Mesaulius served them bread, a man the swineherd
 purchased for himself in his master's absence —
 alone, apart from his queen or old Laertes —
 bought him from Taphians, bartered his own goods.
 (Fagles 14.511-514)

Compare:

Mesaulius served the bread, a servant
 Eumaeus purchased on his own, when his master
 was away. He'd not informed his mistress
 or old man Laertes. He'd acquired the slave
 from Taphians, using resources of his own.
 (Johnston 14.584-589)

• **How does Odysseus solve the problem of being cold?**

In addition, Odysseus tells a story that hints to Eumaeus that he is cold and needs a covering to keep him warm. This story is effective, as Eumaeus lets him use a cloak and a bed of furry skins to keep him warm. In addition, the story shows Odysseus' quick thinking and problem-solving skills. The story is that he (the old beggar) was on a raid with Odysseus, but he had forgotten his cloak. The night was cold and he was freezing, so he told Odysseus. Odysseus then asked a warrior to go to Agamemnon and ask for reinforcements because they were close to the Trojans and feared an attack. The warrior flung off his cloak, and he (the old beggar) was able to use it.

Odysseus does have two purposes in telling this story to Eumaeus:

- One purpose, of course, is to get the loan of a cloak from Eumaeus. The night is cold, and Odysseus feels it.
- However, the major reason is to convince Eumaeus that he, the old beggar, really knew Odysseus. Eumaeus seems positively affected by the story, which puts Odysseus in a good light.

Eumaeus doesn't give Odysseus clothing (he and the other slaves have one suit of clothing each), but he says that Telemachus will give him clothing when he returns. In addition, Eumaeus does act in a friendly manner to the old beggar here by lending him a cloak.

Eumaeus is one of Odysseus' loyal slaves, so loyal in fact that he sleeps out by the swine each night to keep them from harm and to keep them from being poached. The night is cold, so Eumaeus has to be a very loyal slave to do this.

Eumaeus is aware that some people are very willing to rustle animals. By the way, calf rustling is a problem in Southeast Ohio, where I live. Some people will steal a calf out of a pasture as a quick way to make money.

• **What are the purposes of Odysseus' lies?**

As we have seen before, Odysseus is gifted at rhetoric. As his lies show, he is also gifted at rhetoric. Odysseus' lies have many purposes:

- 1) *Odysseus must explain his background to the person he is lying to.*

Odysseus must come up with a credible explanation for why he is traveling.

- 2) *Odysseus must tell an interesting story to his host so that he can continue to receive hospitality from him or her.*

Storytelling is a source of entertainment, and if Odysseus is an entertaining guest, he may receive better hospitality than he otherwise would receive. Since Odysseus (the old beggar) was at Troy, he must have lots of entertaining stories to tell.

- 3) *The stories often contain a thematic element.*

For example, the stories that involve killing a man then fleeing from the avengers show the danger that Odysseus will be in when he kills the suitors. In addition, the stories often show a rich man becoming a slave. It's possible that Odysseus will not be able to

reestablish himself as King of Ithaca. After all, Eumaeus has remained a slave, although we will find out in Book 15 that his parents were rich royalty.

4) *Finally, Odysseus often hints that Odysseus will be coming back soon.*

The purpose here is to prepare the hearer for his return and perhaps to test the hearer to find out if he wants Odysseus to return.

In conclusion, Odysseus is gifted at rhetoric, and that includes being gifted at lying.

Conclusion

In Book 15, Eumaeus, who we now know is loyal to Odysseus, will tell Odysseus, who is in disguise as an old beggar, his story.

Odyssey, Book 15:
“The Prince Sets Sail for Home”
“Telemachus Returns to Ithaca”

Introduction

In Book 15, two important events occur:

- 1) Telemachus returns to Ithaca, and
- 2) Eumaeus tells Odysseus his story.

• Why does Athena appear to Telemachus?

Athena, of course, has a job to do. She must travel to Sparta and tell Telemachus that it is time for him to return home. She does that at the beginning of Book 15.

Telemachus is special to Athena. She does not appear disguised as a mortal when she talks to him. She appears as a goddess, something that most mortals would never see. Ordinarily, when a person sees a god, the god is disguised as a mortal.

Athena lets Telemachus know that some of the suitors are waiting to murder him, and she tells him how he can avoid the suitors:

“I’ll tell you something else — take it to heart.

The bravest of the suitors lie in wait,
 enough to set an ambush, in the straits
 between Ithaca and rugged Samos.

Before you get back to your native land,
 they want to murder you. But in my view,
 that won’t be happening. Before it does,
 the earth will cover many of those suitors,
 who are consuming all your livelihood.”

(Johnston 15.37-45)

Athena also sets up a meeting between Telemachus and Odysseus, and she makes sure that the two will be alone. She tells Telemachus,

“You must steer your well-built ship on a course
 far from the islands, and keep on sailing
 day and night. One of the immortal gods

who's watching over and protecting you
 will send you following winds. And then,
 at the first place you reach in Ithaca,
 send your companions and the ship ahead,
 on to the city — you yourself should go
 to see the swineherd, the man who tends your pigs.
 He's very well disposed towards you.
 Spend the night with him. And then tell him
 to go into the city and bring news
 to wise Penelope that you are safe
 and have returned from Pylos.”

(Johnston 15.46-59)

• **What has Telemachus gained during his journey?**

Telemachus has a *nostos* when he returns to Ithaca, and *nostos* is the word that appears in the third line of this book. *Nostos* is the word used to describe the homecomings of the Achaean warriors who fought at Troy, but Telemachus is now special enough that the word *nostos* can be used to refer to his homecoming.

Telemachus has done a notable deed by journeying to the mainland to seek news of his father. He has gained *kleos* for his deed. Travel in ancient Greece was risky and dangerous, but Telemachus was brave enough to seek news of his father.

Telemachus has been lying awake, while Pisistratus sleeps. Telemachus has been worrying, and Athena confirms that he has reason to worry; however, Athena may be doing that simply to get him back home so that he and Odysseus may meet. After all, Athena is going to make sure that Telemachus arrives home safely and is not murdered by the suitors who are waiting for him.

Telemachus has also learned some information about his father, Odysseus, who he now knows was still alive a few years ago.

• **Why is Pisistratus unwilling to leave Sparta right away?**

Telemachus would like to leave right now, without waiting for the guest-gifts. Pisistratus is unwilling to leave Sparta right away. He has to remind Telemachus to stay a while longer. Pisistratus wants the guest-gifts, but it is right to say goodbye to your host. Telemachus is so excited that he wants to leave now.

• **How good of a host has Menelaus been? Which guest-gifts do Menelaus and Helen give to Telemachus?**

Menelaus is an excellent host. When Telemachus tells him that he wants to return home, Menelaus does not press him overly much to stay. Instead, he says that a good host should

neither force a guest to leave nor force a guest to stay. He says, “Balance is best in all things” (Fagles 15.78).).

However, Menelaus does offer to escort him on a trip throughout Argos. That way, Telemachus can receive many guest-gifts and many ties of friendship.

Another person — such as Pisistratus — might be tempted by the guest-gifts that could be gotten by going on a grand tour of Argos. However, Telemachus has worries that Pisistratus does not. Therefore, Telemachus is firm in his desire to return home right away.

In addition, Menelaus gives Telemachus guest-gifts. He gives him a silver bowl with a lip of gold. The bowl is very valuable, and it was made by the god Hephaestus himself. Helen gives him a robe that she wove herself. We remember from the *Iliad*, Book 3, that Helen is a weaver. In this society, even high-ranking women must work. As we have seen, Penelope, Queen of Ithaca, also weaves.

Furthermore, Menelaus feeds Telemachus and Pisistratus again and gives them wine. When Telemachus and Pisistratus leave, Menelaus hands them “a golden cup of honeyed wine / so the two might pour libations forth at parting” (Fagles 15.163-164). It’s always a good idea to stay on the good side of the gods.

• **Which positive bird-sign does Helen interpret for Telemachus?**

One purpose of this book is to let the readers know that the outlook is good for Odysseus’ regaining his kingdom. Twice, positive bird-signs appear, showing that Zeus is on the side of Odysseus.

While Telemachus is still in Sparta, Helen interprets a positive bird-sign:

“Listen to me.

I will prophesy what the immortals
have set into my heart, what I believe
will happen. Just as this eagle came here
from mountains where it and its young were born
and snatched up this goose bred in the household,
that’s how Odysseus, after all his suffering
and his many wanderings, will come home
and take revenge. Or he’s already home,
sowing destruction for all the suitors.”

(Johnston 15.229-238)

Helen is a good prophetess. She says, “Odysseus will descend on his house and take revenge — / unless he’s home already, sowing seeds of ruin / for that whole crowd of suitors!” (Fagles

15.198-200). Of course, as we know, Odysseus is already on Ithaca, and as Helen says, he is already plotting “sowing seeds of ruin / for that whole crowd of suitors!” (Fagles 15.199-200).

• **Which kind of hospitality would Telemachus receive from Nestor if he were to return to Pylos?**

Telemachus receives excellent hospitality from Menelaus, but he would receive not-so-good hospitality from Nestor. That is, Telemachus would receive good hospitality from Nestor, but Nestor would make him stay longer than he wishes to.

Telemachus decides not to visit Nestor again. Nestor is the same Nestor we saw in the *Iliad* — talkative, and willing to force guests to stay longer than they wish. (We remember Patroclus’ visit to Nestor’s tent.) Knowing how fond Nestor is of his hospitality, Telemachus leaves on his ship without returning to Nestor’s palace first. Pisistratus helps him out. He comes up with the idea of Telemachus’ sailing away without first returning to Nestor’s palace, although he knows that his father will be angry that Telemachus did not visit his palace before sailing for home.

• **Telemachus meets the suppliant Theoclymenus. Which themes appear in Theoclymenus’ speech?**

Before sailing for home, Telemachus meets Theoclymenus, a suppliant who is fleeing for his life after killing a man:

“I, too, have run away,
leaving my own country. I killed a man,
one of my family. Many relatives of his
live in horse-nurturing Argos — they rule
Achaeans there and have enormous power.
I’m fleeing to prevent them killing me,
a dark fate. So now it’s my destiny,
I think, to roam around among mankind.
Let me board your ship — I’m a fugitive,
and I’m begging you, so they won’t kill me.
I think they’re on my track.”
(Johnston 15.54-64)

Two main themes appear in Theoclymenus’ speech:

1) The theme of revenge by one’s kinsmen, Theoclymenus killed a man, and now the man’s relatives want to kill him. In ancient times, if you killed a man, you could either pay a fine or flee. If you fled, the relatives of the man you killed would try to track you down and kill you in revenge for the life you took.

2) The theme of a change in fortune. Theoclymenus' fortune has changed for the worse. He killed a man and now he must wander the earth far from his homeland.

This is a good definition of theme:

The central meaning or dominant idea in a literary work. A theme provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols, and other elements of a work are organized. It is important not to mistake the theme for the actual subject of the work; the theme refers to the abstract concept that is made concrete through the images, characterization, and action of the text. In nonfiction, however, the theme generally refers to the main topic of the discourse.

Source: http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary_t.htm

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• **How does Telemachus treat the suppliant Theoclymenus?**

In this society, it is good to respect a suppliant, and Telemachus does exactly that:

“So desperate!” thoughtful Telemachus exclaimed.

“How could I drive you from my ship? Come sail with us,
we’ll tend you at home, with all we can provide.”

(Fagles 15.312-314)

Compare:

“If you’re keen to come,
there’s no way I’d stop you boarding my trim ship.
So come with us. You’ll find a welcome here,
as much as we possess.”

(Johnston 15.65-68)

By taking Theoclymenus away from the mainland, Telemachus has saved his life. He has also respected a prophet. He has also shown some confidence in taking care of a man who has killed another man.

Today, if someone who had killed another man supplicated us, we would probably call the police to avoid becoming an accessory after the fact. Our culture is so much different from the culture of ancient Greece. Today, if a man kills someone by accident, a trial can be held to determine guilt or lack of guilt. In Homeric times, no trial, I think, would be held. Instead, in anger the relatives of the dead man would hunt and try to kill the dead man’s killer. That is why it is a good deed for Telemachus and other people to respect a suppliant.

By the way, controversial filmmaker John Waters was once mugged in New York. Suffering from a serious concussion and covered with blood, he staggered to a friend’s apartment, and

when she opened the door, he told her, “I’ve just killed five people, and I’ve come to involve you.” (Source: John Waters, *Shock Value*, p. 24.)

• **As Telemachus sets sail, what is Odysseus doing back on Ithaca?**

When Homer stops singing about Telemachus, he leaves his audience with a bit of a cliffhanger:

and then Telemachus veered for the Jagged Islands,
wondering all the way —
would he sweep clear of death or be cut down?
(Fagles 15.332-334)

Compare:

From there,
Telemachus steered them past the jagged islands,
wondering if he’d get caught or escape being killed.
(Johnston 15.385-387)

Of course, with a goddess looking out for him, he is able to arrive safely on Ithaca, as we soon see.

Odysseus tells Eumaeus that he wants to go to the palace so he can beg there and not be a burden on Eumaeus. In addition, Odysseus says that he wants to talk to the queen.

In part, Odysseus is testing the swineherd. Will the swineherd be concerned about the old beggar, or will the swineherd be eager to get rid of the old beggar?

Eumaeus the swineherd passes the test — he is protective of the old beggar. The two have bonded, and they are friends now. However, Eumaeus is afraid that the old beggar will be treated badly by the suitors if he goes there. Significantly, Eumaeus does not tell Odysseus not to talk to Penelope. Probably, Eumaeus is now certain — as a result of the story that got the old beggar a cloak — that the old beggar actually knew Odysseus. Eumaeus advises the old beggar to wait for Telemachus, who will help him.

Odysseus — the old beggar — wants to hear about Odysseus’ father and mother. This is a way to get information, but it is also a way to bond further with Eumaeus. Odysseus discovers that Eumaeus and Anticleia were close, which no doubt Odysseus already knew. He also finds out that things are not good now in the palace.

• **What does Eumaeus tell the old beggar about Odysseus’ father and mother?**

Eumaeus tells the old beggar that Laertes prays for death as he grieves for Odysseus and for his dead wife:

“Laertes is still alive, but night and day
he prays to Zeus, waiting there in his house,

for the life breath to slip away and leave his body.
 His heart's so wracked for his son, lost and gone these years,
 for his wife so fine, so wise — *her* death is the worst blow
 he's had to suffer — it made him old before his time.”
 (Fagles 15.393-398)

Compare:

“Well, stranger, I'll tell you the honest truth.
 Laertes is still living, but all the time
 inside his home he keeps praying to Zeus
 the spirit in his limbs will fade away.
 He grieves excessively for his own son,
 who's gone, and for the wife he married,
 a wise lady, whose death, above all else,
 really troubled him and made him old
 before his time.”
 (Johnston 15.449-457)

Eumaeus also confirms what Odysseus learned from his mother in the Land of the Dead — she died of grief for him:

“She died of grief for her boy, her glorious boy,
 it wore her down, a wretched way to go.
 I pray that no one I love dies such a death,
 no island neighbor of mine who treats me kindly!”
 (Fagles 15.399-402)

Compare:

“She died a wretched death
 grieving for her splendid son. May no man
 who lives here as my friend and treats me well
 die the way she did!”
 (Johnston 15.457-460)

Of course, this is another emotional trial for Odysseus. He can't react to what Eumaeus says, although he reacted strongly when his mother told him in the Land of the Dead how she died.

Here we have some evidence that when Odysseus told the Phaeacians about his Great Wanderings, he did not lie. Anticleia told Odysseus how she died, and Eumaeus' story about how Anticleia died is exactly the same. This confirmation by Eumaeus of the cause of the death of Odysseus' mother is some evidence that at least not all of the story Odysseus told the Phaeacians was lies.

• **What do we learn from Eumaeus' story of his life?**

Odysseus says that he wants to hear Eumaeus' life story. Odysseus, of course, already knows Eumaeus' life story, but hearing it from Eumaeus is a binding experience between the two men.

Eumaeus tells Odysseus that he himself is the son of a king. Unfortunately, when Eumaeus was a little boy, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Kidnapping and slave-trading were common in the ancient world, and that is what has happened to Eumaeus. As a boy, he was taken care of by a slave, a Phoenician woman. Phoenician sailors seduced this woman, and when the Phoenician sailors left, they took her with them. In addition, she brought along Eumaeus so that he could be sold as a slave. The woman died on the journey (the Phoenicians treated her corpse badly by throwing it overboard), but Eumaeus survived and was sold into slavery. Of course, as we know from reading both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the woman's ghost will not be able to enter the Land of the Dead because it has not been properly buried.

By the way, the seduced Phoenician woman is also a slave who used to be free. Her parents are supposed to be rich. Unfortunately, "Taphian pirates" (Fagles 15.479) kidnapped her and sold her into slavery.

Here are a few points to understand:

- 1) Piracy was a problem in the ancient world. Sailors could come along and kidnap women and children and sell them into slavery. When Odysseus was on Scheria, among the Phaeacians, if he had been mistaken for a pirate out to kidnap Nausicaa, he could have been in serious trouble. At the very least, he would not have given guest-gifts. At worse, he would have been killed.
- 2) One of the things we see over and over in the second half of the *Odyssey* is a change of status. Very often, as here, the children of rich people, including kings, become slaves. This means that a change of status from high to low can become permanent. Eumaeus has been a slave for a long time. The Phoenician woman died before ever returning to her homeland. (On the voyage back home, the woman died, and the Phoenician sailors dumped her corpse overboard — a very bad way to treat a corpse now and a worse way to treat a corpse in Homer's day.) At other times, a man kills another man and is forced to run away to save his life. Odysseus is in danger of always being a beggar unless he can find a way to regain his palace and his position as King of Ithaca.

By the way, we learn that Odysseus has a sister, Ctimene. When she grew up, she married a man of Same, an island near Ithaca.

- **We can look at Odysseus and Eumaeus on two levels: 1) a beggar and a slave, and 2) a king and the son of a king.**

If passersby were to see Odysseus and Eumaeus in the hut talking together, they would see a beggar and a slave. We, however, because of the information provided by Homer, are aware that in reality the passersby would be seeing a king and a son of a king. Odysseus is the King of Ithaca, and Eumaeus' father was a king — unfortunately, when Eumaeus was very little, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Homer obviously has a lot of respect for Eumaeus, and obviously Homer's characters tend to be aristocratic. In the *Iliad*, the only common soldier whose name we know is Thersites, who is an unsympathetic character. Perhaps Homer sided with the aristocrats, and perhaps he thought that such a sympathetic character as Eumaeus had to be an aristocrat. Chances are, the bard performed mostly for aristocrats.

- **What does the swineherd's story show about a change in fortune? How is this relevant to Odysseus?**

Fortunes can change — for the worse. Eumaeus is the son of a king, but now he is a slave and a swineherd, and actually he has little chance of ever becoming a free man. (Of course, he will become a free man, as those who have read the rest of the *Odyssey* know.) This means that Odysseus' chance of staying a poor beggar is a real one. Unless he can figure out a way to rid his palace of the 108 suitors (and a way to deal with the suitors' relatives who will seek revenge), he will remain a poor beggar.

- **What does Telemachus do when he arrives home on Ithaca? Which kind of *xenia* does he give Theoclymenus?**

Telemachus, of course, is following Athena's instructions, so he will go to the swineherd's hut, not the palace. Thinking ahead, because there might be trouble, he gives vague details to his shipmates about his plans, saying simply that he will visit his herdsman and farms. He doesn't mention the swineherd specifically. Again, Telemachus is growing more mature. He doesn't want the suitors to know his whereabouts yet.

When Telemachus has returned safely to Ithaca, another positive bird-sign appears. This time it is interpreted by Theoclymenus, a prophet who is forced to flee his country because he killed another man:

“Telemachus, this bird flying to our right
has not come without being prompted by some god.
I knew when I saw it darting forward
it was an omen. In the land of Ithaca
no family is more royal than yours is.
No. You'll be powerful for ever.”
(Johnston 15.674-679)

All bird-signs (this one and the one interpreted by Helen) are looking good for the return of Odysseus.

When they land on Ithaca, Theoclymenus asks Telemachus where he should go. Telemachus answers that because of the suitors he would not get good hospitality at his palace, and he says bitterly that Theoclymenus should go to the home of Eurymachus, one of the main suitors. However, after Theoclymenus has interpreted the bird-sign — very favorably for Odysseus and Telemachus — Telemachus asks a friend named Piraeus to take care of Theoclymenus (whom Telemachus calls his own guest) for a while. Piraeus readily agrees. This shows something good about Telemachus. He has taken care of the suppliant. Telemachus says to Piraeus that the hospitality will be for just a while until he can come himself and offer his own hospitality.

• **At the end of Book 15, what is Homer's audience looking forward to?**

At the end of Book 15, Telemachus is going to the hut of the swineherd, where we know of course that Odysseus is. We know that Odysseus is going to see his son, Telemachus, very soon, and we are looking forward to that meeting and are wondering what will happen when Odysseus and Telemachus meet after they have been separated for 20 years.

Odyssey, Book 16:

“Father and Son”

“Odysseus Reveals Himself to Telemachus”

Introduction

Book 16 is very important. In it, Odysseus and Telemachus meet after having been separated since Telemachus was still an infant, 20 years ago. Because Odysseus must stay in character as the old beggar, he can't reveal his identity to his son. This is an emotional trial for Odysseus.

• Telemachus arrives at the swineherd's hut and is very fondly greeted by Eumaeus.

Telemachus walks to Eumaeus' hut at dawn. The second half of the *Odyssey* is filled with emotional trials for Odysseus. One of them is when his son, Telemachus, arrives at the hut of the swineherd Eumaeus. This is an emotional trial because Odysseus is in disguise, and he cannot reveal himself to Telemachus because Eumaeus is present. As we are well aware, if the suitors know that the old beggar is Odysseus in disguise, they will kill him. Therefore, Odysseus will not reveal who he is to Eumaeus until he is ready to slaughter the suitors.

As you would expect, Odysseus is alert. He hears someone coming, and since the dogs aren't barking, he knows that the person must be known to the dogs and to Eumaeus.

Very quickly, Odysseus knows that the young man who arrives is his son — the very first words Eumaeus says are “You're home, Telemachus” (Fagles 16.26). Yet, even though Odysseus is seeing his own son for the first time in 20 years, he can't say or do anything that would attract attention to himself. Odysseus must stay in character as an old beggar.

• How is Eumaeus' emotion at seeing Telemachus compared to Odysseus' emotion at seeing Telemachus? (See the simile at Fagles 16.16-25 / Johnston 16.14-21.)

Obviously, Odysseus is feeling strong emotions when he sees his son for the first time in 20 years. Homer lets us know about the emotional impact by using a simile in which Eumaeus' emotion at seeing Telemachus is compared to Odysseus' emotion at seeing Telemachus.

Homer compares Eumaeus' emotion at seeing Telemachus to a father's emotion at seeing his son after a long absence:

[...] Straight to the prince he rushed
and kissed his face and kissed his shining eyes,
both hands, as the tears rolled down his cheeks.
As a father brimming with love, welcomes home
his darling only son in a warm embrace —
what pain he's borne for him and for him alone!
home now — in the tenth year from far abroad,
so the loyal swineherd hugged the beaming prince,

he clung for dear life, covering him with kisses, yes,
like one escaped from death.
(Fagles 16.16-25)

Compare:

He went up to greet his master,
kissed his head, both his handsome eyes, his two hands,
then burst into tears. Just as a loving father
welcomes his dear son after a nine-year absence,
when he comes from a foreign land, an only son,
his favourite, for whom he's undergone much sorrow,
that's how the loyal swineherd hugged Telemachus
and kissed him often, as if he'd escaped his death.
(Johnston 16.14-21)

Homer displays his genius here. He used a simile to describe how Eumaeus greets Telemachus. He greets him as a father, after a 10-year absence abroad, would greet a son. In other words, Eumaeus greets Telemachus as Odysseus would like to greet him. Eumaeus is playing the role of a father, while Odysseus is playing the role of a beggar.

Of course, the father in the simile has been gone for only 10 years, while Odysseus has been gone for 20 years. Odysseus' emotion at seeing would be twice as strong as that of the father in the simile.

• **Telemachus calls Eumaeus “Father” or “Atta.” What would be the impact on Odysseus of hearing that? (In our translations, we have “Dear old man” (Fagles 16.35) / “old friend” (Johnston 16.33). As so often, we lose something in translation.)**

Homer stresses the emotion that Odysseus feels when he first sees his son after a 20-year absence by having Telemachus call Eumaeus “father” or “*atta*.” *Atta* is a word that can be translated as daddy or papa. In some languages, you can call any older person father or mother. In the United States, we tend not to do that, but in other cultures people do that. So it is with the ancient Greek culture.

According to Elizabeth Vandiver,

[...] Telemachus calls Eumaios “father.” Actually, he calls Eumaios *atta*, a Greek word which is, in effect, baby-talk. It means, more or less, “papa,” or “daddy,” or something like that. (*The Odyssey of Homer* 115)

In our translations, we have “Dear old man” (Fagles 16.35) / “old friend” (Johnston 16.33). As so often, we lose something in translation.

Think of what Odysseus is feeling when he sees Telemachus. Odysseus would love to hug Telemachus, the way that Eumaeus is doing, but to do that he would not be acting like an old beggar. To save his life, he must continue to remain in character. In addition to seeing this other man hug his son, Odysseus has to stand by and listen to his own son call this other man “father” or “papa.” Telemachus says,

“Have it your way,” thoughtful Telemachus replied,
 “Dear old man [Papa or *Atta*], it’s all for you that I’ve come,
 to see you for yourself and learn the news —
 whether mother still holds out in the halls
 or some other man has married her at last,”
 (Fagles 16.34-38)

Compare:

“If you say so, old friend [Papa or *Atta*]. I’ve come here now
 on your account, to see you face to face
 and to hear you talk about my mother.
 Is she still living in the palace halls,
 or has some other man now married her?”
 (Johnston 16.33-37)

Here we see that Telemachus says the word “Papa” to someone other than Odysseus, his own father. So what does Telemachus call Odysseus? He calls him “stranger” (*xenos*):

“Stay put, stranger.
 We’ll find a chair in the hut somewhere else.
 Here’s a man who’ll get one for us.”
 (Johnston 16.48-50)

Once again, Odysseus cannot show any emotion. He is forced to remain in character as an old beggar.

• Another emotional trial for Odysseus is whether Telemachus will observe proper *xenia*. Does he?

Odysseus is shrewd. He does not show any emotion, and he stays in character as the old beggar. As Telemachus approaches him, Odysseus stands up so that Telemachus can sit down.

Fortunately, Telemachus has been reared correctly. He understands *xenia*. The old beggar is older than he is, and he tells the old man to sit down. Telemachus shows by giving the old beggar *xenia* that he is civilized.

This has to be a relief for Odysseus. He has to have wondered about Telemachus. Has he been reared correctly? Does he understand *xenia*? Does he give *xenia* to beggars? Is Telemachus as bad mannered as the suitors?

• **Telemachus calls Odysseus “stranger” (*xenos*) and Eumaeus “old friend” (*atta*) at Fagles 16.64 / Johnston 16.63. When would those terms be appropriate?**

Telemachus speaks to Eumaeus once more, and once more Telemachus uses the terms *xenos* (stranger) and *atta* (Papa). Once again, he refers to Odysseus as “stranger” and to Eumaeus as “Papa.” However, Robert Fagles has translated *atta* as “old friend”:

“Old friend [*atta*], where does this stranger [*xenos*] come from?”

(Fagles 16.64; Johnston 16.63)

The terms that Telemachus uses are entirely appropriate, but Telemachus, although he does not know it, is applying them to the wrong people here. He ought to be calling Odysseus *atta* and Eumaeus, who has been kidnapped and sold into slavery, *xenos*. In a perfect world, Eumaeus would be a visiting king, and Odysseus would have long been on Ithaca.

Once again, Odysseus does not and cannot show any emotion.

• **Why does Telemachus deny the stranger (Odysseus) *xenia* in the palace? What impact would that have on Odysseus?**

Of course, Odysseus is still wondering about his son. How will Telemachus treat him? Is Telemachus civilized? Does he respect the law of Zeus?

Fortunately, so far, Telemachus acts just right. Odysseus gets up to offer his chair to Telemachus, and Telemachus shows him respect by telling him to sit, and says that Eumaeus can get him (Telemachus) another chair. In addition, he says that he will give Odysseus clothing and a sword and transportation to wherever he would like to go. This must be a relief to Odysseus. His son has turned out well.

After hearing that the old beggar is counting on Telemachus for food and shelter. Telemachus complains about the suitors. He doesn’t see how he can allow the old beggar into his house.

This denial of *xenia* has got to hurt Odysseus. His own son should be master of his own house. However, this is only a partial denial of *xenia*. Telemachus still offers the old beggar a cloak and a shirt and sword and sandals.

Definitely, Telemachus is not master of his own house. However, he is still looking out for strangers. He is denying strangers *xenia* at his palace only because he is afraid that the suitors will mistreat the strangers. In fact, we do see the suitors mistreating strangers later in the *Odyssey*.

• **What do Odysseus (still in disguise as the old beggar) and Telemachus talk about?**

Odysseus, who is still in character as the old beggar, talks with Telemachus and asks him about the suitors. Basically, he is asking why Telemachus stands for this and why doesn’t he do something about it.

The old beggar says that if he were Odysseus' son, or Odysseus himself, he would attempt to do something about the suitors in the palace, even if it meant dying. Odysseus says,

“With my heart the way it is, how I wish
I were either as young as you, the son
of brave Odysseus, or the man himself
returning from his travels — there's still room
for us to hope for that — then, if I came
to the halls of Laertes' son, Odysseus,
and didn't bring destruction on them all,
let a stranger slice this head off my neck.
If I, acting all alone, was overwhelmed
by their greater numbers, I'd rather die,
killed in my own home, than continue watching
such disgraceful acts — ”

(Johnston 16.117-128)

Odysseus is well aware of the outrageous way that the suitors are acting:

“Guests treated to blows, men dragging the serving women
through the noble house, exploiting them all, no shame,
and the gushing wine swilled, the food squandered —
gorging for gorging's sake —
and the courting game goes on, no end in sight!”

(Fagles 16.120-124)

Compare:

“such disgraceful acts — guests treated badly,
women servants shamelessly being dragged
through the fine palace, wine drawn and wasted,
and all the time food eaten needlessly,
acts which go on and on, without an end.”

(Johnston 16.128-132)

What Odysseus says here about the suitors is true, as we will see.

Telemachus tells the old beggar that his mother, Penelope, does not know what to do. Should she continue to think that Odysseus is alive and reject the suitors, or should she believe that Odysseus is dead and get married again? Because no one knows whether Odysseus is alive or dead, Penelope and Telemachus don't know what to do. If they knew for sure that Odysseus were dead, Penelope could marry one of the suitors, and the other suitors would leave the palace. If they knew for sure that Odysseus was alive, they could take steps to drive out the suitors.

Penelope, of course, has two conflicting duties. If Odysseus is alive, then her duty is to remain faithful to him. If Odysseus is dead, then — in this society — her duty is to be remarried. Because Penelope does not know whether Odysseus is alive or dead, she does not know what her duty is.

Telemachus says,

“She does not turn down
the hateful marriage, but cannot decide
to bring these matters to an end. And so,
with their feasting they consume my household,
and they'll soon be the ruin of me, too.”

(Johnston 16.152-156)

We should note two main things here:

- 1) Penelope really, really needs for Odysseus to come back now.
- 2) Telemachus is complaining about the suitors destroying his household.

• **Which orders does Telemachus give Eumaeus?**

Telemachus orders Eumaeus to go to the palace and tell Penelope that he has arrived safely home.

Telemachus also orders Eumaeus not to go to Laertes, who has not been eating since he learned that Telemachus went on a voyage. Laertes has been grieving, apparently afraid that Telemachus will not come back from his journey alive. However, Telemachus does tell Eumaeus to tell Penelope to send a housekeeper to give the news to Laertes of Telemachus' safe return home.

This, of course, will allow Telemachus and his father to be alone together — a perfect time for the old beggar to tell Telemachus that he is Odysseus, his father.

When Eumaeus sees Penelope, by the way, he quietly gives her his news, which is the right thing to do — no need to tell the suitors also. A herald, however, announces the news loudly, alerting the suitors to the news that Telemachus has returned safely. See Fagles 16.356-378 / Johnston 16.403-424. It is a good thing that Eumaeus does this. The suitors know that Telemachus has arrived safely, but they don't know where he is staying. If they knew where he is staying, they could decide to kill him there.

• **Why does Odysseus decide to reveal himself to Telemachus?**

Telemachus has remembered and obeyed the instructions that Athena had given to him when she went to Sparta and told him to return to Ithaca. He was supposed to go to the swineherd's hut and then tell Eumaeus to go to the palace to let Penelope know that he had returned safe and sound.

Of course, in telling Telemachus to do this, Athena was setting up a meeting between father and son, and she was arranging for them to be alone together so that Odysseus could tell his son who he is — his father, returned after a 20-year absence.

After Eumaeus leaves, Athena stands outside the hut. Only Odysseus can see her; she does not reveal herself to Telemachus. The dogs sense her presence, but they whimper and move away. Athena makes a sign to Odysseus, he goes outside, and she tells him that now it is time for him to reveal his identity to his son.

Athena also transforms Odysseus. At the end of Book 13, as part of his disguise as an old beggar, she had made him look older. Now she makes him look younger:

[...] Athena
 touched Odysseus with her golden wand. To start with,
 she placed a well-washed cloak around his body,
 then made him taller and restored his youthful looks.
 His skin grew dark once more, his countenance filled out,
 and the beard around his chin turned black again.
 Once she'd done this, Athena left.
 (Johnston 16.216-222)

• **What is Telemachus' reaction when Odysseus tells him who he is?**

When Odysseus tells Telemachus who he is, that he is Telemachus' father, Telemachus can't believe it. Telemachus, for good reason, thinks that Odysseus must be a god. After all, just a moment he looked like an old beggar, but now he looks much different — taller, better looking, and even cleaner, because Athena has transformed the rags that the old beggar was wearing.

Odysseus makes a very simple speech to Telemachus, telling him that he is his father, and that no other Odysseus will ever return to him.

Odysseus says to Telemachus,

[...] "No, I am not a god,"
 the long-enduring, great Odysseus returned.
 "Why confuse me with one who never dies?
 No, I am your father —
 the Odysseus you wept for all your days,

you bore a world of pain, the cruel abuse of men.”

(Fagles 16.209-214)

Compare:

“I’m not one of the gods.

Why do you compare me to immortals?

But I am your father, on whose account

you grieve and suffer so much trouble,

having to endure men’s acts of violence.”

(Johnston 16.232-236)

Odysseus kisses his son, and he cries. This is really the first time on Ithaca that Odysseus can show how he feels. This is really the first time on Ithaca that he can cry.

But even now, Telemachus tells Odysseus, “No, you’re not Odysseus! Not my father!” (Fagles 16.220), even after Odysseus has told him that he is not a god.

Telemachus’ reaction to Odysseus’ speech is ironic. Odysseus is a master liar, and when he lies, he lies convincingly — so convincingly that people believe him. But now, when he tells the truth to his own son, his own son does not believe him.

• **Why can’t Odysseus prove to Telemachus who he is?**

Odysseus has no way to prove to his son who he is. Telemachus is going to have to accept that Odysseus is his father.

When Odysseus went away from Ithaca, Telemachus was an infant, so Odysseus can’t say, “Do you remember when” Odysseus and Telemachus have no shared memories because Odysseus was not around to make those memories with Telemachus.

When Odysseus went away from Ithaca, Telemachus was an infant, so Odysseus can’t say, “Let me show me you my scar, the scar that Odysseus had.” Telemachus was so young when Odysseus left that he doesn’t remember any distinctive scar. (We find out about the distinctive scar on Odysseus’ knee in Book 19.)

Odysseus can offer Telemachus no proof that he is his father. He can’t use birth certificates or anything like that because they didn’t exist back then. He can’t use DNA typing because that didn’t exist back then.

Telemachus simply has to accept that this man is his father. In a world before DNA typing, every son actually has to accept that a certain man is his father. It’s a matter of trust.

Odysseus says to Telemachus,

“Telemachus,” Odysseus, man of exploits, urged his son,

“it’s wrong to marvel, carried away in wonder so

to see your father here before your eyes.
 No other Odysseus will ever return to you.
 That man and I are one, the man you see ...
 here after many hardships,
 endless wanderings, after twenty years
 I have come home to native ground at last.”
 (Fagles 16.229-236)

Compare:

“Telemachus, it’s not appropriate for you
 to be overly surprised your father
 is back home or to be too astonished.
 You can rest assured — no other Odysseus
 will ever be arriving. I am here.
 I’ve endured a lot in many wanderings,
 and now, in the twentieth year, I’ve come back
 to my native land.”
 (Johnston 16.252-259)

• **Odysseus and Telemachus weep together. Why are they crying?**

Odysseus explains that the goddess is responsible for his transformation from the old beggar, and Telemachus finally accepts that the old beggar is his father. The two then weep together.

Homer uses a remarkable simile to describe the weeping of Odysseus and Telemachus. The simile is about loss.

Homer sings,

[...] the deep desire for tears welled up in both.
 They cried out, shrilling cries, pulsing sharper
 than birds of prey — eagles, vultures with hooked claws —
 when farmers plunder their nest of young too young to fly.
 Both men were so filled with compassion, eyes streaming tears,
 (Fagles 16.246-249)

Compare:

A desire to lament arose in both of them —
 they wailed aloud, as insistently as birds,
 like sea eagles or hawks with curving talons
 whose young have been carried off by country folk
 before they're fully fledged.

(Johnston 16.269-273)

Why are Odysseus and Telemachus weeping? They are weeping over the loss of the years that they could have spent together. Odysseus has lost so much by being away from Ithaca for 20 years. Odysseus has lost the opportunity to see Telemachus grow up, and Telemachus has lost the opportunity to have his father around while he was growing up.

In Homer's simile, farmers steal the young of birds of prey. Odysseus is a warrior, and in a way his child is stolen from him. Odysseus has seen Telemachus as an infant and as a young man. Odysseus has never seen Telemachus as a child. During all those years that Odysseus was away from home, his son was growing from an infant to a young man. Odysseus has lost the opportunity of seeing Telemachus grow up. Similarly, Telemachus' father was stolen from him. Telemachus never received the help that a father could give him.

Back in Book 13, when Odysseus wondered where Athena had been all these years, she replied, "I never had doubts myself, no, / I knew deep down that you would return at last, with all your shipmates lost" (Fagles 13.386-387).

For Athena, whether Odysseus makes it home three years after the Trojan War or 10 years after the Trojan War is not important. For Odysseus, it is very important. If he had returned home seven years earlier, he would have been able to watch and help Telemachus grow up to become a young man. If he had returned home seven years earlier, he and Penelope would perhaps have had more children. If he had returned home seven years earlier, he would have been able to take care of his father, who would not now be living like a poor farmer in the country. If he had returned home seven years earlier, the suitors would not now be living in his palace.

This is a sad scene as Odysseus and Telemachus mourn together over what they have lost. Much sadness hangs over the second half of the *Odyssey*. Finally, Odysseus and Telemachus are together again. Unfortunately, they can never recover the 20 years that they spent apart.

• After weeping, Odysseus begins to plot how to take back his palace. How many suitors must he and Telemachus overcome?

Odysseus is still a man of action, and after weeping with his son briefly, he immediately begins thinking about how he can regain his palace. The first thing he does after briefly telling Telemachus that the Phaeacians brought him to Ithaca, and that Athena is inspiring him, is to start gathering information from Telemachus about the number of suitors in the palace.

Telemachus tells Odysseus that 108 suitors are in the palace, and they have 10 servants in the palace (not counting the female servants who serve Penelope), so that is a total of 118 men — but two servants are loyal to Odysseus' family. In addition, at least one servant who works on a

farm (as a goatherd) is disloyal to Odysseus. Telemachus does not believe that he and Odysseus can kill all of the guilty men.

These are the numbers of the suitors (Fagles 16.278-283 / Johnston 16.309-316):

52: From Dulichion

24: From Same

20: From Zacynthus

12: From Ithaca

Total: 108

Plus, there are six servants from Dulichion and two meat-carvers. This makes 116 men.

Medon the herald (who is loyal to Penelope and is innocent) and Phemius the bard (who is innocent) are servants of Odysseus' household. Neither Medon nor Phemius will be killed.

• What is Odysseus' reaction after hearing how many suitors are in the palace? What must be Telemachus' reaction to that?

Odysseus believes that he and Telemachus can handle the killing of 108 suitors. With the help of the gods, they can recover the palace:

Then lord Odysseus,
who had endured so much, answered him and said:
“All right, I'll tell you. Pay attention now,
and listen. Do you believe Athena,
along with Father Zeus, will be enough
for the two of us, or should I think about
someone else to help us?”

(Johnston 16.322-328)

Odysseus does find a couple of loyal servants to help him and Telemachus, and Athena does help, and he and Telemachus in fact kill all the suitors.

We can guess at Telemachus' reaction to what his father says must be: “Wow!” Telemachus has always heard how great a soldier his father is, and now we have Odysseus showing how he got his reputation (*kleos*).

Telemachus grows up here. If his father says that they can defeat 108 suitors, so be it. This is one of the things that a father can do: help a son grow up by providing leadership and an example to follow.

• Which three responsibilities does Odysseus give to Telemachus?

Another way that Odysseus helps Telemachus to grow up is to share his plan, such as it is right now, with him and to trust him with responsibilities. Telemachus needs to return to the palace the next morning. Odysseus will arrive later, as it would be dangerous if the two walked into the palace together — people would wonder who is the old man with Telemachus, and they might see a resemblance between the two men. When Odysseus arrives, he will be in the character of an old beggar again — Athena will have transformed him with her wand once more.

Odysseus also gives Telemachus three very important instructions:

1) If the Suitors Abuse Odysseus, Telemachus Must Not React and Must Not Protect the Old Beggar Except with Words

Odysseus says,

“If they abuse me in the palace, steel yourself,
no matter what outrage I must suffer, even
if they drag me through our house by the heels
and throw me out or pelt me with things they hurl —
you just look on, endure it.”

(Fagles 16.305-309)

Compare:

“I’ll be looking like a beggar,
old and wretched. If they’re abusive to me,
let that dear heart in your chest endure it,
while I’m being badly treated, even if
they drag me by my feet throughout the house
and out the door or throw things and hit me.
Keep looking on, and hold yourself in check.
You can tell them to stop their foolishness,
but seek to win them over with nice words,
even though you’ll surely not convince them,
because the day they meet their fate has come.”

(Johnston 16.340-350)

Of course, if Telemachus were to seem overly concerned with the welfare of the old beggar, then the suitors will become curious about the old beggar. If they find out that the old beggar is Odysseus, they will kill him.

2) Telemachus Must Remove the Weapons that Hang on the Walls of the Great Hall and Put Them in a Storage Room

Odysseus also entrusts Telemachus with the responsibility of taking the weapons off the walls of the Great Hall and putting them in a storage room. Odysseus is thinking ahead here. The suitors do their feasting in the Great Hall, so that is an obvious place for the battle to occur. If Odysseus and Telemachus fight the suitors there, they don't want the suitors to be able to grab weapons off the walls. It would be much better for Odysseus and Telemachus to be armed, and for the suitors to be unarmed.

3) Odysseus Tells Telemachus that He Must Not Tell Anyone that Odysseus has returned.

Telemachus must not tell anyone, not even his mother, Penelope, that Odysseus has returned and is in disguise as an old beggar.

• Why are these responsibilities important? What is Odysseus helping Telemachus to do?

Odysseus is doing here what fathers do. He is helping Telemachus to grow up by entrusting him with responsibility.

Odysseus is treating Telemachus as an adult now. Telemachus has three crucially important things to do, and if he messes up, then both he and Odysseus can end up dead:

- 1) If Telemachus were to overact if the suitors mistreated the old beggar, he would bring attention to the old beggar. That could cause the suitors to learn that the old beggar is Odysseus, and the suitors would kill both Telemachus and Odysseus.
- 2) If Telemachus fails to take the weapons off the walls of the Great Hall, then the suitors will be able to arm themselves once the slaughter starts, and almost certainly they will kill Telemachus and Odysseus.
- 3) If Telemachus tells anyone, including Penelope (who is always with servant women, some of them disloyal) that the old beggar is Odysseus, that could cause the suitors to learn that the old beggar is Odysseus, and the suitors would kill both Telemachus and Odysseus.

Odysseus trusts his son, Telemachus, with his life. Telemachus must react the right way, and he must act the right way. Telemachus has to act much like Odysseus is acting while he is in disguise as an old beggar. Odysseus is a mature man, and Telemachus must become a mature man.

• Odysseus plans to test the slaves to see who is loyal to him. What is Telemachus' advice to Odysseus?

Telemachus does not think that it would be a good idea to go from farm to farm, testing the fieldhands. As Telemachus says, that would take a lot of time. We will see, though, that Odysseus tests a few slaves whom he runs across. Telemachus also advises testing the women slaves to see who is loyal to them.

• **At the end of Book 16, we get to see just how evil Antinous is. What does he plan to do?**

At the end of Book 16, we get to see just how evil Antinous and Eurymachus are. Both suitors plotted to kill Telemachus when he returned from his journey to Argos and Sparta.

Back in Book 4, Antinous plotted to kill Telemachus when he returned from the mainland:

Antinous said,

“He’ll soon begin
creating problems for us. I hope Zeus
will sap his strength before he comes of age
and reaches full maturity. Come now,
give me a swift ship and twenty comrades,
so I can watch for him and set an ambush,
as he navigates his passage through the strait
dividing Ithaca from rugged Samos,
and bring this trip searching for his father
to a dismal end.”

(Johnston 4.898-907)

Definitely, the suitors are dangerous. In Book 4, they plotted to kill Telemachus, in addition to marrying Penelope and taking over Odysseus’ palace. By the way, the suitors all approve of Antinous’ plot to kill Telemachus:

They all roared approval, urged him on.

(Fagles 4.758)

Compare:

When Antinous had finished,
all of them agreed, and they instructed him
to carry out what he’d proposed.

(Johnston 4.907-909)

The suitors also put the plot in action. Antinous picked out “twenty first-rate men” (Fagles 4.876) to wait in ambush for Telemachus to return from the mainland.

Of course, because of the advice of Athena, Telemachus avoided the ambush and returned safely to Ithaca. The suitors who waited in ambush have learned of Telemachus’ safe return and now return to the palace of Odysseus.

Antinous is in favor of killing Telemachus quickly. He recognizes that Telemachus is a growing threat to the suitors. For example, Telemachus has helped turn the people of Ithaca against the suitors, apparently through the council he spoke at in Book 2. Therefore, we know that Telemachus' resistance against the suitors has had some effect. Antinous is also worried that Telemachus will call another council and tell the people that the suitors tried to kill him.

From Antinous' speech, we learn that Telemachus is now a threat to the suitors and so Antinous — who is upset because the suitors' previous plan to kill Telemachus failed — urges the suitors again to kill him:

“So here at home we'll plot his certain death:
 he must never slip through our hands again,
 that boy — while he still lives,
 I swear we'll never bring our venture off.
 The clever little schemer, he does have his skills,
 and the crowds no longer show us favor, not at all.
 So act! before he can gather his people in assembly.
 He'll never give in an inch, I know, he'll rise
 and rage away, shouting out to all how we,
 we schemed his sudden death but never caught him.
 Hearing of our foul play, they'll hardly sing our praises.
 Why, they might do us damage, run us off our lands,
 drive us abroad to hunt for strangers' shores.
 Strike first, I say, and kill him! —
 clear of town, in the fields or on the road.”

(Fagles 16.410-420)

Compare:

“But let's think about
 a sad end for Telemachus right here
 and ensure he doesn't get away from us.
 For as long as he's alive, I don't think
 we'll be successful in what we're doing.
 He himself is clever, shrewd in counsel,
 and now people don't regard us well at all.

So come now, before he calls Achaeans
to assembly. I don't think he will give up.
He'll get angry and stand up to proclaim
to everyone how we planned to kill him,
and how we didn't get him. The people
will resent us, once they learn about
our nasty acts. Take care they do not harm us
and force us out, away from our own land,
until we reach a foreign country. And so,
let's move first — capture him out in the fields,
far from the city, or else on the road.”

(Johnston 16.460-477)

The suitors regard Telemachus as a threat now — that is why they are plotting to kill him. Ever since Book 1, Telemachus has been growing up and now the suitors want him dead. Because Telemachus is showing signs of maturity, he is a threat to the suitors, and they want him dead.

We also find out what the suitors' plans are for Odysseus' estate and why so many suitors are willing to kill Telemachus although only one is able to marry Penelope — all will get a share of the estate:

“We ourselves will keep the property he owns,
his wealth, too, and share it appropriately
among us. As for possession of the house,
that's something we should give his mother
and the man who marries her.”

(Johnston 16.478-482)

• How does Amphinomus react to the suitors' plot?

Amphinomus speaks out against the plan to kill Telemachus. He is one of the better suitors (although he too will die). He says that the suitors should determine the will of the gods. If the gods favor Telemachus' death, so be it, but if they oppose his death, the suitors should not plot to kill him.

Amphinomus does not want to murder Telemachus, and he advises the suitors against it:

“My friends,
I wouldn't want to slay Telemachus.

It's reprehensible to kill someone
 of royal blood. But first let's ask the gods
 for their advice. If great Zeus' oracles
 approve the act, I myself will kill him
 and tell all other men to do so, too.
 But if the gods decline, I say we stop."
 (Johnston 16.499-506)

By the way, all the suitors, including Amphinomus, will be killed by Odysseus and Telemachus (and two loyal male servants who take care of Odysseus' animals) in the Great Hall. Odysseus, in disguise as the old beggar, will risk his life to warn Amphinomus to leave (Book 18), but Amphinomus will not leave. He will be the third suitor to die, and he will be killed by Telemachus: Fagles 22.94-105.

We learn that Penelope respects Amphinomus to some extent. He is "the man who pleased Penelope the most, / thanks to his timely words and good clear sense" (Fagles 16.441-442). One thing to learn here is that in a society without fathers, even a basically good person can go wrong.

• **How do Medon and Penelope react to the suitors' plot?**

We also learn that the herald Medon is loyal to Penelope and to Telemachus. (Medon's life will be spared when Odysseus kills the suitors.) He overhears the suitors' plot and tells Penelope, who confronts the suitors.

Here we see that Eurymachus, one of the two leaders of the suitors, is a hypocrite. He has been plotting to kill Telemachus, but he tells Penelope that he will allow no harm to come to Telemachus. However, Homer tells us that in his mind Eurymachus continues to plot Telemachus' death.

Penelope criticizes Antinous to his face, pointing out that Odysseus had once helped his father, a suppliant, who had fled to Ithaca because people were pursuing him because he had joined some pirates out to attack the people's allies. Odysseus held back the would-be killers. For this, Antinous should be grateful to Odysseus. Penelope says to Antinous,

"Do you not know your father came here
 a fugitive, afraid of his own people?
 They were extremely angry with him,
 because he'd joined with Taphian pirates
 to cause trouble for the Thesprotians,
 who were allied with us. Those men wished
 to kill him, rip out his heart, and devour

his huge and pleasant livelihood. But then,
 Odysseus restrained them, kept them in check,
 for all their eagerness. Now you eat up
 that man's home without paying anything,
 court his wife, attempt to kill his son,
 and cause me much distress. So stop all this,
 I tell you, and order other suitors
 to do the same."

(Johnston 16.532-546)

Of course, because Odysseus respected Antinous' father the suppliant, Antinous ought to protect Penelope and Telemachus, not plot to harm them. As we see in the *Iliad*, guest-friendship is hereditary. In Book 6 of Homer's *Iliad*, Glaucus and Diomedes discover that they are guest-friends because their grandfathers were guest-friends.

Xenia plays an important role in both the first half and the second half of the *Odyssey*.

• **At the end of Book 16, we get to see just how evil Eurymachus is. How does he respond to Penelope?**

Eurymachus responds to Penelope, telling her no one will harm Telemachus while he, Eurymachus, is still alive. He is lying, of course. He lies even though when he was a child, Odysseus held him in his lap and fed him bites of meat and gave him sips of wine. Both Antinous and Eurymachus, the main suitors, are evil.

Eurymachus says,

"Wise Penelope, daughter of Icarius, courage!
 Disabuse yourself of all these worries now.
 That man is not alive —
 he never will be, he never can be born —
 who'll lift a hand against Telemachus, your son,
 not while *I* walk the land and I can see the light.
 I tell you this — so help me, it will all come true —
 in an instant that man's blood will spurt around my spear!
 My spear, since time and again Odysseus dandled me
 on his knees, the great raider of cities fed me
 roasted meat and held the red wine to my lips.

So to *me* your son is the dearest man alive,
 and I urge the boy to have no fear of death,
 not from the suitors at least.
 What comes from the gods — there's no escaping that."
 (Fagles 16.482-496)

Compare:

"Wise Penelope,
 daughter of Icarius, cheer up. Don't let
 these things concern your heart. No man living
 and no man born and no one yet to be
 will lay hands on your son Telemachus,
 not while I'm alive, gazing on the earth.
 I tell you this — and it will truly happen —
 that man's black blood will quickly saturate
 my spear, for Odysseus, sacker of cities,
 also set me on his knees many times
 and put roast meat into my hands and held
 red wine up for me. Thus, Telemachus
 is far the dearest of all men to me.
 I say to him — don't be afraid of death,
 not from the suitors, but there's no way out
 when death comes from the gods."
 (Johnston 16.547-562)

However, Homer tells us that Eurymachus was "all the while / plotting the prince's murder in his mind" (Fagles 16.497-498).

In Book 9 of the *Iliad*, Phoenix was chosen to be part of the embassy to Achilles because he was a father-figure to Achilles. In this society, people respect their fathers and they respect their elders. Odysseus should be regarded as a father-figure by Eurymachus, yet Eurymachus would be happy if Odysseus were dead.

- **Both Antinous and Eurymachus ought to be loyal to Odysseus; instead, they plot his son's death.**

Both Antinous and Eurymachus ought to be loyal to Odysseus:

- 1) Antinous' father owes Odysseus. Antinous' father had joined a bunch of pirates and had become a fugitive fleeing from a mob of people who wished him dead. Odysseus, however, saved him from the mob. Because Odysseus and his father were friends and had a guest-host relationship, that relationship should hold between Odysseus and Antinous.
- 2) As for Eurymachus, when he was a baby, Odysseus had fed him bites of meat and had let him drink sips of wine (which no doubt had been mixed with water). (The ancients regarded alcohol differently from the way we regard it.)

Both Antinous and Eurymachus should be loyal to Odysseus (and to Telemachus), but instead they plot his death.

• **What happens at the very end of Book 16?**

At the very end of Book 16, Eumaeus reports to Telemachus that he saw a ship filled with men carrying spears and shields pulling into port. These are the suitors who had wanted to kill Telemachus but had been thwarted by Athena.

Hearing Eumaeus' news, Telemachus smiles. Because of Athena's visit to him in Sparta, he knows who these men are — they are suitors who wanted to kill him when he returned from the mainland.

Telemachus also glances at his father. They have bonded a lot in one day. They eat, the sun sets, and they all go to sleep.

Conclusion

In Book 17, Odysseus, still in disguise as the old beggar, makes his way to his palace.

Odyssey, Book 17:
“Stranger at the Gates”
“Odysseus Goes to the Palace as a Beggar”

Introduction

In Book 17, Odysseus travels to his palace while still disguised as an old beggar. He has two significant encounters. One encounter is with a slave who is not loyal to him, the goatherd Melanthius. The other encounter is with his aged dog, Argos, which recognizes him.

• Why is Telemachus rude to the old beggar (Odysseus)? Why do Telemachus and Odysseus arrive at the palace separately?

As Book 17 begins, Telemachus is rude to the old beggar. He says that he wants the old beggar to beg in town because he (Telemachus) is tired of taking care of old beggars. Of course, Odysseus will go to the palace to beg. Telemachus is being rude on purpose to divert suspicion in case someone, including Eumaeus, should think that the old beggar means anything to him.

Telemachus orders Eumaeus,

“[...] I’m telling you to do as follows —
 take this wretched stranger to the city.
 Once there, he can beg food from anyone
 who’ll offer him some bread and cups of water.
 I can’t take on the weight of everyone,
 not when I have these sorrows in my heart.
 As for the stranger, if he’s very angry,
 things will be worse for him. Those are the facts,
 and I do like to speak the truth.”

(Johnston 17.10-18)

This is intelligent on Telemachus’ part. He must treat this old beggar no differently from other beggars. He has told other strangers to find *xenia* other than at the palace, so he tells this old beggar the same thing.

Odysseus responds in character as the old beggar. Beggars do better at begging in homes than in fields, he says, and when he is warm from the fire he will go with Eumaeus to the town. Of course, Odysseus is observing good *xenia* here. Guests ought not to outstay their welcome.

Telemachus is not showing good *xenia*, but he has good reasons for it:

- 1) Telemachus can’t treat this old beggar any differently from the way he treats other beggars.

2) Because Telemachus is not master of his own house, he is afraid that the suitors will mistreat beggars, so he tends not to invite beggars to his house. Of course, when beggars do arrive at his palace, he treats them well since in general he observes *xenia*. However, Telemachus tends not to invite beggars to his house.

Telemachus arrives at the palace before the old beggar. That is very intelligent. Lots of people know that Telemachus went looking for news of his father. If Telemachus arrives with an old man, the suitors will guess that the old man is his father, and they will kill him.

• **How does Telemachus behave at the palace?**

At the palace, Telemachus metaphorically breaks some apron strings. When Telemachus arrives at the palace, he meets two women who seem to believe that Telemachus is tied to their apron strings: the old servant Eurycleia and his mother, Penelope. Eurycleia, the other maids, and Penelope surround and kiss Telemachus, glad that he is home. But when Penelope asks for news of Odysseus, Telemachus asks her to take a bath and put on fresh clothes and go to her own quarters. Note that Penelope does as she is told. Only later will Telemachus tell his mother the news he has found out. Perhaps Telemachus does not want the suitors to learn the news he gathered during his journey just yet. Since Penelope is always surrounded by female servants, some of whom are disloyal, the suitors will soon know exactly what Telemachus tells Penelope.

Penelope, of course, must be bursting with curiosity. For one thing, Telemachus tells her that he “just escaped from death. Sudden death” (Fagles 17.47). Still, she obeys her son.

Telemachus sees the suitors in the Great Hall, the place where they dine. The suitors are hypocrites. They greet him with nice-sounding words, but of course they have been plotting to kill him. Telemachus avoids the suitors and goes to the table where good and loyal people such as Mentor sit.

Telemachus does take good care of his guest, the prophet Theoclymenus. He wanted his friend Piraeus to take care of him for a while, but now Telemachus is acting properly as host. Telemachus’ plan was that Piraeus would take care of Theoclymenus until Telemachus returned to the palace, and then Telemachus would take care of Theoclymenus. Telemachus had good reason for doing that. He knew that the suitors would not respect a suppliant, and Telemachus wanted to be around to protect the suppliant. Now that Telemachus is in his palace again, he can look after his guest and make sure that he is well cared for. Like a good host, Telemachus greets his friend and his guest: Piraeus and Theoclymenus. He goes to see them outside on the meeting grounds, and he goes to greet and talk to them.

Piraeus wants Telemachus to collect the gifts that Telemachus received from Menelaus and Helen, but Telemachus wants Piraeus to hold on to them for now. Telemachus knows that he may be killed soon, and if he is murdered, he wants Piraeus to have the possessions. Telemachus then leads Theoclymenus to his house, and they receive baths, and they eat. Telemachus is providing good *xenia* to Theoclymenus.

Probably the good *xenia* is in part due to the return of Odysseus to Ithaca. Telemachus may feel much more the master of his own house, and thus able to give *xenia* to other people. However, in Book 1 he gave good *xenia* to the disguised Athena, so he is a good person in his own right.

• **Which news does Penelope receive in Book 17?**

Now that he has bathed, Telemachus gives Penelope news about his journey, telling her what Menelaus and Nestor had told him. Following Odysseus' instructions, Telemachus does not tell her any news that Odysseus is still alive and is in disguise as the old beggar.

Theoclymenus prophesies good news. He tells Penelope that Odysseus is still alive and is on Ithaca at that moment. In addition, he tells Penelope that Odysseus is plotting the ruin of the suitors.

We — Homer's audience — know that Theoclymenus is correct because we have special information that Penelope does not have.

Penelope tells Theoclymenus,

“Ah stranger, I wish what you've just said
might come about. Then you'd quickly learn
how kind we are, how many gifts I'd give —
anyone you met would call you blessed.”

(Johnston 17.209-212)

Of course, many people have been lying to Penelope in order to get gifts from her, but we know that Theoclymenus is not lying.

Beginning with Book 17, Penelope may begin to hope. She seems gradually to believe that it is possible that Odysseus is alive and that she will be rid of the suitors before long. She also learns that people such as Menelaus are outraged by the actions of the suitors — Telemachus tells her that. However, Penelope is cautious. She does not give Theoclymenus gifts right away, but she says that he will get them “If only [...] / everything you say would come to pass!” (Fagles 17.177-178).

• **In Book 17, Odysseus has two significant encounters. The first is with the slave Melanthius. What kind of a character is Melanthius?**

On their way to the palace, Odysseus and Eumaeus meet a disloyal slave, the goatherd Melanthius. Melanthius is evil, and he is treacherous, as we see by the way he treats the old beggar.

Melanthius is one of Odysseus' slaves, and he herds Odysseus' goats. However, Melanthius is a treacherous goatherd. He is not loyal to Odysseus at all, in contrast to Eumaeus, the loyal swineherd.

Melanthius is a cruel man. When Odysseus and Eumaeus are on their way to the town (and Odysseus' palace), they see Melanthius. Immediately, he insults the two men. He refers to “one scum nosing the other scum along” (Fagles 17.236) and calls Eumaeus a “Wretched pig-boy” (Fagles 17.238).

Melanthius also insults Odysseus by saying that he is too lazy to work for a living:

“If you'd let me have him guard my farmyard,

clean out the pens, and carry tender shoots
 to my young goats, then he could drink down whey
 and put some muscle on those thighs of his.
 But since he's picked up his thieving habits,
 he won't want to get too close to real work.
 No. He'd rather creep around the country
 and beg food to fill his bottomless gut."

(Johnston 17.282-289)

Melanthius also says that if the old beggar enters the palace, the suitors will treat him badly and fling footstools at him. This is true. The suitors certainly do not respect the old beggar, and we see that the suitors will throw things at the old beggar. Antinous will fling a footstool at him. Eurymachus also will fling a footstool at him, but misses. In addition, Ctesippus will fling an oxhoof at him.

Next, Melanthius kicks the old beggar:

Melanthius finished, and as he moved on past them,
 in his stupidity he kicked Odysseus on the hip.
 But that didn't push Odysseus off the pathway.
 He stood there without budging.

(Johnston 17.296-299)

Odysseus has to remain in character as the old beggar. He thinks about killing Melanthius, but that would bring unwanted attention to him, so he does not. Odysseus passes this trial well.

Eumaeus is loyal, and his loyalty is reconfirmed here. He prays that Odysseus will come back and punish Melanthius. Melanthius, however, is completely convinced that Odysseus is dead, and he says that he hopes that Telemachus will die, too.

Odysseus is severely tested here because Melanthius makes it clear that he wishes that Telemachus were dead:

"Just let Apollo shoot Telemachus down with his silver bow,
 today in the halls, or the suitors snuff his life out —
 as sure as I know the day of the king's return
 is blotted out, the king is worlds away!"

(Fagles 17.275-278)

Compare:

"How I wish Apollo with his silver bow

would strike Telemachus in his own house
 this very day, or that he'd be overwhelmed
 by those suitors, since the day Odysseus
 will be returning home has been wiped out
 in some land far away."

(Johnston 17.318-323)

Obviously, Melanthius is disloyal and someone who deserves to be punished severely.

• **The meeting with Melanthius has two purposes. What are they?**

The two purposes of Odysseus' meeting with Melanthius are these:

1) The encounter with Melanthius is another emotional trial for Odysseus.

Obviously, this is an emotional trial. Previously, Odysseus has had to keep his feelings in check, but his feelings were feelings of joy at seeing Ithaca again and seeing his son again.

This, time, he has to keep a feeling of anger in check. Odysseus is the King of Ithaca, and kings are not used to being kicked by the slaves they own. However, beggars are accustomed to being kicked. Odysseus must respond to Melanthius the way an old beggar would respond, not the way a king would respond.

An even greater emotional trial for Odysseus occurs when Melanthius says that he wishes that Telemachus were dead.

2. Odysseus learns that some slaves are disloyal to him.

Obviously, the suitors would like to kill Telemachus and Odysseus, and so would at least some of their servants. In addition, some of Odysseus' slaves are disloyal to him and they would also like Telemachus and Odysseus dead.

After Eumaeus prays that Odysseus would return to Ithaca to punish Melanthius for the way that Melanthius has treated the old beggar, Melanthius threatens to sell Eumaeus as a slave:

"Listen to him," the goatherd shouted back.

"All bark and no bite from the vicious mutt!

One fine day I'll ship him out in a black lugger,
 miles from Ithaca — sell him off for a good stiff price!"

(Fagles 17.271-274)

Compare:

"Dear me, the things this crafty mongrel says!

I'll take him someday on a trim black ship

far from Ithaca — he can make me very rich.”

(Johnston 17.315-317)

Unfortunately, for Odysseus, other servants — women — will also be disloyal to him but loyal to the suitors.

• **In Book 17, Odysseus has two significant encounters. The second is with the aged dog Argos. In what way is Odysseus’ encounter with Argos an emotional trial?**

Odysseus and Eumaeus have been traveling to town, and now they reach the courtyard of Odysseus’ palace. There Odysseus sees his aged dog Argos, lying on a heap of dung, aka manure. This aged dog recognizes Odysseus, although Odysseus has been away for 20 years. When Odysseus left Ithaca, the dog was very young, and now the dog is very old, since most dogs live to be only 12 or 13 years old.

This is an emotional trial because although the dog recognizes Odysseus, Odysseus cannot react to the aged dog, other than to secretly wipe away a tear at how the dog is being mistreated.

We read:

And so these two men
talked to each other about these things. Then a dog
lying there raised its head and pricked up its ears.
It was Argus, brave Odysseus’ hunting dog,
whom he himself had brought up many years ago.
But before he could enjoy being with his dog,
he left for sacred Troy. In earlier days, young men
would take the dog to hunt wild goats, deer, and rabbits,
(Johnston 17.373-380)

The dog is on the top of the pile of dung probably because it is warm there.

According to a Canadian pet information center, dogs don’t live long lives:

The average life span of the North American or European dog is 12.8 years. This is a large increase in life span over the past 100 years and is mostly attributable to better food and better medical care. Within this 12.8 year average for all dogs is a large range of life spans where certain breeds live longer and certain breeds live less long. In general, larger dogs live shorter lives than smaller dogs. This is due to the fact that the bodies of larger dogs must work harder (are more stressed) than the bodies of smaller dogs. That said, the life expectancy of any one dog in particular is ALSO determined by the stresses in its life (both physical and psychological), what it eats and how well it is taken care of.

Source: <http://www.pets.ca/pettips/tips-46.htm>

Date Downloaded: 1 October 2008

However, reports of old dogs exist. An article dated 8 September 2008 in the *Telegraph*, a British newspaper, reported on a Lab thought to be 29 years old:

Sarah Knapton, “Oldest dog Bella the Labrador dies - aged 29”

A dog believed to be the oldest in the world has died, aged 29 years.

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/5addg8>

• **In what way is Argos a symbol of the state of Odysseus’ palace?**

We see a number of things here. We can look at Argos as being a symbol of the state of Odysseus’ palace and Ithacan society. For one thing, the dog is neglected now. It would be better if the dog, which was once a fine dog, were taken care of. Instead, it is lying neglected and covered with ticks.

In addition, the pile of dung is lying there in the courtyard. If the servants were doing their jobs, the manure would be taken away and used to fertilize the fields.

Eumaeus says,

“[...] Slaves
with their lords no longer there to crack the whip,
lose all zest to perform their duties well.”
(Fagles 17.352-354)

Compare:

“For when their masters
no longer exercise their power, slaves
have no desire to do their proper work.
Far-seeing Zeus steals half the value of a man
the day he’s taken and becomes a slave.”
(Johnston 17.406-410)

• **In what way is Argos a symbol of the state of Ithacan society?**

Many years ago, when classics scholar Elizabeth Vandiver was teaching the *Odyssey* for one of the first times she taught it, when she was going through this scene in the classroom, a student who had not said a single word during the whole term and who always sat in the very back row of the classroom, suddenly sat upright, and said, “Yes, and the ticks are draining Argos’ lifeblood just as the suitors are draining the substance of the palace” (*The Odyssey of Homer* 123). The student then sat back down and never said another word for the rest of the course. According to Ms. Vandiver, this is “[t]he clearest example of the Muse striking that I have ever seen in my life” (*The Odyssey of Homer* 123). She adds that the student was “absolutely right” (*The Odyssey of Homer* 123). We’re told that Argos is covered with ticks and they are draining his lifeblood and that’s just the way the suitors are draining the substance of the palace.

The ticks infesting Argos are like the suitors infesting the palace. Argos was once a fine dog, but now he is neglected. Once, Ithaca was a well-ordered kingdom, but now it is in disorder because the king — Odysseus — and a generation of men have been away so long. We can see that in the dung pile. The manure should have been hauled away and put on the fields for fertilizer, but instead it is lying by the gate of the palace, stinking up the place. Now that Odysseus has been away for so long, many of the servants no longer do their work well.

• **In what way does Argos symbolize the consequences of Odysseus' entry into the palace?**

As Odysseus crosses the threshold and walks into the palace, Argos dies.

We can see Argos again as being a symbol here. The old society of Ithaca, in which the suitors run wild, *xenia* is violated, and servants are disloyal and don't do their jobs, is about to die. Odysseus has returned to his palace, and soon he will set things right again. The suitors will be punished, the disloyal servants will be punished, and Telemachus will be respected again. The slaves will do the jobs that they are supposed to do.

When Argos dies, Odysseus steps into the palace. When Argos dies, it shows that the state of affairs will no longer be as they were. For a long time, the suitors have had their way, but now Odysseus is back, and he will rid his palace of the suitors. The old way of doing things is dead, and this is represented in symbolic terms by the death of Argos.

Out with the old; in with the new.

• **In what way does Argos show that Odysseus' disguise as an old beggar is not perfect?**

Argos shows that Odysseus' disguise as an old beggar is not perfect. There is danger that someone will recognize Odysseus. Fortunately, the suitors are all young, but an older visitor to or an older person in the palace could recognize him.

Occasionally, someone will come close to recognizing Odysseus. Someone will say that the old beggar looks the way that Odysseus would look after many years of hardship.

• **In what way do Argos and Odysseus have missing years just as Odysseus and Telemachus do?**

Odysseus and Argos have a lot of missing years, just like Odysseus and Telemachus. When Odysseus left, Argos was a very young dog and Telemachus was an infant; when Odysseus comes back, Argos is a very old dog and Telemachus is a young man.

• **On the surface the scene with Argos is merely touching, but Homer uses it to make important points in the *Odyssey*.**

Here we see a master poet at work. The scene with Argos is touching — especially to those who have known loyal pets. However, Odysseus uses this scene to bring up important points:

The meeting with Argos is another emotional trial for Odysseus.

Argos symbolizes the disordered state of Odysseus' palace.

Argos symbolizes the disordered state of society on Ithaca.

Argos symbolizes the consequences of Odysseus' entry into the palace.

Odysseus and Argos have missing years just as Odysseus and Penelope, and Odysseus and Telemachus, have missing years.

The meeting with Argos shows that Odysseus' disguise is not perfect — it is possible for him to be recognized.

• **Odysseus enters the palace (his own palace) and begs for food (his own food), which the suitors are eating). How does Antinous treat the old beggar?**

After feeding the old beggar, Telemachus tells the old beggar to also beg from the suitors. Of course, this is a good way for Odysseus to talk to the suitors and see who his enemies are. Also, of course, the beggar will need food for his next meal.

Athena also tells Odysseus to beg, although the bard tells us that Athena will not allow even one suitor to escape with his life:

And now Athena came to the side of Laertes' royal son
and urged him, "Go now, gather crusts from all the suitors,
test them, so we can tell the innocent from the guilty."
But not even then would Athena save one man from death."
(Fagles 17.396-399)

Compare:

But Athena approached Odysseus, Laertes' son,
and urged him to collect bread from the suitors,
so he might find out those who did respect the law
and those who flouted their traditions. Even so,
she wouldn't let any man escape destruction.
(Johnston 17.456-460)

Antinous treats Odysseus badly in this book. Odysseus, in character as an old beggar, goes around to each of the suitors begging for scraps. Most of the suitors give him scraps — which are Odysseus' own food, of course, since the suitors are feasting at his expense — but Antinous refuses to give the old beggar anything.

Actually, Antinous does give one thing to Odysseus. He throws a stool at Odysseus and hits him in the back. Odysseus is not staggered by the blow.

• **How does Odysseus warn Antinous?**

The suitors receive many warnings that they are not behaving well. Odysseus himself warns Antinous after Antinous hits him with a stool:

"Listen to me, you suitors of the splendid queen,
so I can say what the heart in my chest prompts.

There's no pain in a man's heart, no grieving,
 when he's hit fighting for his own possessions,
 for cattle or white sheep. But Antinous
 struck me because of my wretched belly,
 that curse which gives men all kinds of trouble.
 So if beggars have their gods and Furies,
 may Antinous come to a fatal end,
 before his wedding day."

(Johnston 17.602-611)

These are strong words by a beggar, but because the violation of *xenia* by Antinous is serious, the old beggar can get away with saying these words.

The reaction of the suitors to Antinous' throwing of the stool and to Odysseus' warning to Antinous is interesting. They think that he should treat strangers better; after all, the stranger could be a god in disguise and then Antinous would be in real trouble. As we know, this is true in the *Odyssey*. Athena frequently takes on mortal shape and interacts with mortals.

The suitors are aware that some suppliants are gods in disguise. If Odysseus were a god in disguise, things would go badly for Antinous and perhaps for all the suitors. Something similar is actually going on. Odysseus is not a god in disguise, but a goddess is his patron and she will make sure that all of the suitors are killed.

Telemachus follows Odysseus' orders to him. He says nothing to the suitors about their treatment of the old beggar:

Telemachus,
 having seen the blow, felt pain growing in his heart.
 But his eyelids shed no tears upon the ground.
 No. He shook his head in silence and kept planning
 dark schemes in his heart.

(Johnston 17.626-630)

• **How does Penelope react when she hears that an old beggar has arrived on Ithaca?**

Penelope becomes aware of a disturbance in the Great Hall. After all, the throwing of the stool resulted in a lot of noise, including the shouts of the other suitors who are appalled by Antinous' actions.

When Penelope hears that Antinous throw a stool at and hit a guest, she is outraged at the violation of *xenia* and says,

"May Apollo the Archer strike you just as hard!"

(Fagles 17.547)

Compare:

“How I wish that he, too, might be struck
by Apollo, that celebrated archer.”

(Johnston 17.633-634)

We see that another servant is loyal to Odysseus. The housekeeper agrees with Penelope’s wish about Antinous:

And her housekeeper Eurynome added quickly,

“If only our prayers were granted —
then not one of the lot would live to see
Dawn climb her throne tomorrow!”

(Fagles 17.548-551)

Compare:

Then housekeeper Eurynome said to her:

“Oh, if only our prayers could be fulfilled,
not one of them would see Dawn’s lovely throne.”

(Johnston 17.635-637)

Penelope wants to talk to the old beggar immediately so she can ask if he has any news about Odysseus; therefore, after asking that Eumaeus come to her, she asks him to bring the old beggar to her right away:

“Good Eumaeus, go and ask the stranger
to come here, so I can greet him warmly
and ask if he perhaps has heard about
my brave Odysseus, or caught sight of him
with his own eyes. He looks like a man
who’s spent a long time wandering around.”

(Johnston 17.650-655)

Eumaeus speaks highly of the old beggar. We know that Odysseus is a good storyteller who is able to charm his audience, and Eumaeus says straight out that the old beggar was able to charm him with his stories.

Eumaeus passes on the old beggar’s news:

“He insists he’s heard about Odysseus —
 he’s close by, still alive in the rich land
 of Thesprotians — with many treasures
 which he’s going to bring back home.”

(Johnston 17.674-677)

We have seen how cautious Eumaeus is about believing that Odysseus will return to Ithaca. Apparently, the old beggar has gained some credibility with Eumaeus, and Eumaeus is now more inclined to believe that Odysseus will return to Ithaca soon.

Again, Penelope asks Eumaeus to bring the old beggar to her, and then she complains about the suitors, saying,

“There’s no one like Odysseus here who’ll guard
 our house from ruin. If Odysseus came,
 got back to his native land, he and his son
 would quickly take their vengeance on these men
 for their violent ways.”

(Johnston 17.688-692)

At this point, Telemachus sneezes.

Human beings can’t control sneezes; therefore, the ancient Greeks thought that the gods sent sneezes as a lucky omen. Telemachus’ sneezing at this moment is a sign that Odysseus and Telemachus will succeed in ridding the palace of the unwelcome suitors.

Telemachus is changing, and so is Penelope. She is becoming more assertive. She now says straight out and for the first time that she wants the suitors dead.

• How does Odysseus reply to Penelope’s request that he speak with her? Is this the way most beggars would act?

Odysseus’ reply to Penelope’s request is odd for an old beggar. What would an old beggar normally do? If the Queen wanted to talk to him, the old beggar would go to her immediately. By not seeing Penelope immediately at her request, an old beggar could be seen as being rude and could lose his welcome at the palace.

The old beggar tells Eumaeus that he will talk to Penelope and will answer all her questions, but he will do that later, when it is dark.

Odysseus must again be a master of rhetoric. He must artfully come up with an excuse not to see Penelope now. The excuse must be reasonable, so that he does not seem to be disrespecting Penelope. Therefore, Odysseus comes up with the excuse that he is afraid of the suitors, one of whom has already thrown a stool at him:

“But I fear

this abusive crowd of suitors, whose pride
and violence reach up to iron heaven.
Just now, as I was moving through the house,
doing nothing wrong, this man struck me
and caused me pain. Meanwhile Telemachus
couldn't do a thing to stop him, nor could
any other man."

(Johnston 17.721-728)

The old beggar asks Eumaeus to tell Penelope that he will talk to her later — after sunset. The suitors will go to wherever it is that they sleep, and Odysseus will talk to her then.

Penelope is surprised that the old beggar does not come to her immediately. However, she listens to the explanation that Eumaeus says the beggar gave him, and like Eumaeus, she thinks that the beggar is wise:

"The stranger is not stupid. For he thinks
about those things that well may happen.
I don't believe there are any mortal men
who are as high handed as these suitors are,
the way they plan their wicked foolishness."

(Johnston 17.752-756)

• Why wouldn't Odysseus want Penelope to see him in the full light of day? What could happen if Penelope were to recognize him?

Of course, Odysseus does not want to see Penelope while it is daylight. In good light, she may recognize him. If she were to betray by her words that she recognizes him, the disloyal serving women would run to the suitors and tell them that Odysseus has returned. Then the suitors would kill Odysseus.

Yes, there are disloyal serving women around, as we will see. In this culture, no married woman would be alone with an old beggar. She would always be with serving women, unless she were alone with her husband.

We will learn that some of the serving women have taken a suitor as a lover. Some of the suitors are sleeping with the serving women while courting Penelope. These serving women are loyal to the suitors rather than to Penelope and Telemachus.

Occasionally, Odysseus' disguise as an old beggar can be capable of being seen through. The old dog Argos recognized Odysseus. Once in a while, an old servant who knew Odysseus will remark that the old beggar looks like what Odysseus could look like by now, after years of hardship.

Conclusion

Homer has set up a meeting between the old beggar and Penelope. Of course, we are looking forward to that meeting, but Homer believes in delaying important events, thus increasing his audience's anticipation of them.

The old beggar and Penelope will meet in Book 19, and we will need to be alert as we attempt to answer this question: Does Penelope recognize Odysseus?

Odyssey, Book 18:
“The Beggar-King of Ithaca”
“Odysseus and Irus the Beggar”

Introduction

In Book 17, Odysseus had two significant encounters:

- 1) Odysseus also met a disloyal slave, the goatherd Melanthius. This encounter showed him that some of the slaves are disloyal to him and would like him and Telemachus to be dead.
- 2) He saw his aged dog named Argos, which died when Odysseus stepped into his palace. Argos is a symbol of the problems in Odysseus' palace and in the society of Ithaca. Argos' death symbolizes the death of that disorder. Now that Odysseus has returned to Ithaca, he will soon set things right again.

Homer also mentioned another —future— encounter. Penelope has requested that the old beggar come to her so that she can question him. Odysseus has said that he will come when it is dark, giving as a reason that he, the old beggar, is afraid of the suitors.

• Book 17 ended with sunset. What do we expect will happen in Book 18?

Obviously, now that it is dark, we expect the old beggar to go to Penelope. However, that doesn't happen. As Homer did in the *Iliad*, so he does in the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, Homer delayed important events, thus increasing the audience's anticipation. In the *Odyssey*, Homer does the same thing. The meeting between the old beggar and Penelope will not take place until the next book: Book 19.

• What are the purposes of Book 18?

Book 18 has a few major purposes:

- 1) *Book 18 builds suspense and anticipation.*

What will happen when the old beggar speaks to Penelope? Will Penelope recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus? Will any of the old servants who knew Odysseus recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus? Will any of the disloyal serving women, of whom we meet one in this book, learn that the old beggar is Odysseus? Will Penelope, who is intelligent, recognize Odysseus but not betray to the women around her that the old beggar is her husband? Will Odysseus and Penelope be able to speak in code so that they can communicate without having to reveal that the old beggar is Odysseus in disguise?

- 2) *Book 18 introduces the character Melantho.*

Melantho is one of Odysseus' slave women, but she is not loyal to Odysseus. She has taken as a lover the suitor Eurymachus, and she is loyal to him. Melantho is also the sister of Melanthius, the disloyal goatherd.

3) *Book 18 gives more evidence of the suitors' bad behavior.*

The suitors continue to disrespect the old beggar and the rules of *xenia*. They also disrespect Odysseus by sleeping with many of his serving women. Melantho is just one of the serving women who has taken a lover among the suitors.

• In Book 18, Odysseus fights a bullying, braggart beggar nicknamed Irus, after Iris, the messenger-goddess. What do we know about Iris, the messenger-goddess?

In Book 18, Odysseus fights a bullying, braggart beggar nicknamed Irus, after Iris, the messenger-goddess. (Irus takes messages as needed for the suitors.) The beggar is trying to force Odysseus away from the palace, as he regards Odysseus as a competitor for the food and drink doled out by the suitors. (Some of the suitors aren't very generous, even though it isn't their own food and drink they are doling out.)

Iris is a messenger-goddess. In the *Iliad*, she bears messages from Zeus to the other gods. For example, when Zeus wants a particular god or gods to refrain from influencing events in the Trojan War, he will send Iris to that god or those gods to say, "Back off." In the *Odyssey*, the god Hermes bears messages from Zeus.

• What do we learn about Irus? Does he observe good *xenia*?

Irus is a beggar who makes himself useful to the suitors by running messages for them. His real name is Arnaeus, but as mentioned earlier, he is called Irus after Iris, the messenger of the gods.

Irus feels threatened by Odysseus; he doesn't want two beggars on the porch, although there certainly seems to be enough food available to feed two beggars. Irus is a glutton with an enormous belly, but he lacks muscle. Despite his lack of muscle, he is a bully who threatens Odysseus, saying that the two of them will come to blows unless Odysseus leaves.

• What is the suitors' reaction when Irus and Odysseus argue?

The suitors are glad to hear Irus and Odysseus arguing with each other, as a fight will be good entertainment. (This reminds me of a disgusting video series in which bums fight each other for money: *Bumfights*.) The suitors promise good food to the winner, and the fight is set.

The suitors remind me of the lazy young men in chapter 1 of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. They are lazy, chew tobacco all day, and find amusement in dogfights and in setting stray dogs on fire.

The suitors notice the two beggars arguing, and they think that a fight between the beggars will be great fun. Antinous even offers a prize to the winner. The winner will get some goat sausages, and will be allowed to eat with the suitors. Apparently, goat sausages are good eating.

Antinous does not care for beggars, as we saw in Book 17, when he objected to a new beggar — Odysseus — appearing at the palace. He is clever here. In addition to saying that the winner of the fight will get goat sausages, he also says that the winner of the fight will be the only beggar allowed to beg at the palace. Antinous has succeeded at making sure no new beggars stay around the palace.

• **How does Odysseus exhibit his customary cautiousness before the fight with Irus?**

Odysseus, of course, is mighty. His muscles have been hidden under his rags, but when he ties them up in preparation to fight, the suitors notice how muscular his legs are. Irus also notices, and he is terrified.

As we would expect by now, Odysseus is cautious. He is afraid that if he fights Irus, one of the young suitors might take the opportunity to help Irus by kicking or hitting Odysseus. He makes the suitors promise not to trip or hurt him.

Telemachus also says that any suitors who fight for Irus will have to answer to him — and to Antinous and Eurymachus. This is smart thinking on Telemachus' part. He gets the authority of the suitors' two leaders to back his authority up.

After the suitors have sworn an oath not to interfere in the fight, Telemachus says,

“Stranger, if your proud spirit
and your heart urge you on to beat this man,
don't fear a single one of these Achaeans.
Whoever strikes at you will have to fight
with many more as well. I am your host,
and the two princes here agree with me,
Antinous and Eurymachus, both men
who understand things well.”

(Johnston 18.78-85)

Note that Telemachus is able to help the old beggar — his father — without drawing special attention to the old beggar. Telemachus simply wants a fair fight. He does not want any special privileges for this old beggar. Telemachus also flatters Antinous and Eurymachus as a way to persuade them to act the way he wants — to keep the suitors from tripping or hurting the old beggar. This is good rhetoric on Telemachus' part.

• **Odysseus wins the fight, of course. What intelligence does Odysseus show in the fight, and how do the suitors react to his victory?**

Odysseus prepares to fight by making sure that his rags won't trip him up. When he pulls up his rags, he reveals some very impressive leg muscles. The suitors comment on Odysseus' impressive build, and Irus is terrified.

Of course, Odysseus will be the victor. He ponders what to do in this situation. If he wanted, he could kill the beggar with his fists, but he decides instead to lay out the beggar with “a light jab” (Fagles 18.106). This shows Odysseus' intelligence as well as his might. If he were to kill the beggar, that could bring unwanted attention on him. The older servants might hear of the fight, look at the old beggar closely, and recognize him, causing his life to be in danger.

After Odysseus decides to hit Irus gently so as not to attract the attention of the suitors, he hits Irus once — a hook to the neck under the ear. That one punch is enough to break bones and to win the fight. (What is a light jab to Odysseus is a mighty blow to other fighters.) Blood pours out of Irus' mouth, the suitors laugh, and Odysseus receives his reward of a large goat sausage and two loaves of bread.

The suitors, by the way, find Irus' suffering hilarious.

• **What does Odysseus' victory over Irus foreshadow?**

Irus' defeat foreshadows the suitors' defeat at the hands of Odysseus.

• **Who is Amphinomus? How does he treat Odysseus, and how does Odysseus treat him?**

Amphinomus is one of the better suitors. In Book 16, Antinous spoke in favor of killing Telemachus immediately, after having failed to intercept Telemachus on his return voyage from Pylos and Sparta. Amphinomus, however, dissuaded him and the other suitors from doing so, at least until the gods were in favor of Telemachus' murder (which of course they are not). Amphinomus said in Book 16,

“My friends,
I wouldn't want to slay Telemachus.
It's reprehensible to kill someone
of royal blood. But first let's ask the gods
for their advice. If great Zeus' oracles
approve the act, I myself will kill him
and tell all other men to do so, too.
But if the gods decline, I say we stop.”
(Johnston 16.499-506)

After Odysseus' fight with Irus, Amphinomus, one of the best of the suitors, gives Odysseus two loaves of bread, some wine, and the promised large goat sausage, and calls him “old friend, old father” (Fagles 18.141) — words of respect. Amphinomus is treating Odysseus well, and Odysseus warns him, risking his life to do so:

“I see suitors here
planning desperate acts, wasting the wealth
and dishonouring the wife of a man who,
I think, will not remain away for long,
not from his family and his native land.
He is close by. May some god lead you home,
and may you not have to confront the man

whenever he comes back to his own place.
 For I don't believe, once he comes here,
 under his own roof, he and the suitors
 will separate without some blood being spilled."

(Johnston 18.183-193)

Odysseus, of course, is testing the suitors, wanting to see how evil (or good) they are. He realizes that Amphinomus is one of the better suitors, so he warns him. (It would be good for Odysseus, of course, if Amphinomus were to leave. That would be one fewer suitor whom Odysseus would have to kill.)

Odysseus does take a risk when he warns Amphinomus. He nearly reveals that he knows more than he should know. Odysseus begins his conversation with Amphinomus by saying,

"Amphinomus, you seem like a man of good sense to me,
 Just like your father — at least I've heard his praises."

(Fagles 18.145-146)

Compare:

"Amphinomus, you seem to be a man
 with true intelligence. Your father, too,
 had the same quality. I've heard about
 his noble name — Nisus of Dulichium,
 a brave and wealthy man."

(Johnston 18.160-164)

As you can see, Odysseus makes a quick recovery there. How would a beggar like Odysseus know Amphinomus' father — especially since the beggar has just arrived on Ithaca? Odysseus is also taking a risk because why would a beggar speak this way to Amphinomus?

Odysseus tells the truth to Amphinomus. He tells him that Odysseus is right at hand. This is ironic because we know that these words are literally true, but Amphinomus does not know that.

• **Odysseus has risked his life to warn Amphinomus. How does Amphinomus respond?**

Amphinomus, however, stays at Odysseus' palace, and he is killed along with the other suitors. If he had heeded Odysseus' warning and left the palace and gone to his own home, he would have lived. However, Athena will not allow him to live. At this point, he is no longer able to change his evil ways.

Homer sings,

Antiphinomus

went through the house, head bowed, with foreboding
 in his heart, for he had a sense of troubles
 yet in store. Still, he did not escape his fate.
 Athena had bound even him to be destroyed
 by a spear in the strong hand of Telemachus.
 (Johnston 18.196-201)

Amphinomus will be the third of the suitors to die. The first suitors who die are the leaders Antinous and Eurymachus. Odysseus wisely kills the leaders first.

• **Athena will not let Amphinomus escape the coming slaughter. Do the suitors have free will?**

Homer sings that Athena will not let Amphinomus escape. He and all of the other suitors will die.

This brings up the question of whether the suitors have free will. Is Athena making them behave as they do? I would argue that the suitors cannot change at this point because of the previous decisions that they have made in their lives. They have been behaving badly for so long that at this point they cannot behave well.

At this point, Amphinomus has no free will left. He has partied with the other suitors for so long that he cannot leave Odysseus' palace now.

Habits are important. Bad habits can become so firmly engrained that you can't act otherwise. People can become slaves to cigarettes. On the other hand, good habits can become so firmly engrained that you can't act otherwise. Strive to acquire good habits.

The suitors have acquired the habit of partying at the expense of Odysseus. They have been doing this for three years. For them to stop partying now requires an effort of the will that they are no longer capable of making.

• **Is Telemachus growing up? Does Penelope think that Telemachus is growing up?**

In Book 18 Penelope is motivated by Athena to appear before the suitors and to trick them into giving her gifts. To help Penelope in this trick, Athena changes her appearance. Earlier, she made Odysseus appear to be an old beggar with a bald head. And when Odysseus revealed himself to his son, she made him younger, better looking, handsomer. Now she makes Penelope more beautiful.

Before Penelope shows herself to the suitors, the old servant Eurynome tells her that Telemachus is grown up. He has a beard now, and he has come of age:

“Your son is old enough
 to grow a beard — and you prayed very hard
 to gods that you would see him reach that age.”

(Johnston 18.224-226)

When Penelope shows herself to the suitors, she criticizes Telemachus. Penelope knows everything that goes on in the Great Hall, and she knows that the old beggar has been treated badly — he could have been hurt in the fight.

Telemachus is growing up. True, he can be somewhat rude to Penelope, as many boys reaching adulthood can be, but one characteristic of adulthood is the ability to accept criticism when it is justified. He knows that Penelope has a point, although he does point out the hardship of having the unwelcome suitors in the palace.

Telemachus tells Penelope in front of the suitors, “the boy you knew is gone” (Fagles 18.256). Telemachus knows that he is growing up.

• **Before Penelope shows herself to the suitors, how does Athena transform her?**

Homer sings about Athena’s beautification of Penelope,

She made her taller, fuller in form to all men’s eyes,

(Fagles 18.222)

Compare:

She made her taller, too, and changed her figure,

so it looked more regal.

(Johnston 18.248-249)

The translations “fuller in form” (Fagles 18.222) and “more regal” (Johnston 18.249) are interesting. Another translation of the ancient Greek is “thicker,” according to Elizabeth Vandiver (*The Odyssey of Homer* 129). Apparently, the ancient Greeks liked meat on women’s bones. Actually, anyone who looks at *Playboy* centerfolds will realize that modern men also like meat on women’s bones.

Penelope is a respectable woman. When she appears before the suitors, she has women servants with her. She would be ashamed to appear before men she is not related to without women servants around her. Also, it is safer to have women servants with her when she appears before the suitors, all of whom are drinking.

By showing herself to the suitors, Penelope is also showing herself to Odysseus, who sees her for the first time in 20 years.

• **Which two purposes does the beautification of Penelope serve?**

The beautification of Penelope in Book 18 serves two purposes:

1) Penelope’s beauty helps her to trick the suitors.

Penelope is an intelligent woman who tricks the suitors. They have been devouring the herds of Odysseus and drinking his wine without giving anything in return. Penelope is able to get back the value of some of what the suitors have taken by hinting that suitors are supposed to give gifts:

“The way you men behave
 was not appropriate for suitors in the past.
 Those who wish to court a noble lady,
 daughter of a wealthy man, and compete
 against each other, bring in their cattle,
 their own rich flocks, to feast the lady’s friends.
 They give splendid presents and don’t consume
 another’s livelihood and pay him nothing.”
 (Johnston 18.346-353)

Penelope’s beauty encourages the suitors to give her gifts. Antinous replies to Penelope,
 “Daughter of Icarius, wise Penelope,
 if one of the Achaeans wants to bring
 a gift in here, you should accept it.”
 (Johnston 18.358-360)

The suitors send pages to get magnificent gifts for Penelope:

Each man sent a herald out to fetch some gifts.
 One of them brought back, at Antinous’ request,
 a large and lovely robe with rich embroidery.
 It had golden brooches on it, twelve in all,
 fitted with graceful curving clasps. Another man
 brought in a chain made of gold for Eurymachus,
 a finely crafted work strung with amber beads,
 bright as the sun. Two attendants carried back
 some earrings for Eurydamas, with three droplets
 in a stylish shining cluster. For lord Peisander,
 Polyctor’s son, an attendant brought a necklace,
 a splendid piece of jewelry. All Achaeans
 presented her with some gorgeous gift or other.
 Noble Penelope then left and went upstairs.
 Her servants carried up the lovely gifts for her.

(Johnston 18.366-381)

We can ask where the gifts came from. After all, many of the suitors are from other islands. Why do they have these gifts? After all, they have apparently not thought to give gifts to Penelope before this.

One possible answer lies in their relationships with Odysseus' serving women. Many suitors sleep with these women. We can wonder whether these gifts were meant for these serving women. However, the answer may be possibly no. These gifts seem way too expensive for slave women.

Of course, some suitors live on Ithaca. They can send pages to get the gifts.

Or perhaps the suitors have nice gifts nearby just in case Penelope chooses one of them to marry. That way, the winning suitor has a nice gift at hand to use to attempt to win Penelope's heart and not have her marry him reluctantly.

More likely, this is not an important point or anything that Homer wants us to think about.

2) Penelope's beauty catches the notice of Odysseus.

Odysseus has not seen his wife for 20 years, and his first sight of her reveals that she is still beautiful.

• **In which ways is Penelope a trickster?**

Readers' reactions to Penelope vary widely. Some readers think that she is a weak woman, while other readers think that she is a strong woman and a worthy wife to Odysseus. Many people see similarities between Odysseus and Penelope.

Students who choose to write a character analysis of Penelope will have to write about the weaving trick, described in Book 1 and elsewhere, and they will have to write about the trick that she plays on the suitors in Book 18 (getting gifts). In addition, it may be a good idea to write about the part she plays in the bow contest later. And students should write about how Penelope confirms that Odysseus really is Odysseus with a test later.

In Book 18, Penelope tricks the suitors into giving her gifts. First, she tells a story that Odysseus had told her that when Telemachus gets a beard, then if Odysseus has not returned from Troy, she should give up hope that Odysseus will return and instead remarry. We don't know if this is a lie, but it certainly seems to be a lie created to trick the suitors. For one thing, Telemachus is 20 years old and must have had the ability to grow a beard for a few years. This may be a made-up story — Eurynome has just told Penelope that Telemachus has a beard. Or perhaps that just really reminded Penelope of Odysseus' last words to her.

Penelope tells the suitors that Odysseus told her,

“But when you see our son has grown a beard,
then marry who you wish, and leave the house.”

(Johnston 18.339-340)

Apparently, Penelope is supposed to marry, then leave the palace and go and live with her new husband. Apparently, Telemachus will then take over Odysseus' palace and property.

Penelope then tells the suitors that they don't behave as other suitors do. Normally, suitors court their hoped-for bride with gifts — they don't use up the wealth of the woman they hope to be married to; instead, they give wealth to her. The trick works. (Of course, Penelope has had help from Athena, who has beautified her.) The suitors do give Penelope gifts, which help to replenish the wealth of Odysseus' household. Antinous gives her a robe, Eurymachus gives her a necklace, Eurydamas gives her earrings, Pisander gives her a choker, etc.

• **Penelope asks the suitors for gifts. What is Odysseus' opinion of what she (his wife) is doing?**

Odysseus is pleased by Penelope's speech; in fact, Odysseus "glowed with joy" (Fagles 18.316) to see Penelope tricking the suitors.

Fagles' translation has this:

Staunch Odysseus glowed with joy to hear all this —
his wife's trickery luring gifts from her suitors now,
enchancing their hearts with suave seductive words
but all the while with something else in mind.
(Fagles 18.316-319)

Compare:

Long-suffering lord Odysseus
was pleased that she was getting them to give her gifts,
charming them with soothing words, her mind on other things.
(Johnston 18.354-356)

• **Odysseus knows that Penelope is tricking the suitors. How does he know this?**

Odysseus, in disguise as the old beggar, rejoices at this, as he knows that Penelope is tricking the suitors. How does he know this?

We're not explicitly told in Book 18 how Odysseus knows that Penelope has other intentions in mind, that she's trying to get gifts from the suitors but not really planning to marry one of them. However, we can certainly guess at the reasons.

1) Odysseus has much evidence based on what he has heard from his son Telemachus, the swineherd Eumaeus, and Athena that Penelope has been faithful to him.

For example, way back in Book 13, Athena told him about Penelope:

"But she, forever broken-hearted for your return,
builds up each man's hopes —

dangling promises, dropping hints to each —
 but all the while with something else in mind.”
 (Fagles 13.433-436)

Compare:

“[...] She longs for your return.
 Although her heart is sad, she feeds their hopes,
 by giving each man words of reassurance.
 But her mind is full of other things.”
 (Johnston 13.465-468)

2) Now that Odysseus is on Ithaca, he knows that there will not be a wedding — he plans to kill all the suitors before any wedding can take place.

3) Odysseus has probably decided that he can trust Penelope. She has been faithful to him during his 20 years of absence. She will remain faithful to him for another day or two.

• Who is Melantho?

Melantho is a female slave and the sister of the treacherous goatherd Melanthius. Like Melanthius, she is treacherous and disloyal to Penelope. She is definitely on the side of the suitors and sleeps with Eurymachus:

She was Eurymachus' lover, always slept with him.
 (Fagles 18.368)

Compare:

for she loved Eurymachus and had sex with him.
 (Johnston 18.405)

Melantho sleeps with Eurymachus. She is loyal to Eurymachus, not Penelope.

When Odysseus tells the women slaves to go and comfort Penelope and let him trim the torches for the suitors, Melantho tells him,

“You idiotic stranger, you're a man
 whose mind has had all sense knocked out of it.
 You've no wish to go into the blacksmith's home
 or a public house somewhere to get some sleep.
 No. You're here, and you babble all the time.
 Around these many men, you're far too brash.

There's no fear in your heart. In fact, it's wine
 that's seized your wits, or else your mind
 has always been that way and forces you
 to prattle uselessly. Are you playing the fool
 because you overcame that beggar Irus?
 Take care another man, better than him,
 doesn't quickly come to stand against you.
 His heavy fists will punch you in the head,
 stain you with lots of blood, and shove you out,
 send you packing from this house."

(Johnston 18.407-422)

Melantho runs away when Odysseus calls her a "bitch" (Fagles 18.380 / Johnston 18.424) and threatens to tell Telemachus what she has said to him. Telemachus would punish her severely for not giving good *xenia*.

• **How does Athena make the suitors act?**

Athena makes the suitors behave badly.

Homer sings,

There was no way Athena would allow the suitors,
 those arrogant men, to stop behaving badly,
 so that still more pain would sink into the heart
 of Laertes' son, Odysseus.

(Johnston 18.434-437)

Eurymachus behaves badly and is unable to change. He mocks the old beggar's baldness by saying that the old beggar must be from the gods — his bald head glows with light and the gods are able to have light without torches.

Eurymachus also says that the old beggar is lazy and unwilling to work. The old beggar — Odysseus — responds that he can work and fight. He also tells Eurymachus what would happen if Odysseus were to return:

"But you're much too proud,
 and your mind's unfeeling. You really think
 you're an important man, with real power,
 because you mingle with a few weak men.

But if Odysseus returned, got back here
to his native land, those doors over there,
although they're really wide, would quickly seem
too narrow for you as you fled outside."

(Johnston 18.477-484)

Odysseus is bold for a beggar. Why is he so bold? Possibly because the suitors are drunk.

Odysseus' bold speech angers Eurymachus so much that he picks up a stool and throws it at Odysseus, who ducks — it hits the wine-steward instead.

In the previous book, the suitors were against Antinous when he threw a stool at the old beggar. This time, the suitors are on Eurymachus' side. They are sorry that the old beggar came and caused disruption in their ranks. The suitors are growing more and more evil as seen by the way they respond to the two stool-throwing incidents.

By this time, Eurymachus has been evil so long that he cannot change. All he can do is to keep on with his evil ways. If you do evil, and do evil, and do evil, soon you can no longer do good because you are evil. You had free will, but you used your free will to become evil and now you are a slave to your evilness.

In the Bible, Moses wants Pharaoh to let his people go, but we read that God hardens Pharaoh's heart, so the people of Egypt have to undergo the seven plagues. Pharaoh used his free will to become evil, and now change requires an effort of the will that he is no longer capable of making.

• **How does Telemachus assert himself at the end of Book 18?**

Telemachus obeys Odysseus' orders. Earlier, Odysseus told him that if the suitors were to mistreat him that he should not overreact and draw attention to the old beggar. Telemachus obeys. He protects the old beggar as much as he would protect any old beggar:

But now Telemachus dressed them [the suitors] down:

"Fools, you're out of your minds! No hiding it,
food and wine have gone to your heads. Some god
has got your blood up. Come, now you've eaten well
go home to bed — when the spirit moves, that is.

I, for one, I'll drive no guest away."

(Fagles 18.457-462)

Compare:

"You fools, you've gone insane, and in your hearts
no longer hide how much you eat and drink.

You must be being incited by some god.
 So, now you've feasted well, return back home.
 When the spirit bids, you can get some rest.
 Still, I'm not chasing anyone away."

(Johnston.18.511-516)

Telemachus' line "I'll drive no guest away" (Fagles 18.462) has a double meaning. The suitors take the line to mean that he will not drive the suitors away. Of course, we know — and the suitors should know — that Telemachus means that he will not drive the old beggar away.

Telemachus stands up strongly for the old beggar. Of course, now the old beggar has been around for a while, so other people will think that Telemachus knows him better and so is more willing to protect them.

Earlier, when Antinous threw a stool at the old beggar, Telemachus did not say anything. At that time, it was important that Telemachus not say anything to Antinous about how he is treating the old beggar because it could have drawn the suitors' attention to the old beggar. However, now it is safe for Telemachus to speak up more strongly because the old beggar has been around awhile and the suitors have accepted that he is nothing more than an old beggar.

In his speech at the end of Book 18, Telemachus also tells the suitors to go home for the night — rather forcefully.

Telemachus is asserting himself. He is ordering the suitors to leave the old beggar alone. Of course, earlier in the book, he has promised the old beggar that no one would hurt him in the fight with Irus. Here, he continues to protect the old beggar.

The suitors "go home to bed" (Fagles 18.461), as Telemachus has told them to do. They are astonished at Telemachus:

[...] And they all bit their lips,
 amazed the prince could speak with so much daring.

(Fagles 18.463-464)

Compare:

Telemachus spoke, and they all bit their lips,
 astonished that he'd spoken out so boldly.

(Johnston 18.517-518)

Throughout the *Odyssey*, Telemachus has been growing and has been becoming an adult.

Conclusion

In the next book, Odysseus and Penelope will finally meet face to face after 20 years apart.

Odyssey, Book 19
“Penelope and Her Guest”
“Eurycleia Recognizes Odysseus”

Pronunciation

Eurycleia: Eu ry CLEYE a

Introduction

Two important events occur in Book 19:

- 1) Odysseus, in disguise as the old beggar, and Penelope meet and talk together.
- 2) Eurycleia, a faithful female servant, recognizes that the old beggar is Odysseus because of a distinctive scar that he has on his knee.

This book up until Book 23 raises a great critical question: Does Penelope recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus? In Book 23, Penelope sets a test to determine whether the old beggar really is Odysseus. When the old beggar passes the test, she knows for certain that he really is Odysseus. However, from Book 19 to the middle of Book 23, people can argue either

- 1) Yes, Penelope does recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus in disguise, or
- 2) No, Penelope does not recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus in disguise.

In my opinion, Homer keeps this deliberately ambiguous, not answering the question for certain either way. Apparently, Homer thought that it was good to allow the audience to argue over certain things.

Some books of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are richer than others, meaning that there is more to comment on. Book 19 is one of the richest books in the *Odyssey*.

• What do Odysseus and Telemachus do at the beginning of Book 19?

At night, when all the serving women are in their own quarters, Odysseus and Telemachus take the weapons from off the walls and put them in the storeroom. Previously, Odysseus had said that he would signal Telemachus to do this, but they are able to work together at the task.

Telemachus shows maturity when he won't allow the serving women to be present. Why won't he do this? We can guess that it is because he doesn't want them to tell the suitors what he is doing and arouse their suspicions.

Pallas Athena helps Odysseus and Telemachus by providing a magical light that astonishes Telemachus. Odysseus tells Telemachus that the gods are able to do such things:

“Quiet,” his father, the old soldier, warned him.

“Get a grip on yourself. No more questions now.

It's just the way of the gods who rule Olympus.”

(Fagles 19.44-46)

Compare:

“Keep quiet.

Check those ideas and ask no questions.

This is how gods who hold Olympus work.”

(Johnston 19.53-55)

Because Athena is providing light and because the stowing of the weapons is completed, Odysseus tells Telemachus to go to bed.

Of course, Odysseus still has things to do. He is going to talk to Penelope. In addition, because Penelope will have women with her, he will be able to “test” (Fagles 19.48) the serving women to see who is loyal and who is disloyal to him.

• When Penelope talks to the old beggar (Odysseus), she looks like Artemis or Aphrodite. Why would Homer pick those two goddesses to compare Penelope to?

Homer describes Penelope as looking like Artemis or Aphrodite when she arrives to speak to the old beggar:

“Now down from her chamber came reserved Penelope,

looking for all the world like Artemis or golden Aphrodite.

(Fagles 19.56-57)

Compare:

Then wise Penelope emerged out of her room,

looking like Artemis or golden Aphrodite.

(Johnston 19.65-66)

Homer chooses these goddesses carefully:

1) Artemis is a militant virgin, as we know from the story of Actaeon. Penelope, of course, is not a virgin, but she has been very careful to stay true to Odysseus for 20 years.

2) Aphrodite is known for her beauty, and 20 years after Odysseus left to go to Troy, Penelope has not lost any of her beauty.

• What is the importance of the setting of the conversation between Penelope and the old beggar?

Odysseus and Penelope have an important conversation, and the setting and the time of the conversation are important.

The setting of the conversation is the hearth (fireplace). This is important. The hearth can be regarded as the center of the home. The hearth is a fireplace. In this society, it is where food is cooked. It is a source of light. It is a source of warmth on cold days and nights.

In the old days, people would say that the kitchen is the center of the home, but nowadays many of us have outsourced such tasks as cooking, so that is no longer true in many homes.

Still, in the phrase “hearth and home,” we have an idea of the importance of the hearth or fireplace in earlier cultures. The hearth can be regarded as a symbolic symbol of a household, and that is where Odysseus and Penelope meet and first speak to each other after 20 years of separation.

• What is the importance of the timing of the conversation between Penelope and the old beggar?

The timing of the conversation is at night. People in ancient Greece did not have the electric lights that we have today. Back then people would get light from a few lamps and from the fire in the fireplace. The lighting would be poor, this decreasing the chances of Penelope’s recognizing that the old beggar is Odysseus, her husband.

Odysseus is intelligent, and so we can assume that this is his reason for requesting that this meeting with Penelope take place at night. Of course, one of Penelope’s elderly servants, Eurycleia, knew Odysseus, and he may also want to reduce the chances of her recognizing him.

• Penelope and Odysseus are not alone. Who are the people with them?

When they meet, Odysseus and Penelope are not alone. In this society, a married woman would not appear before males who are not her relatives without being escorted by her female servants.

For example, in Book 18, when Penelope appeared in front of the suitors, she was escorted:

Then leaving her well-lit chamber, she descended,
not alone: two of her women followed close behind.
(Fagles 18.235-236)

Compare:

she moved down from her shining upper chambers.
She was not alone — two attendants went with her.
(Johnston 18.262-263)

Indeed, earlier, Penelope had mentioned the importance of having escorts when she requested that Eurycleia do this:

“But please, have Autonoë and Hippodamia come
and support me in the hall. I’ll never brave
those men alone. I’d be too embarrassed.”
(Fagles 18.207-209)

Compare:

“But tell Hippodameia and Autonoe

to come in here — they can stand beside me
in the hall. For I won't go in there alone
among the men. I'd be ashamed."

(Johnston 18.233-236)

At least three female servants are in the room when Penelope and Odysseus meet: Eurycleia, Eurynome, and Melantho (sister of Melanthius, the unfaithful goatherd). More female servants may also be present. We have to assume that Melantho is present. She insults Odysseus, and we are never told she leaves the room. Eurycleia is present, as she will wash the old beggar's feet. Penelope also asks Eurynome to bring a chair so the old beggar can sit: See Fagles 19.105-106.

• **Why is the presence of Melantho in the room important?**

Melantho's presence in the room is important: She is treacherous — she is the lover of Eurymachus.

When Odysseus, disguised as the old beggar, and Melantho first met back in Book 18, we learned much evidence that she is treacherous. Homer lets us know that she is definitely on the side of the suitors and sleeps with Eurymachus:

She was Eurymachus' lover, always slept with him.

(Fagles 18.368)

Compare:

for she loved Eurymachus and had sex with him.

(Johnston 18.405)

In Book 18, when Odysseus told the women slaves to go and comfort Penelope and let him trim the torches for the suitors, Melantho told him,

"You idiotic stranger, you're a man
whose mind has had all sense knocked out of it.
You've no wish to go into the blacksmith's home
or a public house somewhere to get some sleep.
No. You're here, and you babble all the time.
Around these many men, you're far too brash.
There's no fear in your heart. In fact, it's wine
that's seized your wits, or else your mind
has always been that way and forces you
to prattle uselessly. Are you playing the fool
because you overcame that beggar Irus?

Take care another man, better than him,
 doesn't quickly come to stand against you.
 His heavy fists will punch you in the head,
 stain you with lots of blood, and shove you out,
 send you packing from this house."

(Johnston 18.407-422)

In Book 19, we have more evidence that Melantho is treacherous and does not recognize *xenia*. She lashes out at Odysseus in the character of an old beggar,

"Stranger, are you still going to pester us
 even now, all through the night in here,
 roaming around the house, spying on women?
 Get outside, you wretch, and be satisfied
 with what you've had to eat, or soon enough
 you'll be beaten with a torch and leave that way."

(Johnston 19.81-86)

Penelope reprimands Melantho, but Melantho is apparently present during Penelope's conversation with the old beggar.

Odysseus must be careful here. If Melantho were to learn that the old beggar is Odysseus in disguise, she would have no trouble telling Eurymachus who the old beggar is, and the suitors would then kill the old beggar.

• **How does Penelope react to Melantho's treacherous nature?**

The great question for critics of this part of the *Odyssey* is whether or not Penelope recognizes the old beggar. This part of the *Odyssey* can be interpreted as yes, Penelope recognizes the old beggar, or as no, Penelope does not recognize the old beggar.

Odysseus responds to Melantho's taunts, saying that as a beggar he should be pitied, and that Penelope, Odysseus (if he returns home), or Telemachus may punish her.

The old beggar, aka Odysseus, aka the father of Telemachus, threatens Melantho with Telemachus, who he says has "come of age at last" (Fagles 19.96). This is more evidence that Telemachus is growing up.

Penelope does speak out against Melantho, saying,

"You can be sure,
 you bold and reckless bitch, I've noticed
 your gross acts. And you'll wipe away the stain

with your own head. You clearly know full well,
because you heard me say it — I'm intending
to ask this stranger in my halls some questions
about my husband, since I'm in so much pain."

(Johnston 19.116-122)

We can interpret Penelope's criticism of Melantho in two ways:

- 1) Penelope recognizes that the old beggar is Odysseus, and she criticizes Melantho to keep her from saying bad things to Odysseus.
- 2) Penelope does not recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus, but Melantho is a bad servant who needs to be criticized, and so Penelope criticizes her.

• **When Penelope asks the old beggar who he is, he replies that she should ask anything but that. Why?**

Penelope says,

"Stranger, first of all I'll ask this question —
Who are you among men? Where are you from?
From what city? And where are your parents?"

(Johnston 19.133-135)

Penelope is not violating *xenia*. The old beggar has already eaten, and she has had a chair brought for him. Later, she will offer him a bath, which is part of the protocol of *xenia*.

Penelope asks the "beggar" who he is, and he replies by saying that she should ask him anything but that. Odysseus says,

"[...] here inside your home
ask me questions about anything except
my family or my native land, in case
you fill my heart with still more sorrow,
as I remember them."

(Johnston 19.147-151)

In the conversation with the beggar, Penelope begins by asking "the beggar" who he is. She wants to know who he is, she wants to know if he has ever encountered Odysseus, and she wants to know if he has ever had any news of Odysseus.

Why does Odysseus say to Penelope to ask him anything else? One possible answer is that he does not want to lie to his wife.

In addition, this could be Odysseus' way of telling his wife that he doesn't want his identity revealed — if she should recognize him.

Odysseus will lie to Penelope — because of circumstances, he has to — but perhaps he is reluctant to do that.

• **How does Penelope respond?**

When Odysseus requests that she ask him anything but who he is, Penelope responds by telling him about her own troubles with the suitors.

Penelope tells the old beggar that she was able to hold off the suitors with her famous weaving trick, but the suitors have discovered the trick, and it looks as if Penelope will be forced to marry one of the suitors.

Penelope's famous weaving trick was to tell the suitors that she would marry one of them after she had finished weaving a shroud for Laertes, Odysseus' father, to be buried in. Laertes is still alive, but Penelope is preparing for the future, when Laertes will die. Weaving takes time, and when Laertes dies, Penelope will not be able to weave a shroud quickly enough at that time. Because Odysseus' sister is a married woman who lives on Same, an island near Ithaca, and because Odysseus' mother is dead, it is Penelope's duty to weave the burial shroud.

Each day, Penelope wove the shroud, and each night, she unraveled what she had woven that day. This trick worked for three years, but eventually one of the female servants told the suitors what Penelope was doing. The suitors caught her in the act of unweaving the shroud, and they have forced her to finish weaving the shroud.

Penelope also says,

“Now I can't escape
the marriage or invent some other scheme.
My parents are really urging me to marry,
and my son is worrying about those men
eating away his livelihood. He notices,
because he's now a man, quite capable
of caring for a household to which Zeus
has granted fame.”

(Johnston 19.203-210)

Penelope then asks the old beggar again to identify himself and to tell his story.

• **Which lies does Odysseus (the old beggar) tell Penelope?**

Of course, Odysseus has to lie to Penelope. It would odd if the old beggar were to refuse to identify himself to a Queen. It would also attract attention to himself because everyone would

start wondering just who this old beggar is. Of course, Melantho is present, and she will report the conversation of Odysseus and Penelope to her lover, Eurymachus.

Odysseus lies about coming from Crete, and he says that yes, he saw Odysseus — 20 years ago, when Odysseus was on his way to the Trojan War. Penelope, of course, is hoping for recent news of Odysseus, so she receives no encouraging news from the old beggar. Perhaps Odysseus is trying to lull Melantho, whom he knows will report his conversation back to the suitors.

• Odysseus says that his name is Aethon (EE-thon) — the blazing one. Why is that important?

Odysseus says that his name is Aethon (EE-thon) — a name that means the Blazing One.

Fire imagery precedes an *aristeia* (a warrior's day of glory in battle) in the *Iliad*. We see fire imagery in the name Aethon. We also saw fire imagery in the light that Athena provided while Odysseus and Telemachus put away the weapons at the beginning of this book. Soon, Odysseus will have a day of glory as he slaughters the suitors.

• Does Penelope recognize Odysseus? Maybe. Maybe not.

The great critical question of this part of the *Odyssey* is whether or not Penelope recognizes the old beggar. This part of the *Odyssey* can be interpreted as yes, Penelope recognizes the old beggar, or as no, Penelope does not recognize the old beggar.

If Penelope does recognize that the old beggar is in fact Odysseus, then the two may be communicating subtly to each other in such a way that the female servants who are present do not understand the hidden meaning of what they are saying.

The old beggar's description of Odysseus is remarkable. The old beggar says that he saw Odysseus 20 years ago, yet he is able to describe in great detail what Odysseus wore. If I met a man 20 years ago, I would not be able to say what he was wearing. Could this be a subtle communication from the old beggar to Penelope that he is actually Odysseus in disguise? On the other hand, people had fewer clothes back then, and Odysseus was magnificently dressed.

When Penelope cries after hearing that the most recent news the old beggar has of Odysseus is 20 years old, it may be because she was hoping for more recent news of her husband. Or it may be that she is relieved that he is back but she is worried about what will happen if and when he faces the suitors.,

• This is an intense emotional trial for Odysseus — and for Penelope (especially if she recognizes her husband).

Odysseus has had a number of intense emotional trials in which he has had to hide his emotions: finding out that he is on Ithaca, seeing his son for the first time in 20 years, meeting the treacherous goatherd Melanthius, and seeing his dog Argos. However, meeting his wife, Penelope, and speaking to her for the first time in 20 years without being able to reveal to her who he is, is probably his most intense emotional trial. And if Penelope recognizes that the old beggar is her husband, it must be an intense emotional trial for her, too.

Homer shows Penelope's emotion in a simile. Penelope is weeping for her husband, who is sitting near her. Her tears are like snow melting on mountains and forming flooding rivers:

Penelope listened with tears flowing down.

Her flesh melted — just as on high mountains
 snow melts away under West Wind's thaw,
 once East Wind blows it down, and, as it melts,
 the flowing rivers fill — that's how her fair cheeks
 melted then, as she shed tears for her husband,
 who was sitting there beside her.

(Johnston 19.268-274)

Odysseus pities her, but of course he can't show his emotion:

Odysseus
 felt pity in his heart for his grieving wife,
 but his eyes stayed firm between his eyelids,
 like horn or iron, and he kept up his deceit
 to conceal his tears.

(Johnston 19.274-278)

• **What wordplay do we see in Penelope's line "*Destroy, I call it — I hate to say its name!*" (Fagles 19.299)?**

Of course, the word play is that the name contains two words: *destroy* and *Troy*.

This line is clever. Bernard Knox points out in a note on page 514 of Robert Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey*:

"destroy" is T.E. Lawrence's rendering of a remarkable turn of phrase in Penelope's speech: she calls the city she does not wish to mention *kakoilion*, combining the Greek word for evil — *kakos* — with the name *Ilion*, an alternative name for Troy.

T.E. Lawrence is also known as Lawrence of Arabia.

Ian Johnston refers to the city as "wicked Ilion" (Johnston 19.340).

• **Why does the old beggar say that Odysseus isn't home yet?**

The old beggar's news — or perhaps his lack of any recent news — regarding Odysseus makes Penelope cry. However, Odysseus, still in disguise as the old beggar, continues with his story. He tells Penelope,

"I'll tell you the truth,
 hiding nothing — for I've already heard
 about Odysseus' return. He's close by,

in the wealthy land of Thesprotians,
 still alive and bringing much fine treasure
 with him. He's urging men to give him gifts
 throughout that land."

(Johnston 19.352-358)

This is consistent with what the old beggar told the loyal swineherd earlier.

Odysseus continues telling his story to Penelope, and there is some truth in it. He tells her that Odysseus had lost his men and ships, but he had survived and reached the land of the Phaeacians. All of this is true.

He also says that Odysseus continued to sail around the Mediterranean to amass treasure, else he would have returned home much sooner. Most importantly, he tells Penelope,

"He's near by and safe
 and will be here soon. He won't stay away
 from his friends and native land much longer.
 I'll make an oath on that for you. May Zeus
 be my first witness, highest and best of gods,
 and the hearth of excellent Odysseus,
 which I've reached, all these things will happen
 just as I describe. In this very month
 Odysseus will come, as the old moon wanes
 and the new moon starts to rise."

(Johnston 19.394-403)

• How does Homer tease the audience when Penelope offers the old beggar a bath (Fagles translation: 19.406-409)?

Penelope is a good hostess, and she offers Odysseus a bath at daybreak. The old beggar's news — or perhaps his lack of any recent news — regarding Odysseus made her cry, but she still respects *xenia*.

Odysseus says that he would not like to have a full bath, although he would not mind if an old servant washed his feet. Penelope then orders Eurycleia to wash his feet.

Here Odysseus may wish to avoid a full bath because he may be recognized. Right now, his rags hide much of his body. In addition, as we saw with Nausicaa, Odysseus may be thinking it best not to be bathed by a young girl. However, he does mess up a little here, as an old servant is more likely to recognize him, having served under him, than a young girl who was born after Odysseus left for the Trojan War.

Homer plays with his audience here a little. Penelope says,

“Up with you now, my good old Eurycleia,
come and wash your master’s ... equal in years.”

(Fagles 19.406-407)

Robert Fagles must have been proud after the ellipsis (...) in these lines. They get his audience asking these questions: Does Penelope know? Does she recognize Odysseus?

Eurycleia provides an explanation for why the old beggar has requested that an old beggar bathe his feet. Melantho has mocked him, and so of course he does not want the young slaves to bathe his feet — they may continue to mock him.

• **Odysseus’ disguise is not perfect.**

Odysseus’ disguise is not perfect. As we saw, Argos recognized him, although of course a dog’s sense of smell came into play there. In addition, of course, Penelope remarks,

“Odysseus must have feet and hands like his by now —
hardship can change a person overnight.”

(Fagles 19.408-409)

Compare:

“Perhaps Odysseus has feet and hands like his,
for mortal men soon age when times are bad.”

(Johnston 19.466-467)

In addition, Eurycleia remarks on the old beggar’s resemblance to Odysseus,

“But come now, listen to me.
Hear what I say. Many worn-out strangers
have come here, but none of them, I tell you,
was so like him to look at — your stature,
voice, and feet are all just like Odysseus.”

(Johnston 19.490-494)

People in the ancient world wore sandals or went barefoot, and so other people would be familiar with what their feet looked like.

As it happens, Eurycleia does end up recognizing Odysseus for real — he has a distinctive scar on his knee from a boar-hunting mishap in his youth.

• **How did Odysseus get his scar?**

Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus’ distinctive scar, and she knows that the old beggar is Odysseus.

At this point, the bard tells the story both of how Odysseus got his name and of how he got the scar. Both are very important for identification purposes.

Earlier, we saw that Odysseus made a mistake when he told his name to Polyphemus the Cyclops, apparently in an attempt to win *kleos* — recognition for his deed of blinding the Cyclops. This backfired on him because Polyphemus was then able to pray to his father, Poseidon, and tell him who had blinded him. Poseidon then made lots of trouble for Odysseus. Therefore, names are important identifiers.

A distinctive scar is also an important identifier. The ancient Greeks did not have such things as DNA typing or dental records; a distinctive scar would be an important identifier for someone who has been away for 20 years. So, of course, would be a distinctive birthmark.

Odysseus got his scar when he was visiting his maternal grandfather (who gave him his name at birth) and hunting a boar. Note that Odysseus is a young man when he goes on a journey to Parnassus to visit his maternal grandfather. Going on a journey is a sign of approaching maturity, and Telemachus also went on a journey that helped him to grow up. Modern young men often go on a road trip.

Odysseus was able to kill the boar, but it wounded him first:

Odysseus rushed in first, his strong hands gripping
the long spear, keen to strike the boar. But the beast
got the jump on him and struck him above the knee,
charging at him from the side, a long gash in his flesh
sliced by its tusk, but it didn't reach Odysseus' bone.
But then Odysseus struck the boar, hitting it
on its right shoulder. The bright point of his spear
went clean through — the boar fell in the dust, squealing,
and its life force flew away.

(Johnston 19.571-579)

In the hunt for the boar, Odysseus shows his bravery by killing the boar, but it wounds him and creates a distinctive scar that Odysseus — when he wishes — can use to prove his identity to people who have known Odysseus previously and have seen and remember the scar.

One example of scars being an identifying characteristic comes from musician Iggy Pop, who sometimes rolled around on broken glass while doing his act, necessitating trips to the emergency room after the show. Whenever Iggy Pop introduced himself to a young lady, and she didn't believe that he was Iggy Pop, she would say, "Show me your scars."

• **What does Odysseus' name mean?**

Odysseus' name — which his maternal grandfather gave him — is related to the Greek word that can be translated as “pain.” Two ways to translate “Odysseus” are “Giver and Receiver of Pain” or “Man of Pain.”

Odysseus' maternal grandfather names Odysseus:

“give the boy the name I tell you now. Just as I
have come from afar, creating pain for many —
men and women across the good green earth —
so let his name be *Odysseus* ...
the Son of Pain, a name he'll earn in full.”
(Fagles 19.460-464)

Compare:

“My son-in-law and daughter, give the boy
whatever name I say. Since I've come here
as one who's been enraged at many people,
men and women, on this all-nourishing earth,
let him be called Odysseus, a man of rage.”
(Johnston 19.525-529)

As you can see, Robert Fagles translates “Odysseus” as “Son of Pain.” However, “Giver and Receiver of Pain” is certainly a tempting translation, especially as we see Odysseus both giving pain to the boar when he kills it in the hunt, and we see Odysseus receiving pain as the boar inflicts the wound that scars his knee.

Ian Johnston translates the name as “man of rage” (Johnston 19.529).

• **Odysseus both suffers pain and inflicts pain.**

Not just in the boar hunt, but also throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus both gives and receives pain. The same is true of the *Iliad* and the Trojan War.

In the *Iliad*, Odysseus kills many warriors, but also he is himself wounded badly enough that he cannot fight until his wound has healed.

In the Trojan War, Odysseus invents the Trojan Horse, a trick that ended with the deaths of many, many Trojans. It also made many women widows and slaves, and many children fatherless slaves.

Odysseus endures pain in the cave of Polyphemus the Cyclops, whom he sees eat several of his men. In addition, Odysseus inflicts pain on Polyphemus by driving a red-hot stake into his eye and blinding him.

In the case of the Phaeacians, Odysseus did not inflict pain on them. However, Poseidon hates Odysseus at the time because of what Odysseus had done to Poseidon's son Polyphemus. The Phaeacians helped Odysseus, and Poseidon punished them. At worst, Poseidon put a mountain on top of their port city and killed them. At best, Odysseus changed their way of living — the Phaeacians no longer help strangers by providing passage home.

Poseidon punishes the Phaeacians after they return Odysseus to Ithaca. The first thing that Poseidon does is to transform the ship that carried Odysseus home. When the ship arrives at the Phaeacian harbor, Poseidon turns it to stone.

We should bear in mind that although the ship is turned to stone, Poseidon may change his mind about his plan to “pile a huge mountain round about their port” (Fagles 13.173). After the ship is turned to stone, King Alcinous prays to Poseidon not to “pile a huge mountain round about their port” (Fagles 13.173). He prays,

“Hurry, friends, do as I say, let us all comply:
stop our convoys home for every castaway
chancing on our city! As for Poseidon,
sacrifice twelve bulls to the god at once —
the pick of the herds. Perhaps he'll pity us,
pile no looming mountain ridge around our port!”
(Fagles 13.203-208)

Compare:

“But come, let all of you
attend to what I say. You must now stop
escorting mortal men when any man
comes to our city. And let's sacrifice
twelve choice bulls as offerings to Poseidon,
so he'll take pity and not ring our city
with a lofty mountain range.”
(Johnston 13.217-223)

With luck, Poseidon will be happy with the sacrifice and will not hurt the Phaeacians any more.

However, we should note that although Odysseus has meant the Phaeacians no harm, his visit to their city has changed their society. The Phaeacians were renowned for hospitality to strangers. Any strangers who needed a passage home used to be able to count on the Phaeacians for aid. Now, however, to save their port, King Alcinous says that the Phaeacians will no longer offer such wonderful hospitality to strangers.

• **How does Eurycleia react when she recognizes Odysseus? How does Odysseus react to being recognized?**

Eurycleia's reaction to recognizing from the old beggar's scar that the old beggar is Odysseus is exactly what we would expect — she wants to share the good news with Penelope.

Eurycleia drops the old beggar's foot, and it drops into the bronze basin, making a loud noise. She whispers to Odysseus that she recognizes him, and then she tries to catch Penelope's eye.

Fortunately, Eurycleia is wise enough not to shout, "Look, Penelope, Odysseus is back!" After all, her master did not tell Penelope who he was, and after all, disloyal servants are present. Still, she would like to let Penelope know that the old beggar is Odysseus.

In the debate about whether Penelope recognizes Odysseus, you may use this scene as evidence that Penelope does recognize that the old beggar is her husband. After all, when Odysseus' foot hits the basin, knocking it over, it makes quite a noise. We are told that the basin is made of burnished (polished) bronze, so it made a noise — it "clanged" (Fagles 19.530) — when Odysseus' foot hits it. Ian Johnston translates the passage in this way: "She dropped his foot. / His leg fell in the basin, and the bronze rang out" (Johnston 19.594-595).

Yet Penelope pays no attention to it.

Odysseus then grabs Eurycleia by the throat and says, "Nurse, you want to kill me?" (Fagles 19.545).

Odysseus makes it clear to Eurycleia, his wet nurse (Eurycleia breastfed him when he was an infant), that she must keep his identity secret, and she obeys.

Eurycleia is loyal, by the way, and she tells Odysseus that she will tell him who are the disloyal serving women — something that Odysseus says that he will investigate for himself. Odysseus has gained one more ally to help him and Telemachus regain control of the palace.

After Eurycleia has washed his feet, Odysseus speaks again to Penelope.

On the other hand, you may argue that Penelope does not recognize that the old beggar is her husband. Penelope does not look up when Odysseus' foot clangs against the basin because "Athena turned her attention elsewhere" (Fagles 19.542).

• **An important question: Does Penelope recognize Odysseus? Their opening conversation.**

A big, important question that is debated is whether or not Penelope recognizes that the old beggar is her husband. In that debate, this conversation between Penelope and the old beggar is very important, and it has been interpreted in both ways: 1) Yes, Penelope does recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus, and 2) No, Penelope does not recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus.

Of course, because of the presence of the disloyal serving women, including the treacherous Melantho, Penelope cannot reveal that the old beggar is Odysseus, if in fact she does recognize him. Instead, Penelope and the old beggar must find a way to communicate without the disloyal serving women realizing that the old beggar is Odysseus.

Think back to their very opening conversation — which is held when they first meet, before Eurycleia washes the old beggar's feet, feels the scar, and recognizes that the old beggar is Odysseus. That conversation (and the conversation following Eurycleia's washing of the beggar's feet) can be interpreted in both ways.

Penelope Does Recognize Odysseus: She Gives Him a Message

When Penelope and the old beggar speak for the first time, Penelope tells her story to him. She tells him about the weaving trick, she says that she can't think of another trick, and she says that she is under great pressure to marry one of the suitors.

If Penelope recognizes Odysseus, she is giving him a message. She is telling him that she has been faithful, but now she is under great pressure, and she needs help right away.

Penelope Does Not Recognize Odysseus: She is Unburdening Herself

Of course, it may be the case that pouring her heart out in this way is therapeutic for Penelope — telling your troubles to another person can make you feel better. That may be Penelope's reason for telling the old beggar about her troubles.

Penelope Does Not Recognize Odysseus: She is Crying Out of Disappointment that the Old Beggar Does Not Have Recent News of Odysseus

When the old beggar tells Penelope that yes, he saw Odysseus, but that was 20 years ago, Penelope cries. Why does she cry? If she does not recognize Odysseus, she is crying out of disappointment that the old beggar does not have more recent news of her husband.

Penelope Does Recognize Odysseus: She is Crying Because She is Grieving

However, if Penelope does recognize Odysseus, then she is crying because Odysseus' leaving for Troy was the start of all of her troubles and because Odysseus faces a great challenge in reestablishing himself on Ithaca.

A Deliberate Ambiguity?

In my opinion, this ambiguity is intentional on Homer's part. It is interesting for the audience to speculate on whether or not Penelope recognizes her husband.

• An important question: Does Penelope recognize Odysseus? Penelope's dream.

After Eurycleia has washed his feet, Odysseus speaks again to Penelope.

At this time, Penelope tells the old beggar about a dream that she claims she had. In the dream, she kept 20 geese, but an eagle killed all of the geese. Then the eagle, using a human voice, told her this:

‘Daughter of famous Icarius,
you must be brave. That was no dream,
but a true glimpse of what will really happen.
The suitors are those geese, and I am here —

before I was an eagle, but now I've come
as your own husband, who will execute
a cruel fate on each and every suitor.'

(Johnston 19.690-696)

Penelope asks the old beggar to interpret the dream, and Odysseus says that what the eagle said will come true, adding,

"Destruction is clear for each and every suitor;
not a soul escapes his death and doom."

(Fagles 19.628-629)

Compare:

"The suitors' deaths
are all plain to see, and not one of them
will escape destruction and his fate."

(Johnston 19.704-706)

Penelope Does Recognize Odysseus: She is Asking, What are You Going to Do?

This dream is rather odd: It contains its own interpretation, and therefore the old beggar need not interpret it. Indeed, the old beggar says that it need not be interpreted: what the eagle said will come to pass.

However, if Penelope does recognize Odysseus, she may be speaking in code to him and asking him, What are you going to do? Are you going to kill the suitors? Odysseus' answer tells her, Yes, I am going to kill the suitors. If Odysseus had wanted to give her a different answer, he would have interpreted the dream differently.

Penelope then immediately tells the old beggar that dreams pass through two gates. One gate is made of "ivory" (Fagles 19.634); through that gate pass untrue dreams. The other gate is made of "polished horn" (Fagles 19.637); through that gate pass true dreams. The message here may be that attempting to kill all the suitors is dangerous — you may succeed, or you may fail.

Penelope Does Not Recognize Odysseus; She is Looking for Reassurance

Suppose that Penelope does not recognize Odysseus. Then she is looking for reassurance when she asks him to interpret the dream. The interpretation of the dream is clear, but she wants to hear someone else say what she wants to hear — Odysseus will return, and he will kill all the suitors.

• **An important question: Does Penelope recognize Odysseus? The archery contest.**

Next in their conversation, Penelope says that she has decided to hold an archery contest. The suitors will compete, and whoever wins the archery contest is the man whom she will marry.

Penelope tells the old beggar,

“That morning is already drawing near
 which will separate me from Odysseus’ house,
 a day of evil omen. I’ll now organize
 a competition featuring those axes
 he used to set inside his hall, in a line,
 like a ship’s ribs, twelve of them in all.
 He’d stand far off and shoot an arrow through them.
 I’ll now set up this contest for the suitors.
 The one whose hand most deftly strings his bow
 and shoots an arrow through all twelve axes
 is the one I’ll go with. I’ll leave my house,
 where I’ve been married, a very lovely home,
 full of what one needs to live — even in dreams
 it will stay in my memory forever.”

(Johnston 19.721-734)

Shooting an arrow through all twelve axes means shooting an arrow through the holes either in the ax heads or at the end of the handles of the axes. The holes would be made so that a person could either tie an ax to his belt or hang an ax on the wall.

Penelope Does Recognize Odysseus; She is Looking for a Way to Get a Weapon in His Hands

Let’s say that Penelope recognizes that the old beggar is her husband. In that case, what she says here may be a plan to get a weapon in his hands. She can be letting Odysseus know that she will get his great bow and his arrows into the Great Hall. He will then have to figure out a way to get the bow and arrows into his hands.

Of course, a bow and arrows is an excellent weapon to use in this situation. Odysseus and Telemachus are vastly outnumbered by the suitors, and it is an excellent idea to kill as many of them as possible from a distance before resorting to up-close fighting.

Penelope Does Not Recognize Odysseus; She is Looking for a Way to Insult the Suitors

On the other hand, if Penelope does not recognize Odysseus, then she has another purpose in mind here. Odysseus’ bow is a big bow, and few people can even string it, let alone shoot it. It is like Achilles’ spear in the *Iliad*. When Patroclus wore Achilles’ armor into battle, he had to leave the spear behind because it was so big that only Achilles could wield it.

In fact, none of the suitors will be able to string the bow. Perhaps Penelope knows this. If so, she is preparing an insult to the suitors. They are trying to marry her, but if they cannot even string Odysseus' bow, then they are much lesser men than he was.

Of course, Penelope has good reason to think that the suitors can't string the bow. They are young, yes, but they have been feasting, drinking, and partying for three years, not working out strenuously (although they do play athletic games, at least one suitor has soft hands). They are probably out of shape, not having stinted the wine for three years.

Penelope may be using her wits to come up with another delaying tactic here. The suitors have been pressing her to marry one of them, and she has declined. Now can she say that she will marry the winner of the archery contest, knowing that none of the suitors is strong enough to even be able to string Odysseus' great bow.

Or it may be the case that Odysseus really did tell her to remarry if he had not come back by the time Telemachus grew a beard. Perhaps Penelope thinks that now that time has come, and the archery contest is a way to get the best possible husband for herself.

Odysseus' Reaction

Odysseus' reaction is interesting here. He is very much in favor of the archery contest. He tells Penelope,

“Honoured wife of Odysseus, Laertes' son,
don't delay this contest in your halls
a moment longer. I can assure you,
Odysseus will be here with all his schemes,
before these men pick up the polished bow,
string it, and shoot an arrow through the iron.”

(Johnston 19.736-741)

Odysseus is ready to take advantage of this opportunity, whether or not Penelope recognizes him.

• **An important question: Does Penelope recognize Odysseus? In my opinion, Homer is deliberately ambiguous.**

Of course, this scene — and other scenes — can be interpreted in either of two ways:

- 1) Penelope does recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus, and
- 2) Penelope does not recognize that the old beggar is Odysseus.

Your interpretation is up to you; however, a third possibility is that Homer is being deliberately ambiguous here.

Just as was the case with the *Iliad*, Homer's audience knows how the *Odyssey* ends. Odysseus will kill the suitors and regain his wife and his palace. One way to provide some extra interest here in this section is to give the reader something to debate.

I can certainly imagine the audience arguing about this question after hearing the *Odyssey* yet another time.

• **How does Book 19 end?**

At the end of Book 19, Penelope falls asleep. In Book 19's final line, we are told that "watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep" (Fagles 19.681).

Sleep is referred to often in the *Odyssey* as being welcome. Sleep is welcome to Penelope because it is a way to escape from her troubles for a while. It is welcome to both men and women in general because people (except for the suitors) in the *Odyssey* work hard.

Conclusion

We know what is in store. The very next day the archery contest will take place. That is something that Homer's audience will be looking forward to. However, Homer often delays important events in order to increase his audience's anticipation.

Odyssey, Book 20:
“Portents Gather”
“Odysseus Prepares for His Revenge”

Pronunciation

Philoetius: fi LEE shus

Introduction

Book 19 was an important book because it contains a recognition scene in which Eurycleia recognizes that the old beggar is Odysseus because of a distinctive scar that he has on his knee. In addition, it is possible that Penelope recognizes Odysseus and that they have a coded conversation about the suitors — they have to talk in code because at least one disloyal female servant is present: Melantho. Book 19 is also important because it ends with Penelope announcing that on the next day she will hold an archery contest, and whoever wins the archery contest will marry her.

• Why does Homer delay the action in Book 20 when we are eager for Odysseus to fight the suitors?

As usual, Homer delays the action although we eagerly wait for Odysseus to kill the suitors. Immediately, we want to get on with the story. We know that Odysseus will kill the 108 suitors, but Homer delays this event to increase his audience’s anticipation. The suitors won’t be killed until Book 22. The archery contest is held in Book 21.

Apparently, Homer believed that delaying action was good: If the audience is really interested in what will happen next, you can increase that interest by delaying the action.

Homer’s audience would have been entertained by Homer’s pretending to draw near to the action, then delaying it.

• What are the purposes of Book 20?

Book 20 has several purposes:

- 1) The main purpose of Book 20 is to delay the action.
- 2) This delay creates suspense. The audience wonders, What will happen next?
- 3) Book 20 contains more evidence of the suitors’ bad behavior, of which we have already had plenty of evidence. In addition, the goddess Athena makes Homer’s audience know that the suitors’ doom is inevitable.
- 4) Book 20 also introduces the character of Philoetius, a loyal cowherd, who will help Odysseus and Telemachus.

• **When Odysseus learns of the rutting of the serving women, he thinks of the Cyclops. Why does Homer remind the audience of Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops at this point in the narrative?**

At the beginning of Book 20, Odysseus learns that several of his serving women have taken lovers among the suitors. Of course, we have already learned that Melantho is the lover of Eurymachus. This makes him angry. After all, their loyalties are toward the suitors, not toward him.

It is night, and Odysseus is lying down, but he can't sleep:

But he couldn't sleep.

His heart was hatching trouble for the suitors.

Then the women went out from the hall, the ones
who in earlier days had had sex with the suitors.

They were laughing, having fun with one another.

Odysseus' spirit in his chest was stirred — mind and heart
engaged in fierce debate whether he should charge out
and put each one to death or let them and the suitors
have sex one last and final time.

(Johnston 20.5-13)

Odysseus decides not to kill the serving women immediately, but instead to allow them one more night. He tells himself that he has been through much worse, as when he faced the Cyclops. But he still managed to be victorious.

The mention of the Cyclops reminds us of Odysseus' cunning. Odysseus used cunning then, and he must use cunning during the archery contest. Odysseus was triumphant then; he may be triumphant now. However, the mention of the Cyclops also reminds us that Odysseus makes mistakes. He told the Cyclops his name. What happens if Odysseus makes a major mistake like that now?

• **Odysseus is thinking ahead — how will he kill the suitors, and how will he handle the suitors' avengers once he has killed the suitors?**

As always, Odysseus is thinking ahead. He asks Athena how he will be able to kill the suitors — and how he will be able to escape the wrath of the suitors' relatives once he has killed the suitors. Athena has scolded him for worrying, and she says that he ought to be happy because he is at home with his wife and son. Odysseus replies,

“Yes, goddess, everything you say is true.

But the heart inside my chest is worried —

How can I handle the shameful suitors,

just a single man against so many.
 And in the house they're always in a group.
 There's something else my heart is thinking of —
 it's more important, too — if I do kill them,
 with Zeus' help and yours, how do I find
 a way of making my escape? That's something
 I'd ask you to consider.”

(Johnston 20.40-49)

Odysseus is thinking ahead: If he succeeds in killing the suitors, their male relatives will be out for revenge. What will he do then?

Athena tells Odysseus that she will take care of him:

“men put their trust in weaker friends than me —
 in a mortal man who lacks my wisdom.
 I'm a god, and I'm there to protect you
 to the end in all your troubles. I tell you —
 to make things clear — if there were fifty groups
 of mortal men taking a stand around us,
 eager to slaughter us in war, even so,
 you'd still drive off their cattle and fine sheep.
 Let Sleep take hold of you. To stay awake,
 on guard all night, will make you weary.”

(Johnston 20.51-60)

Of course, we remember that Athena has not always been around to help Odysseus. She was not around to tell him to stay away from the Island of the Cyclopes.

But Athena tells Odysseus to sleep, and he does.

• Penelope dreams about Pandareus' daughters. Why would Homer have Penelope dream about that particular myth right now?

Penelope dreams about the myth of Pandareus' daughters. The gods destroyed the daughters' parents, and then whirlwinds swept the daughters away. This is bad.

However, goddesses like the daughters, and they take care of them. Aphrodite feeds them. Artemis makes them tall. Athena makes them talented. The girls grow up and are of an age to be married. This is good.

However, Harpies (hard-bird, half-woman) snatch the girls and take them to the Furies to be their servants. The Furies are horrible-looking creatures — they are creatures of revenge. This is bad.

Here we have a change of fortune from bad to good to bad again.

This could possibly happen here in Odysseus' palace.

While Odysseus was away, the suitors moved in and took over his palace and courted his wife and plotted to kill his son. This is bad.

But if all goes well today, Odysseus and Telemachus will kill all the suitors. This is good.

But the suitors have families. The male relatives of the suitors can come after Odysseus and Telemachus and kill them for revenge. This is bad.

The similarity of the two stories is the great changes in fortune.

• Penelope cries out in her dream and wakes Odysseus. Which good omens then occur for Odysseus? How do the good omens affect Odysseus?

Odysseus falls asleep, but Penelope lies awake, wishing she were dead. Artemis is the goddess who kills women by shooting arrows at them, and Penelope prays that Artemis would shoot her or that a whirlwind would pick her up and carry her away.

Penelope has dreamt that Odysseus was in bed with her. In her dream, she thought he was real and not a dream. Penelope then cries out.

Penelope's cry awakes Odysseus. Afterward, Odysseus daydreams that his wife is with him. Odysseus and Penelope are thinking alike. Both of them are thinking about being reunited with the other.

Both Zeus and Athena show us that the suitors are doomed. The gods are on Odysseus' side (except for Poseidon).

Odysseus prays to Zeus and asks for a sign, and Zeus thunders — a good omen for Odysseus:

“Oh Father Zeus,
if you wished to bring me over land and sea
to my own land, when you had given me
so much distress, let someone in the house
wake up and say something in there for me,
a word of omen, and here outside the house
let there appear another sign from Zeus.”

(Johnston 20.115-121)

Odysseus is specific in asking for two signs of two different kinds:

1) A sign from someone awake indoors.

2) A sign from outside that comes from Zeus himself.

Odysseus gets both signs:

And Counselor Zeus heard him.

At once he thundered down from glittering Olympus,
from high beyond the clouds. Lord Odysseus rejoiced.

And then some woman grinding on the stones close by
sent out a word of omen from inside the place

where the shepherd of his people placed his millstones.

(Johnston 20.122-127)

Zeus' thunder is followed by a woman who is grinding grain saying that the thunder came out of a clear, uncloudy, starry sky, and she prays that the suitors will die on this day:

“Father Zeus, who rules both gods and men,
you’ve thundered loud up in the starry sky,
and yet there’s not a single cloud up there.

You must be offering a sign to someone.

I’m a poor wretch, but what I have to say,
oh, make that happen. May these suitors here
for the last and final time this very day

have a pleasant dinner in Odysseus’ home.

Those men have hurt my knees with this hard work
grinding flour — may they now sup their last.”

(Johnston 20.134-143)

Clearly, both Zeus and Athena are against the suitors. Zeus is against them because they have broken the laws of *xenia*, and Athena is against them because she is the protectress of Odysseus.

Odysseus is in a good mood because of the omens. He now feels certain that he will defeat the suitors:

Odysseus’ heart leapt up, the man convinced
he’d grind the scoundrels’ lives out in revenge.

(Fagles 20.135-136)

Compare:

That word of omen and Zeus’ thunder

made lord Odysseus happy — he thought he'd be revenged
on those malicious men.

(Johnston 20.144-146)

• **Which additional evidence shows that Eurycleia and Eumaeus the swineherd are loyal?**

Telemachus observes good *xenia*. He is concerned about the old beggar and asks Eurycleia about him.

In Book 19, Eurycleia promised Odysseus that she would keep her secret, and in this book she does exactly that. She speaks to Telemachus, but she does not tell him that the old beggar is his father. Of course, Eurycleia has no way of knowing that Telemachus already knows that. (Also, of course, other women are also present.)

Eurycleia puts the women to work — it is Apollo's feast day. The suitors will be arriving shortly, as they always do.

We see more evidence that Eumaeus the swineherd is loyal. He arrives with three fat pigs for slaughter by the suitors, and he greets the old beggar warmly, calling him "friend" (Fagles 20.183) and asking if the suitors are treating him well or badly. Odysseus, of course, replies that they are treating him badly and that he wishes the gods would pay them back.

• **Which additional evidence shows that Melanthius the goatherd is treacherous?**

We see once again that Melanthius the goatherd is treacherous. He treats Odysseus in the character of the old beggar badly:

"Stranger, are you still bothering us here,
inside the house, begging from the people?
Why don't you get out? I think it's clear
the two of us won't say goodbye, until
we've had a taste of one another's fists.
The way you beg is not appropriate.
Achaeans do have feasts in other places."

(Johnston 20.213-219)

• **Who is Philoetius the cowherd? Is he loyal?**

Philoetius the cowherd (someone who takes care of cattle) is another slave who is loyal to Odysseus. He greets the old beggar kindly, calling him "old friend, old father" (Fagles 20.218), and he makes it clear that he, like Eumaeus, wishes that Odysseus would come home.

In a word, Philoetius is loyal, just like Eumaeus. We know immediately that he is a good man, loyal to Odysseus, because Homer introduces him by calling him "that good cowherd" (Fagles 10.203). That epithet is backed up by Philoetius' actions. Philoetius and Eumaeus are foils — contrasts — to Melanthius. They are loyal, while Melanthius is disloyal.

The first thing Philoetius does is to ask Eumaeus who the old beggar is. He compliments the beggar's build, saying that it is like a king's. He also greets Odysseus, in the character of the old beggar, by shaking hands with him, greeting him as "old friend, old father" (Fagles 20.218), and wishing him well.

By calling Odysseus "old friend, old father" (Fagles 20.218), Philoetius is showing respect to Odysseus. In this culture, you can call an older person "father" as a mark of respect, even if that other person is not your biological father. (Telemachus did this to Eumaeus after returning from the mainland.)

Philoetius sees the old beggar in his rags and remarks that perhaps Odysseus is wearing rags — if he is still alive. He also provides much evidence that he is loyal to Odysseus, and to Telemachus. He has thought of running away to another master because of the suitors, but he doesn't want to leave Telemachus:

"In fact, I would have run off long ago
to one of the other haughty kings —
for things are now unbearable — but still,
that unlucky man is always on my mind.
Perhaps he might come home from somewhere,
and send the suitors packing from his home."

(Johnston 20.274-279)

In conclusion, Philoetius is loyal both to Telemachus and to Odysseus. In addition, he is kind to strangers and he recognizes that life can be difficult sometimes. In short, Philoetius is a loyal and good cowherd.

• **Would Philoetius and Eumaeus fight on Odysseus' side if he were to return?**

Odysseus tells Philoetius that in fact he will soon see Odysseus kill the suitors

Philoetius responds by saying that if that is true, he will fight on the side of Odysseus. The swineherd, Eumaeus, says that he also wishes that Odysseus would come home. Of course, this is exactly what Odysseus has been wanting to hear. As the next couple of books show, both Eumaeus and Philoetius will help Odysseus and Telemachus kill the suitors.

When the old beggar swears an oath that "Odysseus will come home while you're still here" (Fagles 20.259), Philoetius says,

"Stranger, if only," the cowherd cried aloud,
"if only Zeus would make that oath come true —
you'd see my power, my fighting arms in action!"

(Fagles 20.262-264)

Compare:

“Ah stranger,
 how I wish Cronos’ son might bring about
 what you’ve just said. Then you’d find out
 how strong I am and what my hands can do.”

(Johnston 20.292-295)

Eumaeus also says that he wishes Odysseus would come home again:

Eumaeus echoed his prayer to all the gods
 that their wise king would soon come home again.

(Fagles 20.265-266)

Compare:

Eumaeus also prayed like that to all the gods
 for wise Odysseus’ return to his own home. (Johnston 20.296-297)

Eumaeus is also willing to fight for Odysseus, as he soon shows. He does not say that explicitly here, probably because he still does not think that Odysseus will ever come home.

• What are the suitors doing? Which omen occurs for the suitors? How can the omen be interpreted?

As always, the suitors are evil. In Book 20, they are again plotting the death of Telemachus. However, an omen shows that the gods disapprove of their plotting to kill Telemachus, so the suitor Amphinomus, who is concerned about the gods, says that they should concentrate on feasting, not on plotting.

Homer sings,

[...] once more the suitors were plotting certain doom
 for the young prince — suddenly banking high on the left
 an omen flew past, an eagle clutching a trembling dove.

(Fagles 20.268-290)

Compare:

As they were talking in this way to one another,
 the suitors were making plans against Telemachus,
 scheming to bring him to a fatal destiny.
 But then a bird went soaring past them, on their left,
 an eagle flying up high, gripping a trembling dove.

(Johnston 20.298-302)

Of course, we can easily interpret the omen. The bird is on the left of the suitors — the unlucky side. We know that the eagle represents Odysseus and the dove represents the suitors. Very soon, Odysseus will kill all the suitors.

Amphinomus, one of the better suitors, can also interpret the omen. He realizes that the plot to murder Telemachus cannot succeed. We should note that even though Amphinomus is one of the better suitors, he is still plotting the death of the suitors.

Also, we should note that even on the day of their death, the suitors are receiving unlucky omens, but they continue their evil ways.

• **Is Telemachus becoming a man?**

Telemachus observes good *xenia*, making sure that the old beggar has something to eat and drink.

Telemachus also promises to defend the old beggar:

“Sit here for now,
among these men and drink your wine. I myself
will protect you from all suitors’ insults
and their fists, for this is not a public house
but a home belonging to Odysseus,
and he acquired this place for me. You suitors,
make sure your hearts do not encourage you
to gibes and blows, so that no arguments
or fights will happen here.”

(Johnston 20.322-330)

The suitors fall silent as Telemachus speaks, but Antinous mocks him to his face:

“Fighting words, but do let’s knuckle under —
to our *prince*. Such abuse, such naked threats!
But clearly Zeus has foiled us. Or long before
we would have shut his mouth for him in the halls,
fluent and flowing as he is.”

(Fagles 20.300-304)

Compare:

“Achaean, what Telemachus has said

is challenging, but let's accept his words,
 although his speech is a bold threat to us.
 For Zeus, son of Cronos, has not given
 his permission, or here within these halls
 by this time we'd have put a stop to him,
 for all his clear-voiced talk."

(Johnston 20.334-340)

Telemachus is becoming more forceful in his words to the suitors.

Antinous may be showing here that he knows that Zeus is against the suitors. He knows that Zeus is the god of *xenia*, and he must know that he and the other suitors are violating *xenia*. He also knows that he and the other suitors have been plotting to kill Telemachus, their host, but have been so far unsuccessful in doing that. Or he may just be sarcastic here.

• **The day is a holiday dedicated to Apollo. Why is it appropriate for Odysseus to slaughter many of the suitors with a bow and arrows on this day? (Spears will kill many of the suitors.)**

The feasting continues on Apollo's festal day, and it is fitting that the suitors will die on the grand festal day of Apollo.

Apollo is the "distant deadly archer" (Fagles 20.309). Apollo is also called the "distant deadly archer" in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, where he shoots arrows at men and they die of plague. This image foreshadows the killing of the suitors by Odysseus, who will use Apollo's own weapons: bow and arrows.

In addition, when men and women died suddenly, although they seemed healthy, the ancient Greeks would say that they died of arrows shot by Apollo and by Artemis, his sister. Apollo shot the men, and Artemis shot the women.

Servants bring beasts to the palace to be slaughtered on Apollo's grand festal day:

Meanwhile, as heralds led offerings sacred to the gods
 down through the city, long-haired Achaeans gathered
 underneath archer god Apollo's shadowy grove.

(Johnston 20.342-344)

• **Athena will not let the suitors stop acting outrageously. Do the suitors have free will?**

Athena will not let the suitors stop acting outrageously. She intends that all of the suitors will die — none will escape.

None of the suitors can escape his fate, so Athena makes them continue to behave outrageously.

This brings up the question of free will. Athena makes the suitors behave this way, so do they have free will? They chose to act this abominably in the beginning. Now, they have been behaving this way so long that they have no choice but to continue to act this act. They are no longer capable of making the effort of will that is necessary to do the right thing.

For my part, I see the Athena as being a psychological force here rather than a supernatural entity. (I do believe in the one true God.) When something happens that a god is supposed to do, I think often (but not always) it can be explained naturalistically. For example, Odysseus looks like an old beggar at some times, and at other times he looks like a god. I think that means simply that Odysseus is a good actor. When he acts like a beggar, people see a beggar with old wrinkled skin. When Odysseus acts like a king, people see a god-like king. The suitors act like idiots here because they are idiots. They have been behaving for idiots for so long that it would take an effort of the will that they are no longer capable of to begin behaving again in a morally appropriate fashion.

This is similar to God's hardening Pharaoh's heart in Exodus. Pharaoh has been behaving so badly to the Jews for so long that he is incapable of acting differently, even when Moses asks God to send plagues upon the Egyptians.

Homer sings,

But there was no way Athena would permit
those proud suitors to hold back their bitter insults,
so that Odysseus, Laertes' son, would suffer
still more heartfelt pain.

(Johnston 20.350-353)

• **Do the suitors deserve to die?**

The suitors deserve to die:

- They were plotting the death of Telemachus, but when Zeus sends them a bad omen — an eagle on the unlucky left rather than the lucky right — they stop plotting.
- We have seen that Antinous and Eurymachus deserve to die. They have reasons to respect Odysseus, but they do not respect Odysseus.
- Now we are shown the bad actions of some minor suitors who also deserve to die.

• **What happens when Ctesippus throws an ox hoof at Odysseus? What is the importance of that action?**

Ctesippus, whom Homer calls “a lawless boor” (Fagles 20.320), throws an ox hoof at Odysseus. What is worst, he calls the ox-hoof a “proper guest-gift” (Fagles 20.330):

“You noble suitors, listen to me now —
I've got something to say. This stranger here
has for some time had an equal portion,

as is right, since it's by no means proper,
 nor is it just, for Telemachus' guests
 to go without — no matter who it is
 who shows up at the house. So now I, too,
 will provide a gift to welcome him.

Then he, for his part, can pass it along
 to some bath attendant or another slave
 here in the home of godlike Odysseus."

As he said this, his strong hand picked up an ox hoof
 from the basket where it lay, and then he hurled it.

(Johnston 20.359-371)

Fortunately, Odysseus ducks and Ctesippus misses.

The oxhoof is supposed to be a guest-gift for Odysseus. Of course, this is very poor *xenia*. We remember the Cyclops' "guest-gift" to Odysseus, and we remember what happened to the Cyclops. The Cyclops' "guest-gift" was to eat Odysseus last, and Odysseus blinded the Cyclops.

Telemachus stands up for the old beggar:

"Ctesippus, you can thank your lucky stars
 you missed our guest — he ducked your blow, by god!
 Else I would have planted my sharp spear in your bowels —
 your father would have been busy with your funeral,
 not your wedding here."

(Fagles 20.340-344)

Compare:

"Ctesippus,
 in your heart you understand what's good for you —
 that's must be why you didn't hit the stranger.
 He escaped your throw all on his own.
 Otherwise, I'd have taken my sharp spear
 and rammed you in the chest. Then your father
 would be here planning for your funeral

and not a wedding feast.”

(Johnston 20.375-382)

Earlier, Telemachus had said publicly — the suitors heard him — that he would protect the old beggar, and so it is right that he speaks us here to warn the suitors to leave the old beggar alone. Again, Telemachus is growing up.

• Telemachus complains about the suitors’ actions, and the suitor Agelaus tells him to urge his mother, Penelope, to marry one of the suitors. What is ironic about Telemachus’ reply to Agelaus?

Telemachus complains about the suitors’ actions:

“[...] I’d rather die, yes, better that way by far
than have to look on at your outrage day by day:
guests treated to blows, men dragging the serving-women
through our noble house, exploiting them all, no shame!”

(Fagles 20.353-356)

Agelaus, a minor suitor, urges Telemachus to marry his mother, Penelope, to one of the suitors.

Telemachus replies, “I don’t delay my mother’s marriage, not a moment” (Fagles 20.379).

Of course, Penelope is already married to “the man who takes her heart” (Fagles 20.380), and Telemachus wants very much to see that marriage renewed.

• Which omen does the Prophet Theoclymenus see for the suitors?

Definitely, Book 20 shows that the suitors are doomed.

The prophet Theoclymenus sees bad things for the suitors. As he looks at them, he sees blood coming from the meat they eat, and he sees ghosts in the courtyard.

The “ghosts” that Theoclymenus sees are perhaps the future ghosts of the suitors. Theoclymenus tells the suitors:

“Poor men, what terror is this that overwhelms you so?
Night shrouds your heads, your faces, down to your knees —
cries of mourning are bursting into fire — cheeks rivering tears —
the walls and the handsome crossbeams dank with blood!
Ghosts, look, thronging the entrance, thronging the court,
go trooping down to the world of death and darkness!
The sun is blotted out of the sky — look there —
a lethal mist spreads all across the earth!”

(Fagles 20.391-398)

Compare:

“Oh you miserable men, what troubles
are you suffering now? Your heads, your faces,
your lower limbs are shrouded in the night.
You’re on fire with grief, faces wet with tears,
fine pedestals and walls have gobs of blood,
the porch is full of ghosts, so is the yard —
ghosts rushing in the dark to Erebus.
Up in the sky the sun has disappeared —
an evil mist is covering everything.”

(Fagles 20.441-449)

The suitors respond by laughing uncontrollably and insulting the seer. The suitors think his vision is funny:

At that
they all broke into peals of laughter aimed at the seer —
(Fagles 20.398-399)

Compare:

Theoclymenus finished. But they all laughed,
enjoying themselves at his expense.
(Johnston 20.450-451)

The suitors have had many, many warnings from seers. In addition, Odysseus has warned one of the kinder suitors individually. However, the suitors have all chosen to stay, and they are all doomed. They have been behaving badly for so long that they are no longer capable of behaving well and doing the right thing.

Almost always, the suitors mock the person warning them; here they mock Theoclymenus. Theoclymenus leaves to seek *xenia* from Piraeus. Basically, he is driven away by the suitors. What guest would want to stay around the suitors? In addition, Theoclymenus does not want to be present when the slaughter he has foreseen starts. Theoclymenus tells the suitors,

“[...] Oh I can see it now —
the disaster closing on you all! There’s no escaping it,
no way out — not for a single one of you suitors,

wild reckless fools, plotting outrage here,
 the halls of Odysseus, great and strong as a god!”
 (Fagles 20.410-414)

Compare:

“I’ve got a mind that’s not made for a fool.
 I’ll go outside with these, for I can see
 you’re headed for disaster — no suitors
 who, in the home of godlike Odysseus,
 mistreat others and plan their reckless schemes
 will be able to avoid it or escape.”
 After he’d said this, he left the stately palace
 and went to Peiraeus, who gladly welcomed him.
 (Johnston 20.462-469)

Book 20 ends with the suitors suggesting that Telemachus sell his guests — the old beggar and Theoclymenus — as slaves. Of course, this violation of *xenia* would not make Zeus happy. This suggestion shows us once again that the suitors deserve to die.

• **What is Penelope doing at this time?**

Penelope is eavesdropping. She has placed a chair where she can hear every word. Apparently, Penelope is waiting for the right moment to announce the archery contest.

The suitors prepare the next meal: lunch. They have eaten breakfast. (The suitors eat all their meals at Odysseus’ palace.) The next meal for the suitors will be a “groaning feast” (Fagles 20.439).

• **What have been the main purposes of Book 20?**

- Book 20 causes narrative suspense by delaying the actual enactment of the bow contest that Penelope has suggested in Book 19.
- It introduces the character of the loyal cowherd Philoetius and shows us once again that Eumaeus is a loyal swineherd.
- It shows that Telemachus is growing up.
- It moves us on into Book 21 with a heightened sense of the inevitability of the suitors’ doom.
- It shows that both Zeus and Athena want the suitors to die.
- It shows again that the suitors deserve to die.
- It shows that the disloyal goatherd Melanthius deserves to die.

- It shows again that some of the serving women are disloyal.

Conclusion

The slaughter of the suitors is growing ever nearer.

In Book 21, the contest with the Great Bow is held to determine which of the suitors will marry Penelope.

Odyssey, Book 21:
“Odysseus Strings His Bow”
“The Contest with Odysseus’ Bow”

Pronunciation

Philoetius: fi LEE shus

Introduction

The most important events of Book 21 are these:

- The suitors hold the contest of the bow.
- Odysseus reveals his identity to two loyal slaves: the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius.
- Odysseus gets the bow into his hands and strings it.

• What are the main purposes of Book 21?

Book 20 had two main purposes

- 1) Book 20 causes narrative suspense — Penelope stated in Book 19 that she would hold an archery contest and would marry the suitor who won, yet the archery contest does not occur until Book 21.
- 2) Book 20 shows us again the suitors are doomed.

In Book 21, these things happen:

- 1) Odysseus reveals himself to the loyal servants.
- 2) Odysseus prepares to kill the suitors.

Book 21 begins and ends with the bow — we can say that the bow bookends Book 21. At the beginning of Book 21, Penelope finds the bow and cries, and then she orders the bow to be taken into the Great Hall for the archery contest. The archery contest is then held, and after Odysseus reveals his identity to two loyal servants and sets his plan in action, he gets the bow in his hands and strings it. He then plucks its string — and wins the archery contest by shooting an arrow through 12 axheads.

• The history of the bow reminds the audience of *xenia*, good and bad.

Homer tells his audience the history of the bow, which reminds his audience of good *xenia* and of bad *xenia*.

Good Xenia — The Bow is a Guest-Gift

The bow reminds us of good *xenia*. The bow is a guest-gift that Odysseus received from Iphytus (EYE-fi-tus). Odysseus gave his friend a sword and a spear. When Odysseus went off to fight in the Trojan War, he left the bow behind as a keepsake of his friend.

By the way, when Odysseus befriended Iphitus, Odysseus was on an errand of justice. Messenian raiders had stolen flocks from Ithaca, and Odysseus, then a young man, was off to get justice for the raid. Of course, on this day the bow will be used to get justice.

Bad Xenia — Iphitus (EYE-fi-tus) was Murdered by Heracles

The bow also reminds us of bad *xenia*. Heracles murdered Iphitus before Iphitus and Odysseus were able to visit each other. Iphitus was a friend to Heracles, but in a fit of madness, Heracles murdered Iphitus.

Other Important Points

Iphitus is the son of Eurytus, who had challenged Apollo to an archery contest. Apollo was insulted by the challenge and killed Eurytus. Of course, Odysseus is going to engage in an archery contest. The Eurytus/Apollo story shows that it is better not to challenge your betters, and the suitors have definitely challenged both Odysseus the King and Odysseus the old beggar.

The bow may have come from Apollo himself. According to later sources, according to the Knox note for 21.16 on p. 515 of the Robert Fagles translation, Apollo gave Eurytus a bow.

• **When Penelope gets the bow, why does she weep? (Two interpretations.)**

Penelope goes to the storeroom where Odysseus' weapons are kept. She finds the bow, and she cries over it.

This is another scene that can be interpreted as evidence that yes, Penelope does know that the old beggar is her husband, or no, Penelope does not know that the old beggar is her husband.

Crying: If Penelope Does Not Know the Old Beggar is Odysseus, She is Crying at a Reminder of Her Husband

Suppose that Penelope does not know that the old beggar is her husband. Why is she crying? The bow is simply a reminder of happier times, when Odysseus was home and hunted on Ithacan soil. Frequently, Penelope cries because of the absence of her husband, and this is just one more example of that.

Crying: If Penelope Does Know the Old Beggar is Odysseus, She is Crying Because Her Husband may be Killed

Suppose that Penelope does know that the old beggar is her husband. Why is she crying? She is crying because soon a great archery contest will start, followed by a battle between the suitors and Odysseus. Odysseus and Telemachus are vastly outnumbered — 108 against two — and the most likely result of the battle is that Odysseus and Telemachus will be killed and that Penelope will be forced to marry one of the suitors.

• **Telemachus takes the axes and sets up the axes in order. What exactly is meant by shooting an arrow through 12 axes?**

Penelope carries the bow in the Great Hall, and her servants carry a chest that contains the axes. She tells the suitors that whoever wins the archery contest by shooting an arrow through 12 axes is the man whom she will marry. Telemachus then sets up the 12 axes in order, and he is so good at doing this that the suitors marvel at his work:

Amazement gripped all those observing him
to watch him organize those axes properly,
although before that time he'd never seen them.

(Johnston 21.145-147)

Magic is not involved here. The arrow is not supposed to go through solid metal. Instead, these axes have a hole somewhere. The hole may be in the axhead itself, so that the ax can be tied to a belt. Or the hole may be at the end of the handle so that the ax may be hung from a wall or ceiling.

The important point is that winning the archery contest requires a significant feat of archery — the winner must be able to shoot an arrow through 12 axes set up in a row.

• **The stringing of the bow will not be easy. Telemachus almost succeeds in stringing the bow, but Odysseus signals to him not to string the bow. Why?**

When the bow is brought into the Great Hall, both the cowherd Philoetius and the swineherd Eumaeus cry because the bow brings forth the memory of Odysseus — more evidence that they are faithful to Odysseus. Antinous, bully that he is, wheels on them and tells to stop. He also says that he remembers Odysseus and that stringing the bow will not be easy.

Telemachus seems giddy. He laughs, and he talks almost as if he were auctioning off his mother to the highest bidder. He even says that he is “giggling like some fool” (Fagles 21.121). Of course, we know — and Telemachus knows — that a battle is going to break out soon with him and his father against the suitors. The suitors, however, probably think that Telemachus is simply happy that his mother is going to be wed and that the suitors will go home.

Telemachus tries first to string the bow, and he would have succeeded on the fourth attempt had Odysseus not signaled to him not to string the bow:

Then, going and standing in the threshold, he tried
to test the bow. Three times he made it tremble,
as he strove to bend it, and three times he relaxed,
hoping in his heart he'd string that bow and shoot
an arrow through the iron. On his fourth attempt,
as his power bent the bow, he might have strung it,
but Odysseus shook his head, motioning him to stop,
for all his eagerness.

(Johnston 21.148-155)

Telemachus is a good actor. He gives the suitors a reason for his not being able to bend the bow — he's a weakling:

“God help me,” the inspired prince cried out,

“must I be a weakling all my life?
 Unless I’m just too young to trust my hands
 to fight off any man who rises up against me.
 Come, my betters, so much stronger than I am —
 try the bow and finish off the contest.”
 (Fagles 21.149-154)

Compare:

“Well, I suppose I’ll remain a coward,
 a weak man, too, in future days, or else
 I’m still too young and cannot yet rely
 on my own strength to guard me from a man
 who gets angry with me first. But come now,
 you men who are more powerful than me,
 test this bow. Let’s end this competition.”
 (Johnston 21.157-163)

Of course, the suitors are happy to hear that Telemachus cannot string the bow. They are happy that Telemachus says that he is too weak to string the bow, although we know that he could have strung the bow if he wanted.

As it turns out, Telemachus is stronger than the suitors, none of whom can string the bow.

One of the themes in this book is Telemachus’ coming of age. He becomes an adult in the final books of the *Odyssey*, and his being able to string the bow — although he chooses not to — is one example of his maturity.

We can look at Telemachus’ trying to string the bow as preparation for Odysseus — the old beggar — to try the bow later. Obviously, Telemachus is not going to participate for real in the contest — if he wins, he is not going to marry his own mother. Similarly, the old beggar will say that he wants to try to string the bow only, not participate in the contest.

Odysseus has a good reason for Telemachus not to string the bow. If he were to string the bow, the suitors would shoot many, many arrows in the archery contest. Odysseus prefers to use those arrows to kill the suitors.

• Leodes is unable to string the bow. In fact, none of the suitors can string the bow. Why not?

After Telemachus sets up the axes for the archery contest, and after Telemachus could have strung the bow but did not, the suitors try to string the bow, but they cannot. The archery contest cannot even get started because no one can string the bow.

The first suitor to try is Leodes/Leiodes, a young suitor whom Homer tells us was the only one of the suitors who did not approve of the way the suitors were behaving. Homer sings,

The first to stand up was Leiodes, son of Oenops,
 their soothsayer. He always sat furthest away,
 beside the lovely mixing bowl — the only man
 hostile to their reckless acts — he was angry
 with the suitors, all of them.

(Johnston 21.174-178)

Note: Robert Fagles uses the name Leodes; Ian Johnston uses the name Leiodes. These names are transliterated from the ancient Greek.

Leodes says, “Here is a bow to rob our best of life and breath” (Fagles 21.174). This is ironic. We know something that Leodes doesn’t know: The bow will rob the suitors of life and breath.

Leodes has soft palms that won’t allow him to string the bow. None of the suitors can even string the bow because they have been partying hard for three years. Sometimes they do take part in athletic games, but mostly they eat and drink.

Odysseus, of course, has calluses on his hands.

• Eurymachus and the suitors warm the bow by the fire and rub it with grease to soften it. Why is this ironic?

After Leodes fails to string the bow, the suitors warm the bow by the fire and rub it with grease, but still they cannot string it even though they are doing everything they know to make the bow bendable.

This is ironic because the suitors are conditioning the bow that Odysseus will use to kill them.

More irony: The contest of the bow occurs on Apollo’s feast day. Apollo, of course, is an archer who shoots men with his bow and arrows. Odysseus’ bow was given to him as a gift from Iphitus (EYE-fi-tus), whose father was Eurytus. According to later sources, Apollo gave the bow to Eurytus (YOO-ri-tus). If this is true, Odysseus is using Apollo’s bow to kill the suitors on Apollo’s feast day.

• Eumaeus, Philoetius, and Odysseus talk in the courtyard, where Odysseus will reveal his identity to them.

Odysseus takes advantage of the busyness of the suitors. While they are trying to string his bow, Odysseus see the two male slaves whom he has learned are loyal to him — Eumaeus the swineherd and Philoetius the cowherd — leave the Great Hall and go into the courtyard. Odysseus goes outside to join them.

Odysseus has had much evidence that these two slaves are loyal to him and that they detest the suitors. He knows that these two servants are very likely to fight for him once they are convinced that he is Odysseus disguised as an old beggar. In fact, Philoetius has recently stated that he would fight for Odysseus if Odysseus ever returned to Ithaca.

Odysseus reveals his identity to Eumaeus and Philoetius while the suitors are busy in the Great Hall. Because of his disguise as an old beggar, Odysseus has a certain freedom of movement. The suitors really don't care about what an old beggar does.

• **How do Eumaeus and Philoetius respond when the old beggar asks whether they would fight for Odysseus if he were to return home?**

Odysseus asks the two loyal slaves,

“You there, cattleman and swineherd, shall I
tell you something or keep it to myself?
My spirit tells me I should speak to you.
If Odysseus were to come back suddenly,
brought from somewhere by a god, would you two
be the sort of men who would defend him?
Would you support the suitors or Odysseus?
Answer as your heart and spirit prompt you.”
(Johnston 21.240-147)

Eumaeus and Philoetius both say that they would support Odysseus.

Philoetius is especially supportive:

“Father Zeus,” the trusty cowherd shouted,
“bring my prayer to pass! Let the master come —
some god guide him now! You'd see my power,
my fighting arms in action!”
(Fagles 21.226-229)

Compare:

“Oh Father Zeus,
would that you might fulfill this very wish —
may that man come, and led on by some god.
Then you would know the kind of strength I have
and how my hands can show my power.”
(Johnston 21.248-252)

Eumaeus also prays to the gods that Odysseus would come home soon.

This is consistent with what they said back in Book 20: When the old beggar swears an oath that “Odysseus will come home while you’re still here” (Fagles 20.259), Philoetius says,

“Stranger, if only,” the cowherd cried aloud,
 “if only Zeus would make that oath come true —
 you’d see my power, my fighting arms in action!”
 (Fagles 20.262-264)

Compare:

“Ah stranger,
 how I wish Cronos’ son might bring about
 what you’ve just said. Then you’d find out
 how strong I am and what my hands can do.”
 (Johnston 20.292-295)

Eumaeus also says that he wishes Odysseus would come home again:

Eumaeus echoed his prayer to all the gods
 that their wise king would soon come home again.
 (Fagles 20.265-266)

Compare:

Eumaeus also prayed like that to all the gods
 for wise Odysseus’ return to his own home.
 (Johnston 20.296-297)

Odysseus tells the two loyal slaves his real identity. He says that of all the male slaves they are the only ones who have remained faithful to him:

“Well, here I am in person —
 after suffering much misfortune, I’ve come home,
 back in the twentieth year to my own land.
 Of those who work for me, I recognize
 that you’re the only two who want me back.
 Among the rest, I’ve heard no one praying
 that my return would bring me home again.

(Johnston 21.257-263)

• **Which rewards does Odysseus offer if Eumaeus and Philoetius fight for him?**

Odysseus then promises Eumaeus and Philoetius great gifts, including freedom, if he succeeds in killing in the suitors.

The rewards that Odysseus promises for Eumaeus and Philoetius if they fight for him include these things:

- Freedom
- Wives
- Land
- Houses

Odysseus says,

“So now I’ll tell you what’s in store for *you*.
If a god beats down the lofty suitors at my hands.
I’ll find you wives, both of you, grant you property,
sturdy houses beside my own, and in my eyes you’ll be
comrades to Prince Telemachus, brothers from then on.”

(Fagles 21.239-243)

Compare:

“I’ll bring you each a wife, and I’ll provide
possessions and a house built near my own.
Then you’ll be my companions — and kinsmen
of Telemachus.”

(Johnston 21.267-270)

Slavery exists in both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. It is taken for granted, yet Homer does not try to sentimentalize slavery. Anyone who is a slave prefers not to be a slave.

• **Why does Odysseus promise these rewards to Eumaeus and Philoetius?**

Obviously, the battle with the suitors will be dangerous. Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus and Philoetius number four men, while the suitors number 108 men and have a number of servants, including the disloyal goatherd Melanthius, on their side.

Chances are, Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius will die in the battle, so Odysseus must promise great rewards to the loyal servants who fight for him.

Four people will be fighting 108 suitors. If they kill an equal number of suitors, they will kill 27 suitors each.

• **How does Odysseus prove his identity to Eumaeus and Philoetius?**

Odysseus shows Eumaeus and Philoetius his distinctive scar:

“Come, I’ll show you something,
a sure sign, so you will clearly know it’s me
and trust me in your hearts — here’s the old scar
I got from a boar’s white tusk, when I’d gone
to Parnassus with Autolycus’ sons.”

(Johnston 21.270-274)

• **Which orders does Odysseus give Eumaeus and Philoetius?**

Odysseus gives Eumaeus and Philoetius a few orders. One order is that they go into the Great Hall separately instead of in a pack. That way, they won’t attract any attention.

Orders for Eumelus

Odysseus orders Eumelus to do two things:

- 1) Despite the objections of the suitors, Eumelus must bring the bow to the old beggar.
- 2) Eumelus must tell the serving-women to lock their rooms and not come out, no matter what they may hear.

The women servants need to be locked up for two reasons:

- 1) So they won’t get hurt.
- 2) So the disloyal women servants won’t help the suitors.

Orders for Philoetius

Philoetius must bolt and lock the outer gate of the courtyard:

“Now, as for you,
good Philoetius, I want you to lock
the courtyard gates. Bolt and lash them shut.
Do it quickly.”

(Johnston 21.297-300)

Apparently, Odysseus is concerned that passersby might hear the sounds of slaughter and he doesn’t want them to enter the courtyard and then the palace to come to the aid of the suitors. Of course, the passersby could be friends or relatives of the suitors, some of whom live on Ithaca.

All of the suitors, of course, have been on Ithaca for the past three years, so they have had a chance to get to know many people, some of whom are probably their friends.

Odysseus' plan is to trap the suitors in the Great Hall and slaughter them there.

• **When Odysseus reenters the Great Hall, what is Eurymachus worried about?**

When Odysseus reenters the Great Hall, the suitors are still unsuccessfully trying to string the great bow.

Eurymachus worries about this. If the suitors cannot string Odysseus' bow, what will people say about them? What about the suitors' *kleos*?

“It’s too bad. I’m frustrated for myself
and for you all. I’m not that unhappy
about the marriage, though I am upset.
There are many more Achaean women —
some here in sea-girt Ithaca itself,
others in different cities. But if we are
so weak compared to godlike Odysseus
that we can’t string his bow, it’s a disgrace
which men will learn about in years to come.”

(Johnston 21.309-317)

Of course, Eurymachus is right to be worried about the suitors' *kleos*. We are the “men to come” (Fagles 21.285), and we are hearing about the suitors' disgrace.

What Eurymachus is worried about is what Homer is doing right now — telling us about the suitors' “disgrace” (Fagles 21.285).

When the suitors give up stringing the bow, Odysseus lets them drink their fill of wine. Why?

Antinous says to set the bow aside. Apparently, he is not willing to try the bow any more because he knows that he will not succeed in stringing it. Since it is a feast day of the god Apollo, he advises the other suitors to party now and try the contest again tomorrow.

After they give up stringing the bow for the day, the suitors go ahead and drink wine, as they usually do.

The drink, of course, is wine most likely mixed with water — the same kind of drink that Odysseus gave the Cyclops to get him drunk. Odysseus, the old beggar, wants the suitors to get befuddled with drink before the fighting begins. Getting the Cyclops drunk helped Odysseus to put out the Cyclops' eye. Since the suitors are drinking Odysseus' wine and not their own, they may not mix it with water. They don't stint on eating meat, and they are unlikely to stint on drinking wine.

• **The old beggar (Odysseus) says that he wants to string the bow. What excuse does he give for wanting to do that?**

Odysseus, the old beggar, wants to attempt to string the bow. Just as he had anticipated, the suitors are offended that he wants to even attempt the task.

Odysseus appeals both to Eurymachus and to Antinous, and he says that he wants to try to string the bow simply to see if he has any strength left in his old body:

“But come now,
give me the polished bow, so here among you
I can test my power and arms and see
if I still have strength in my supple limbs
the way I used to have, or if my travels
and my lack of food have quite destroyed it.”

(Johnston 21.352-357)

Odysseus does not say that he wants to take part in the contest to win Penelope. As always, he shapes his discourse to achieve his goals. Thus, he says that one of the suitors will win the contest and marry Penelope — all the old beggar wants to do is to test his strength.

Of course, we should be aware that Odysseus does not need to take part in the contest in order to marry Penelope. Odysseus is already married to Penelope. However, Odysseus actually will shoot an arrow through the 12 axes. This is appropriate. Even though he is married to Penelope, he still needs to win her.

• **Why are the suitors indignant that the old beggar wants to try to string the bow?**

The suitors are indignant on three counts:

- First, how can the old beggar even think he could string the bow, when they have not been able to. The suitors are young, while the old beggar is — of course — old.
- Second, the winner of this contest will marry Penelope. An old beggar should not be the one who marries Penelope.
- Third, they are afraid that the old beggar might string the bow and make them look bad. They don’t say this, but we already know that Eurymachus is worried about his future *kleos*.

• **Antinous says that the old beggar is drunk like the Centaur visiting the Lapiths. What myth is Antinous referring to? Odysseus is not acting like the Centaur. Who is?**

Antinous says that the old beggar is drunk like the Centaur visiting the Lapiths. In that myth, a Centaur was invited to a wedding. The Centaur got drunk and tried to rape the bride. The friends of the bride cut off the Centaur’s nose and ears and then threw him outside the doors.

Antinous has it wrong — the suitors are like the Centaur:

- The suitors are drunk.
- The suitors are trying to marry — against her will — a woman who is already married to someone else.
- Odysseus is going to severely punish the suitors even worse than the Centaur was punished.
- The Centaur violated *xenia* and so are the suitors.

• **Penelope says to let the old beggar try to string the bow. Why? (Two interpretations.)**

Penelope tells the suitors to let the beggar attempt to string the bow:

“Antinous, it’s neither good nor proper
to deny guests of Telemachus a chance,
no matter who it is comes to this house.
And if, trusting in his strength and power,
the stranger strings Odysseus’ great bow,
do you think he’ll take me to his home
and make me his wife? I’m sure he himself
carries no such hope in that chest of his.
So none of you should be at dinner here
with sorrow in his heart because of him.
That would be undignified.”

(Johnston 21.393-403)

As we have seen before, Penelope’s words can be interpreted as yes, she does know that the old beggar is Odysseus, or no, she does not know that the old beggar is Odysseus.

Penelope Does Not Know that the Old Beggar is Odysseus — She is Showing Her Contempt for the Suitors

If Penelope does not know that the beggar is Odysseus, she is showing her contempt for the suitors. She is saying that she believes that an old beggar may succeed at a task that the suitors have failed to accomplish.

Penelope Does Know that the Old Beggar is Odysseus — She is Helping to Get the Bow into Odysseus’ Hands

If Penelope does know that the old beggar is Odysseus, she is helping him get the bow into his hands. She is helping him to be able to kill the suitors.

Irony — Odysseus is Not Planning to Take Penelope to His House and Make Penelope His Wife

Penelope says to the suitors,

“And if, trusting in his strength and power,
the stranger strings Odysseus’ great bow,
do you think he’ll take me to his home
and make me his wife? I’m sure he himself
carries no such hope in that chest of his.”

(Johnston 21.396-400)

Of course, the old beggar is already married to Penelope, who is in his place, so he has no need to “take [her] home and claim [her] as his bride” (Fagles 21.355).

• **Telemachus asserts authority over his mother and the bow. He orders Penelope to leave the great hall. Why does he do that?**

Telemachus speaks up and orders Penelope to go to her own quarters and to tend to her own, womanly duties, which include weaving. Telemachus says,

“So, mother,
go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for the bow now,
men will see to that, but I most of all:
I hold the reins of power in this house.”

(Fagles 21.389-394)

Compare:

“But you should go up to your own chamber
and keep busy with your proper work,
the loom and spindle, and tell your women
to go about their tasks. The bow will be
a matter for the men, especially me,
since the power in this house is mine.”

(Johnston 21.443-449)

Distaff: “A staff that holds the unspun flax, wool, or tow from which thread is drawn in spinning by hand.” — *The American Heritage College Dictionary*.

Why does Telemachus tell Penelope to leave the Great Hall? Telemachus knows that a great battle is going to break out. Soon the Great Hall will be covered with blood. Spears and arrows will be flying everywhere, and Telemachus wants his mother to leave for these reasons:

- 1) He doesn't want Penelope to get hurt.
- 2) The suitors greatly outnumber Odysseus, Telemachus, and the two loyal male servants. Quite possibly, the good guys will die. Telemachus does not want his mother to see her husband and her son die.
- 3) He doesn't want the suitors to use Penelope as a hostage.

• **How does Telemachus' concern for his mother show that he has grown up?**

Of course, Telemachus shows a lot of maturity when he wants Penelope to leave. He is protecting her.

Penelope does as Telemachus requests. This is a sexist society, and women do as they are told. In addition, Penelope wants Telemachus to grow up, and in this society, a grown-up son can tell his mother what to do.

Once again, Telemachus is showing that he is a man, not because he orders Penelope around, but because he is concerned about her safety.

Penelope goes to her room, and Athena makes her fall asleep.

• **Eumaeus, bringing the bow to the old beggar, hesitates when the suitors yell at him. Why does Eumaeus hesitate? What convinces him to bring the bow to the old beggar?**

When Eumaeus finally brings the bow to Odysseus, Penelope has left. Telemachus is on guard for what's going to happen next.

Of course, Eumaeus is a slave, and he is conditioned to obey orders. When the suitors order him not to take the bow to the old beggar, Eumaeus hesitates.

Once again, Telemachus shows his maturity. When Eumaeus stops in his tracks with the bow after the suitors start shouting at him, Telemachus springs into action and does some of his own shouting:

“Old man,
keep on moving up here with that bow. You'll soon
regret obeying them all. I'm younger than you,
but I might force you out into the fields
and throw rocks at you. I'm the stronger man.”

(Johnston 21.467-471)

Eumaeus — after some hesitation that increases the suspense of the scene — brings the bow to Odysseus, who strings it easily.

• **Odysseus gets the bow and strings it easily.**

Telemachus' yelling at Eumaeus and his threat against the suitors causes the suitors to laugh at him, but Telemachus succeeds in making Eumaeus bring the bow to Odysseus.

Ironically, one of the suitors says,

“I wish him luck,” some cocksure lord chimed in,
 “as good as his luck in bending back that weapon.”

(Fagles 21.449-450)

Compare:

“Well, I hope
 the chance that this brings him some benefit
 matches his ability to string this bow.”

(Johnston 21.509-511)

Odysseus scans the bow to make sure that it is in good shape — it is. He then strings the bow easily — the same bow that the suitors have been unable to string. Homer makes a good simile here — Odysseus strings the bow as easily as a bard strings a lyre:

then, like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song —
 who strains a string to a new peg with ease,
 making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end —
 so with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.
 Quickly his right hand plucked the string to test its pitch
 and under his touch it sang out clear and sharp as a swallow’s cry.

(Fagles 21.453-458)

Compare:

once he’d raised the bow and looked it over
 on all sides, then — just as someone really skilled
 at playing the lyre and singing has no trouble
 when he loops a string around a brand-new peg,
 tying the twisted sheep’s gut down at either end —
 that how easily Odysseus strung that great bow.
 Holding it in his right hand, he tried the string.
 It sang out, resonating like a swallow’s song,
 beneath his touch.

(Johnston 21.513-521)

Of course, when the bard mentions that Odysseus plucks the string of the bow, we can imagine what the bard does to a string of the lyre: He plucks it.

At this time, Zeus strikes fear in the hearts of the suitors with thunder and lightning. Zeus is helping Odysseus here. If the suitors were able to think clearly, they would know that if they were to rush Odysseus, they could overpower him easily. But fear helps to confuse their minds.

• **What is Odysseus' target for the first arrow he shoots?**

Odysseus then shoots an arrow through the axes. Although he is married to Penelope, he still has to win her. By shooting an arrow through 12 axes, he has won the contest. However, to truly win Penelope, he still has to kill all the suitors.

Odysseus is looking forward to the slaughter of the suitors. He tells Telemachus,

“Now it’s time to get a dinner ready
for these Achaeans, while there’s still some light,
then entertain ourselves in different ways,
with singing and the lyre. These are things
which should accompany a banquet.”

Johnston 21.541-545)

• **How does Book 21 end?**

Odysseus nods to Telemachus, who comes and stands close by him.

When Telemachus comes and stands by Odysseus, he puts on his sword and picks up his spear. Homer describes

his bronze spearpoint glinting like fire
(Fagles 21.484)

Compare:

Homer says that Telemachus is
fully armed with glittering bronze.
(Johnston 21.550)

Of course, fire is associated with *aristeias*.

The word *aristeia* means “excellence” — including excellence in battle. Very often, an *aristeia* begins with the hero arming himself. Very often in the arming process, the armor shines like fire. Whenever that happens, you know that the hero arming himself will fight very well.

Telemachus’ spearpoint is “glinting now like fire” (Fagles 21.484). Telemachus will fight very well in the battle.

Conclusion

In the next book, Book 22, we will see Odysseus, Telemachus, and the two loyal male servants slaughter all 108 suitors — plus a few disloyal servants. Odysseus will fight first with bow and arrows, then with a spear. The other weapons used are spears and swords. In Book 22, Telemachus will completely leave his adolescence behind.

Odyssey, Book 22:
“Slaughter in the Hall”
“The Killing of the Suitors”

Introduction

We have a few important topics to cover in Book 22:

- In Book 22, Odysseus, Telemachus, and the two loyal male servants kill all the suitors.
- In Book 22, the theme of *xenia* is important, as it has been throughout the epic poem. The suitors’ violation of *xenia* justifies their slaughter.
- In Book 22, a controversy is raised by the punishment Odysseus and Telemachus give to the disloyal female slaves and to the treacherous goatherd, Melanthius. I will argue that the punishment is justified in Odysseus’ society.
- **The book divisions in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are artificial. Homer did not compose these epic poems with book divisions in mind.**

In oral performance, Books 21 and 22 would flow together in a continuous narrative. Odysseus would string the bow, shoot an arrow through 12 axes, nod to Telemachus, and then shoot Antinous, the first suitor to be killed. The bard would not stop and say, “Book 22: Slaughter in the Hall” before singing about how Odysseus kills Antinous.

• **Who is the first suitor whom Odysseus kills? Why would Odysseus kill him?**

Odysseus is a mastermind. He pours the arrows in front of him. Odysseus is going to be shooting arrows very quickly now, so he wants them within arm’s reach. He is also blocking the exit so that no suitor can leave.

Odysseus then shoots and kills the suitor Antinous. Notice that Antinous is one of the two leaders of the suitors. As a military man, Odysseus knows that it is important to go after the leaders first. If you kill the leaders, the followers will be thrown into disarray.

Antinous is drinking when Odysseus shoots him in the throat. Of course, Antinous is violating *xenia* when he is punished for violating *xenia*. And, of course, we remember that Odysseus has an advantage because the suitors are drinking.

• **At first, the suitors think that the old beggar killed the man by mistake; however, Odysseus quickly reveals his identity.**

The suitors are shocked when the old beggar kills Antinous, but they do not realize that the old beggar is Odysseus. They seem to think that the old beggar made a mistake — perhaps let fly an arrow accidentally when his hand slipped. They don’t realize that the old beggar is Odysseus until he tells them who he is. If any of the suitors do think that the old beggar may be Odysseus, they are trying to persuade themselves that they are wrong.

We learn that the suitors are

[...] Groping, frantic —

each one persuading himself the guest had killed
the man by chance.
(Fagles 22.31-32)

Compare:

In their foolishness,
they didn't realize they'd all become enmeshed
in destruction's snare.
(Johnston 22.39-41)

Of course, accidental deaths do happen. Beat author William Burroughs once played "William Tell" with his wife. In 1951, he attempted to shoot an apple off the top of her head with a handgun. He missed and killed her.

The suitors are looking for spears and shields, but the spears and shields that used to be on the walls have been taken to the storeroom by Odysseus and Telemachus.

Odysseus reveals himself to the suitors, when they are scolding him and remarking what a grievous mistake he has made by shooting Antinous. Odysseus says to them,

"You dogs, because you thought
I'd not come back from Troy to my own home,
you've been ravaging my house, raping women,
and in your devious way wooing my wife,
while I was still alive, with no fear of the gods,
who hold wide heaven, or of any man
who might take his revenge in days to come.
And now a fatal net has caught you all."

(Johnston 23.42-49)

One thing we learn here is the suitors — at least some of them — are rapists. Some of the serving-women — the disloyal ones — have been volunteers. They leave their bedrooms in the night to go sleep with the suitors, but other serving-women have been raped. "Ravished" (Fagles 22.38) includes force.

• **What are the crimes that the suitors have committed?**

Odysseus mentions all of the things that the suitors have done wrong. Of course, he stresses the suitors' many violations of *xenia*:

- The suitors have disregarded *xenia* by bleeding Odysseus’ “house to death” (Fagles 22.37). Of course, the suitors have been feasting on Odysseus’ food; slaughtering his cattle, pigs, goats, and sheep; and drinking his wine.
- The suitors have raped Odysseus’ serving-women. (In addition, they have slept with the serving women who voluntarily made suitors their lovers.)
- The suitors wooed Odysseus’ wife while he was still alive.
- The suitors did not respect *xenia*, thereby not respecting the gods. Zeus *Xenios* is, of course, the god of *xenia*. Anyone who disrespects *xenia* is disrespecting Zeus.

Odysseus concludes by saying that the suitors will now die. The suitors are so corrupt that the only thing to do with them now is to kill them.

• Eurymachus speaks up. How does he try to talk Odysseus out of killing him and the other suitors?

Eurymachus wants to save his life, and therefore he blames Antinous for inciting all the suitors’ misdeeds. He also says that the suitors will repay everything that they have taken from Odysseus’ household. He says that they can levy a tax on the inhabitants of Ithaca, and also the suitors will give Odysseus “twenty oxen in value, bronze and gold” (Fagles 22.61).

Of course, Eurymachus is not a person whose word anyone — and especially Odysseus — should trust. Eurymachus and the other remaining 107 suitors will kill Odysseus if they get the chance. Odysseus must kill the suitors. There are no police, no judges (except for Odysseus), no courts of law on the island. The only justice available is what Odysseus can mete out. As King of Ithaca, Odysseus is its judge.

In some places of the ancient world, there were courts. In the *Iliad*, a judge and a lawsuit appear on Achilles’ shield — the shield made by the god Hephaestus. Odysseus is King of Ithaca; Odysseus is the judge of people on Ithacan soil.

• What is Odysseus’ reaction to Eurymachus?

Odysseus is too intelligent to accept Eurymachus’ offer. He knows that if he accepts Eurymachus’ offer, the suitors will kill both him and Telemachus. Odysseus tells Eurymachus that he intends to kill every suitor:

“Eurymachus, if you gave me
all the goods you got from your own fathers,
everything which you now own, and added
other assets you could obtain elsewhere,
not even then would I hold back my hands
from slaughter, not until the suitors pay
for all their arrogance. Now you’ve a choice —
to fight here face to face or, if any man

wishes to evade his death and lethal fate,
to run away. But I don't think there's one
who will escape complete destruction."

(Johnston 22.78-88)

Odysseus does say that the suitors that they can choose between "life or death — your choice — fight me or flee" (Fagles 22.69). However, it is unclear where the suitors can flee. After all, Odysseus has taken steps to keep the suitors trapped in the Great Hall.

It's possible that Odysseus could tell (but he doesn't) any suitors who say that they wish to flee to go into a corner and lie down with their hands where he can see them. Odysseus would like to reduce the number of suitors whom he must fight as it would increase his chances of winning. Odysseus might then allow those suitors to live after he has killed the remaining suitors.

However, all of the suitors, rallied by Eurymachus, decide to fight. Odysseus and his small band will kill them all.

• **The suitors have swords, and there are a lot of suitors, so they have a good chance of killing Odysseus. Which orders does Eurymachus give the suitors?**

The suitors have swords, but of course you have to be close to the enemy to use a sword. Odysseus has the best weapon of his time to use to kill the suitors from a distance: a bow and arrows. Eurymachus tells the suitors,

"So fight — call up the joy of battle! Swords out!
Tables lifted — block his arrows winging death!
Charge him, charge in a pack —
try to rout the man from the sill, the doors,
race through town and sound an alarm at once —
our friend would soon see he's shot his bolt!"

(Fagles 22.77-82)

This is good advice from an evil man, and because Eurymachus is a leader, he will be the second suitor to die.

Before he dies, Eurymachus gives good advice to the suitors — take out your swords and rush Odysseus in a pack. This is good advice for the suitors because over 100 men rushing one man with a bow and arrows (and another man with a sword and spear) will result in a victory — the over 100 men would win. It's fortunate for Odysseus and Telemachus that Odysseus kills Eurymachus — a good strategist — next.

• **Who is the next suitor whom Odysseus kills? Why is he a good choice for Odysseus to kill?**

Smart Odysseus kills the leaders first. Eurymachus takes his own advice, and rushes toward Odysseus. Eurymachus is the second suitor to die. Again, Odysseus cuts a leader down with an arrow. Odysseus shows remarkable foresight in killing the two leaders of the suitors first. This helps to panic the rest of the suitors.

Amphinomus also rushes at Odysseus and Telemachus, and he is quickly killed — by Telemachus, who is growing up in this battle. Odysseus, when he was disguised as the old beggar, had risked his life to warn Amphinomus, who is one of the better suitors.

• **Odysseus will run out of arrows eventually. How does he get other weapons?**

Odysseus' arrows won't last forever. Soon, he and Telemachus will need other weapons — and armor. Telemachus gets weapons from the storeroom for himself, Odysseus, and the two loyal male slaves: Eumaeus and Philoetius.

• **Which major mistake does Telemachus make, and how do the suitors take advantage of it?**

Telemachus makes a major mistake when he goes to the storeroom to get armor and weapons: He leaves the door to the storeroom unlocked, thus allowing other people to get into the storeroom.

Melanthius, the disloyal goatherd, is able to reach the storeroom by climbing through holes that allow air to circulate in the palace. Melanthius gets armor and weapons for the suitors so that they can kill Odysseus and Telemachus.

• **Telemachus admits that he made a mistake. How does that show his maturity?**

Odysseus sees that the suitors are getting spears and armor, and he thinks that either one of the serving women or Melanthius has unlocked or smashed open the door to the storeroom. Telemachus shows his maturity by admitting that he made the mistake of leaving the door ajar.

Telemachus says,

“Father, I bear the blame for this myself.
It's no one else's fault. I left it open —
the close-fitting door of that storage room.
One of them has keener eyes than I do.
Come, good Eumaeus, shut the storeroom door.
And try to learn if one of the women
has done this, or if it's Melanthius,
son of Dolius — I suspect it's him.”

(Johnston 22.196-203)

Part of being mature is being able to admit that you made a mistake. Telemachus could have easily blamed this on someone else — Odysseus already thinks that one of the women slaves or Melanthius the goatherd did this. But Telemachus admits to leaving the door open although it is a grievous mistake that could get his father and him killed. Many students aren't mature. They blame others for their mistakes. They offer excuses rather than apologies for excessive absences, not attending conferences, turning in papers late, not showing up for tests or oral reports, etc.

• **How do Eumaeus and Philoetius take care of Melanthius?**

Odysseus sends Eumaeus and Philoetius to take care of Melanthius in the storeroom — Eumaeus sees Melanthius carrying armor to the suitors, so they know who is arming the suitors.

Eumaeus and Philoetius tie Melanthius up, and then they hoist him with a cable to the ceiling. Melanthius will hang in a painful position for a long time. The two loyal servants then put on their armor again and return to fight with Odysseus and Telemachus.

• **In what way is Laertes' old shield a symbol?**

In Book 24, Odysseus will reveal himself to his father, Laertes. We are prepared for that scene by Melanthius' getting Laertes' old shield. The shield is decaying now — it has mildew — and it is a fitting symbol for Laertes' condition now. Laertes is old and declining, in pitiable shape.

• **Athena appears in disguise. How do the suitors treat her?**

Athena appears briefly disguised as Odysseus' friend Mentor, and the suitors immediately make her angry by threatening her; of course, they think that she is Mentor. Agelaus yells at her,

“Mentor,
don't let what Odysseus says convince you
to fight the suitors and to stand by him.
For this is how it will end up, I think,
when our will prevails. Once we've killed these men,
father and son, then you'll be slaughtered, too,
for all the things you're keen to bring out
here in the hall. You're going to pay for it
with your own head. Once our swords have sliced
your strength from you, we'll mix your property,
all the things you have inside your home
and in the fields, with what Odysseus owns.
We won't allow your sons and daughters
to live within your house or your dear wife
to move in Ithaca, not in the city.”

(Johnston 22.268-282)

The suitors are still behaving badly. You don't shout at and threaten a goddess. Of course, they don't know that she is a goddess. Also, of course, the suitors have been ignoring Zeus, the god of *xenia*, as well. Also, of course, all the suitors accomplish is motivating Athena to help Odysseus kill them.

• **How does Athena help Odysseus?**

Athena appears briefly disguised as Mentor, but she merely encourages Odysseus to fight well. She does not fight for or with him. Instead, she turns herself into a swallow and flies to the rafters.

However, Athena does help in making sure that the suitors' spears do no major damage. Telemachus does get a slight wound, but it is nothing compared to the damage that a spear could do. Most of the spears cast by the suitors do no damage at all, even when six spears are thrown at one time at Odysseus by the suitors, at the insistence of Agelaus.

The suitors understand that it is important to kill the leader. Agelaus tells the remaining suitors:

“[...] If Zeus is willing, we may hit Odysseus,
carry off the glory! The rest are nothing
once the captain's down!”

(Fagles 22.265-267)

Compare:

“Come, you six men throw first,
to see if Zeus will let us strike Odysseus
and win the glory. Those others over there
will be no trouble after he's collapsed.”

(Johnston 22.318-321)

Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd all fight well, but Odysseus, of course, is the main hero.

• **How does the battle end?**

At first, Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius kill from a distance, throwing spears that Athena makes sure do their deadly work, while at the same time she makes sure that the spears of the suitors do little or no damage.

Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius don't run out of spears. Apparently, they keep moving closer to the suitors as they kill them because they get spears from the suitors' bodies:

Back to the great hall's far recess the others shrank
as the four rushed in and plucked up spears from corpses.

(Fagles 22.283-284)

Compare:

The suitors then pulled back
into the inner section of the hall. The others
then rushed up to pull their spears out of the dead.

(Johnston 22.338-340)

Later, the suitors are panicked, and our four heroes are able to kill them at close range, stabbing them with long spears.

You may recall that in Book 20 Ctesippus threw an oxhoof at the old beggar, claiming that the oxhoof was a guest-gift. Now, Philoetius gives Ctesippus a guest-gift in return — a spear that takes his life:

and the cowherd stabbed Ctesippus
right in the man's chest and triumphed over his body:
“Love your mockery, do you? Son of that blowhard Polytherses!
No more shooting off your mouth, you idiot, such big talk —
leave the last word to the gods — they're much stronger!
Take this spear, this guest-gift, for the cow's hoof
you once gave King Odysseus begging in his house!”

(Fagles 22.299-305)

Compare:

“Son of Polytherses,
you love to jeer — but don't yield any more
to your stupidity and talk so big.
Leave that sort of boasting to the gods,
for they are far more powerful than you.
This is your guest gift — something to pay back
the ox hoof you gave godlike Odysseus
back when he was begging in the house.”

(Johnston 22.358-365)

All three suitors who struck, or tried to strike, the old beggar (Odysseus) are now dead. Those three are Antinous and Eurymachus, whom Odysseus kills, and Ctesippus, whom Philoetius kills.

Note that Ctesippus' father is a "blowhard" (Fagles 22.301). Just having a father around is not enough for a son to grow up well. The father has to rear the son well.

Each and every suitor is killed, including Leodes/Leiodes, whose palms were so soft that he did not even come close to stringing Odysseus' bow. Leodes supplicates Odysseus, saying that he was only the suitors' prophet, but Odysseus kills him anyway:

[...] Odysseus picked up in his fist
a sword that lay near by — Agelaus, when he was killed,
had let it fall onto the ground. With this sword
Odysseus struck Leiodes right on the neck —
his head rolled in the dust as he was speaking.
(Johnston 22.407-411)

Of course, Leodes, like all of the rest of the suitors, had many, many warnings to stop courting Penelope, but he ignored them. In addition, Leodes must be a very poor prophet. Other prophets realized that the suitors should stop courting Penelope, but Leodes did not.

• **Telemachus pleads for mercy for two men — the bard Phemius and the herald Medon. How does that show his maturity?**

A mature Telemachus pleads for mercy for two men — the bard Phemius and the herald Medon. These are innocent men.

Way back in Book 1, we found out that the bard is innocent:
A herald placed an ornate lyre in Phemius' hands,
the bard who always performed among them there;
they forced the man to sing.
(Fagles 1.178-180)

Compare:

A herald gave a splendid lyre to Phemius,
so he was forced to sing in front of all the suitors.
(Johnston 1.199-200)

Here the bard says that he is self-taught, although inspired by a god (Fagles 22.365-366).

At the end of Book 4, we find out that Medon is loyal to Penelope: The herald Medon tells her that the suitors are plotting to kill Telemachus. Medon is loyal to Penelope and Telemachus. He has eavesdropped on the suitors, and he tells Penelope what he has heard.

Odysseus, of course, does not know that these men are innocent — he has not been around long enough to learn that. In his fighting frenzy, Odysseus is likely to kill these two innocent men. Fortunately, Telemachus stops him:

Phemius hugs Odysseus' knees and supplicates him. Homer, a fellow, bard, sings,

“Hold on. Don't let your sword injure this man.

He's innocent. We should save Medon, too,

the herald, who always looked out for me

inside the house when I was still a child,

unless Philoetius has killed him,

or the swineherd, or he ran into you

as you were on the rampage in the hall.”

(Johnston 22.443-449)

Once again, we see evidence of Telemachus' maturity. He is concerned with justice. In Odysseus' fury, without the request of Telemachus, Odysseus would have most likely killed both Phemius and Medon.

Fortunately, Medon is not dead. He is hiding under a chair. He comes out from hiding and supplicates Telemachus, hugging his knees.

Odysseus smiles and tells him that Telemachus has saved his life.

Both Phemius and Medon go into the courtyard and stay “at the altar-stone of mighty Zeus” (Fagles 22.403). There they are safe, although frightened, because this is the altar of Zeus, and they are under the god's protection.

The aftermath of the slaughter requires cleaning the Great Hall both literally and ritualistically.

Now that the suitors have been slaughtered, the palace needs to be cleaned literally. The bodies need to be taken out of the Great Hall, and the blood needs to be cleaned up.

In addition, the Great Hall needs to be cleaned ritualistically. After the Great Hall has been literally cleaned, Odysseus uses sulfur and fire to clean the “pollution” (Fagles 22.509) ritualistically.

Odysseus sends Telemachus to fetch Eurycleia, who rejoices that the suitors are dead. Eurycleia “was about to lift a cry of triumph” (Fagles 22.433), but Odysseus tells her, “No cries of triumph now. / It's unholy to glory over the bodies of the dead” (Fagles 22.436-437).

Odysseus also asks Eurycleia how many slave women are disloyal and how many are guiltless (22.444).

Eurycleia reports that 12 of the 50 female slaves were disloyal:

“In these halls of yours,

there are fifty female servants, women
 we have taught to carry out their work,
 to comb out wool and bear their slavery.
 Of these, twelve in all have gone along
 without a sense of shame and no respect
 for me or even for Penelope herself.”

(Johnston 22.522-528)

• **What happens to the 12 disloyal slave women?**

The 12 disloyal female slaves are forced to clean the hall before Telemachus kills them by hanging them. Because the 12 disloyal female slaves had taken lovers from among the suitors, they are being forced to clean the blood of their lovers.

Telemachus does not want to give the women a “clean death” (22.488) by the sword, and so he hangs them.

Telemachus points out,

“I don’t want
 to take these women’s lives with a clean death.
 They’ve poured insults on my head, on my mother,
 and were always sleeping with the suitors.”

(Johnston 22.572-575)

Odysseus had told Telemachus to kill them with a sword, but Telemachus disobeyed that order, and he gives the disloyal serving women a different death: He hangs them.

• **What happens to Melanthius?**

The treacherous goatherd Melanthius is treated viciously. His genitals are pulled off and thrown to the dogs to eat raw. His ears and nose are cut off. And his hands and feet are chopped off. Apparently, he dies from his wounds or from exposure and hunger and thirst — no one would have taken care of him.

After the hall has literally been cleaned, Odysseus ritualistically purifies the palace with fire and with sulfur.

By the way, in some parts of the world, punishments for crime are harsh. For example, in Saudi Arabia a pickpocket can be punished by having his hand amputated:

World Briefing | Middle East: Saudi Arabia: Thief’s Hand Amputated

An Afghan man convicted of pickpocketing at the Grand Mosque in Mecca had his right hand amputated as punishment, the Saudi Press Agency reported. The sentence was

carried out according to the kingdom's Islamic laws, under which murderers, rapists and drug smugglers are executed, usually by public beheading.

Source:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A02E6D81238F937A15754C0A9649C8B63>

Date Published: 24 July 2002

• Is the punishment that Odysseus metes out too harsh? Should we lose our sympathy for Odysseus?

The killing of the suitors, the hanging of the disloyal slave women, and the vicious treatment of Melanthius strike many modern readers as too harsh.

All of the suitors are killed, even Leodes, who supplicates Odysseus for mercy.

The disloyal serving women are hung.

The goatherd Melanthius is tortured, he is castrated, and he will die.

Odysseus and Telemachus seem to think this slaughter is necessary.

Should we lose sympathy for Odysseus? No.

Remember, in this society there are no police, no law courts, no judges (except for the king). The only punishment of the guilty that can be achieved is what Odysseus and Telemachus are able to bring about. They are the source of justice on Ithaca.

• Is the killing of the suitors justified?

The killing of the suitors is justified.

Over and over again, the suitors have been warned that Odysseus is returning and that they need to change their ways.

Over and over again, the suitors have shown just how evil they are.

In Book 2, during the Ithacan council, Eurymachus made a speech that showed the suitors disrespected everything that ancient Greek society respected: old men, prophets, the gods, *xenia*.

At the end of Book 4, after the suitors discover that Telemachus has journeyed to the mainland, Antinous asks for a ship and 20 men so that he can ambush and kill Telemachus when he returns. All the suitors "roared approval" (Fagles 4.758) at Antinous' plan to kill Telemachus when he returned from Pylos and Sparta. Antinous said,

"Quick, fetch me a swift ship and twenty men —

I'll waylay him from ambush, board him coming back

in the straits between Ithaca and rocky Same.

This gallant voyage of his to find his father

will find *him* wrecked at last!"

They [the suitors] all roared approval, urged him on,
(Fagles 4.753-758)

Compare:

“Come now,
give me a swift ship and twenty comrades,
so I can watch for him and set an ambush,
as he navigates his passage through the strait
dividing Ithaca from rugged Samos,
and bring this trip searching for his father
to a dismal end.”

When Antinous had finished,
all of them agreed, and they instructed him
to carry out what he’d proposed.

(Johnston 4.901-909)

In Book 16, when Penelope criticizes the suitors, Eurymachus says that he won’t let anything happen to Telemachus. After all, Odysseus used to hold him on his lap and feed him meat and give him wine when Eurymachus was a little boy. However, the bard tells us that Eurymachus was

Encouraging, all the way, but all the while
plotting the prince’s murder in his mind ...

(Fagles 16.497-498)

Compare:

He said these words to ease her mood, while he himself
was planning her son’s death.

(Johnston 16.563-564)

The suitors are completely immoral, and the only thing that can be done with them is to kill them before they kill innocent people.

Odysseus, of course, has to kill all the suitors. If he were to kill just Antinous, the other suitors will be happy to kill him.

• **Is the killing of the slave women justified?**

Killing the slave women is also justified in this society, although we disapprove of slavery.

The slave women also could have gotten Odysseus killed. If any of them had learned that the old beggar was Odysseus in disguise, they would have told their lovers the suitors, and the suitors would have killed Odysseus and probably Telemachus, too.

In addition, the disloyal slave women alerted the suitors to Penelope's weaving trick.

In the society, slaves are supposed to be loyal to their masters. These slave women were not loyal, and so they are killed.

One may wish that Odysseus could have sold the slave women to another master instead of killing them, but this society doesn't work that way.

• **Is the killing of Melanthius justified?**

Melanthius is treated viciously, but he was a vicious person. He said that he was glad that Odysseus was dead and that he wished that Telemachus were dead, too.

In addition, Melanthius almost got Odysseus and Telemachus killed — Melanthius brought armor to the suitors and almost helped them win the battle. If Melanthius' wish had come true, both Odysseus and Telemachus would be dead and Penelope would be married to one of the suitors.

Does this mean that I am an ethical relativist? Is right and wrong what a society says is right and wrong? I hope not. Odysseus' society and our society are concerned with justice. Odysseus' society does not have police and law courts. If justice is to prevail, Odysseus has to provide it.

We can be very happy that in our society we have laws, courts, and police. We don't need to do the things that Odysseus did to get justice.

• **What happens at the end of Book 22? What do we anticipate will happen in Books 23-24?**

At the end of Book 22, Odysseus is reunited with the loyal slave women, who are very happy that he is still alive.

A few important things have yet to occur. We will see them in Books 23 and 24:

- Odysseus must be reunited with his wife. At this time, Penelope is still in her quarters, and she does not know that all of the suitors are dead.
- Odysseus must be reunited with his father. Odysseus has still not seen his father.
- The families of the suitors will want revenge. Odysseus killed their sons, and so they will want to kill Odysseus. Odysseus must find a way to fight off and/or make peace with these families.

Conclusion

In Book 23, Odysseus and Penelope are truly reunited. Penelope will know for a fact that the old beggar is her husband.

Before the two are reunited, Penelope will exhibit great cautiousness and great intelligence.

Odyssey, Book 23:
“The Great Rooted Bed”
“Odysseus and Penelope”

Introduction

In Book 22, Odysseus, Telemachus, and two loyal male servants killed all of the suitors. They also punished the disloyal serving women and the treacherous goatherd, Melanthius.

In Book 23, Odysseus and Penelope are finally reunited. Odysseus is able to prove his identity to her by passing a test that she sets for him.

• Why is Penelope asleep? What is the explanation if Penelope recognizes that the old beggar is her husband? What is the explanation if Penelope does not recognize the old beggar?

The loyal serving woman Eurycleia tells Penelope, who has slept through the contest with the bow and the killing of the suitors, that the old beggar is her husband and that he has killed all of the suitors.

That Penelope sleeps through this can be difficult to explain.

Penelope Does Not Know that the Old Beggar is Her Husband

If Penelope does not know that the old beggar is her husband, her sleeping through the contest of the bow can be explained as a simple lack of interest in the contest. It is just another delaying tactic, and Penelope does not care to stay awake to find out what happens.

Penelope Knows that the Old Beggar is Her Husband

If Penelope does know that the old beggar is her husband, then her falling asleep is much more difficult to understand and explain. She would want to stay awake to see what happens. Will the suitors kill Odysseus and Telemachus, or will Odysseus and Telemachus be able to kill all the suitors? Penelope would be eagerly listening to any sounds she can hear from the Great Hall. One possible way to explain her falling asleep is that she falls asleep simply through exhaustion and worry. (Homer tells us that Athena made her fall asleep.)

Two Explanations in Other Words

Eurycleia awakens Penelope. Of course, if Penelope recognized that the old beggar were Odysseus, would she have fallen asleep? Not likely. She would know that a battle would be about to break out in the great hall, and she would stay awake with worry. On the other hand, in Book 21, we read that Penelope wept when she went to her room until Athena made her fall asleep:

Climbing up to the lofty chamber with her women,
 she fell to weeping for Odysseus, her beloved husband,
 till watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep.

(Fagles 21.397-399)

Compare:

With her servant women she walked up to her room
and then wept for Odysseus, her dear husband,
till bright-eyed Athena cast sweet sleep on her eyes.

(Johnston 21.451-453)

Perhaps Penelope fell asleep in realistic terms because she was exhausted through worrying.

Once again we can explain Penelope's actions in two ways: one way if she recognized the old beggar and one way if she did not. If she recognized the old beggar, then we can say that Athena made her fall asleep. If she did not recognize the old beggar, then we can say that there is no reason for Penelope not to fall asleep on her own.

• What happens when Eurycleia wakes Penelope and tells her that Odysseus has returned? Does Penelope believe her?

Even after Eurycleia tells her that Odysseus has returned and killed the suitors, Penelope says that she doesn't believe that Odysseus has returned; she says that a god must have killed the suitors:

"But the story can't be true, not as you tell it,
no, it must be a god who's killed our brazen friends — "

(Fagles 23.69-70)

Compare:

"But this story can't be true, not the way
you've told it. One of the immortal gods
has killed the noble suitors out of rage
at their heart-rending pride and wicked acts."

(Johnston 23.78-81)

Eurycleia mentions Odysseus' distinctive scar, telling Penelope,

"But come on, I'll tell you something else —
it's a clear proof — that scar a boar gave him
some time ago with its white tusk. I saw it.
I washed it clean."

(Johnston 23.92-95)

Despite what Eurycleia says about the scar, Penelope continues to say that she disbelieves that Odysseus has returned.

Penelope is aware of the power of the gods, and she tells Eurycleia,

“Dear nurse, you find it hard
to grasp the plans of the eternal gods,
even though you’re really shrewd.”

(Johnston 23.101-103)

What could those plans include? The plans of a god can include disguising himself as Odysseus (right down to the distinctive scar), killing the suitors, and jumping into bed with Penelope.

• **Are Eurycleia and Penelope shocked by the sight of dead corpses?**

Penelope does say that she will come downstairs to see Telemachus, the corpses of the suitors, and the man who killed them. Neither Eurycleia nor Penelope seems shocked by the idea of looking at dead bodies; both have wanted the suitors to die. In addition, these two women must have known that violence and death would occur when and if Odysseus returned.

• **Does Penelope know that the old beggar is Odysseus? If so, how can we explain what happens in this book?**

Penelope sees Odysseus, aka the old beggar, after the suitors have been killed. She does not rush up to him and say, “Oh, Odysseus! You’re back!”

This is another scene that can be interpreted in two ways: either Penelope knows that the old beggar is her husband, or she does not know that the old beggar is her husband.

Penelope Does Not Know that the Old Beggar is Her Husband

If Penelope does not know that the old beggar is her husband, her not rushing up to him and saying, “Odysseus, you’re back!” is perfectly understandable.

Penelope Knows that the Old Beggar is Her Husband

If Penelope does know that the old beggar is her husband, her not rushing up to him and saying, “Odysseus, you’re back!” needs some major explanation.

What explanations can we offer?

1) Very often, when something we have wanted for a long time happens, we say, “I can’t believe it!”

If I were to win \$10 million in the lottery, I would say, “I don’t believe it!” (I don’t play the lottery, but let’s assume I do.) Similarly, Penelope has long wanted Odysseus to return to her. Now that he has, she says, “I don’t believe it!”

2) Penelope does not want to be fooled by a god.

The gods take human form. Penelope even says that the old beggar must be a god in disguise. The god must have been angered by the suitors’ abuse of *xenia* and therefore must have killed them. One thing about the gods is that they do sleep with mortal women. Often, they will disguise themselves as a woman’s husband so that they are able to sleep with the woman. This is

how Zeus became the father of Heracles. Penelope has been preserving her chastity for the last 20 years. She does not want to mess up now. Zeus *Xenios* is the god of *xenia*. If he killed the suitors because of their violation of *xenia*, he may also take the opportunity to violate Penelope. Zeus is a horny god. (A joke from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: That's a funny place for a horn. Oh. It's not a horn.)

3) *Penelope is exhibiting her customary caution.*

Penelope wants to be absolutely sure that the old beggar is her husband before she sleeps with him.

4) *Penelope is demonstrating to Odysseus how protective she is and has been of her chastity.*

Penelope has been chaste for 20 years, and she wants Odysseus to know that she has been chaste for 20 years. If she eagerly jumps into bed with the old beggar, Odysseus may wonder if she eagerly jumped into bed with someone else. Even if she recognizes that the old beggar is Odysseus, she may want to impress him with how carefully she has guarded her chastity. She can do that by setting a test for her husband to pass to prove his identity before she sleeps with him.

• **Penelope does not rush to Odysseus and welcome him home. How does Telemachus react to this show of caution by Penelope?**

When Penelope comes downstairs, her attention is drawn to the man who killed the suitors:

A long while she sat in silence ... numbing wonder
filled her heart as her eyes explored his face.
One moment he seemed ... Odysseus, to the life —
the next, no, he was not the man she knew,
a huddled mass of rags was all she saw.
(Fagles 23.106-110)

Compare:

She sat there
a long time in silence. Amazement came in her heart —
sometimes her eyes gazed at him full in the face,
but other times she failed to recognize him,
he had such shabby clothing covering his body.
(Johnston 23.115-119)

Penelope and Odysseus do not have a big emotional reunion when they first meet after the old beggar kills all of the suitors. Odysseus is sitting, “leaning against the great central column” (Fagles 23.103). Penelope is sitting, looking at him. Both are silent.

Penelope for a long time has not known whether she is a wife or a widow. She may still not know.

Telemachus is disappointed by how his parents are acting. He is especially disappointed by Penelope, who should be joyful because Odysseus has returned home. Telemachus says to his mother,

“Mother, you’re a cruel woman,
with an unfeeling heart. Why turn aside
from my father in this way? Why not sit
over there, close to him, ask him questions?
No other woman’s heart would be so hard
to make her keep her distance from a husband
who’s come home to her in his native land
in the twentieth year, after going through
so many harsh ordeals. That heart of yours
is always harder than a stone.”

(Johnston 23.121-130)

• **A key to Penelope’s character is her caution. She does not want to make a mistake now.**

We have seen that Odysseus is cautious. When Calypso tells him that he can leave her island, Odysseus makes her promise not to do anything to hurt him. Only after she has promised that does he begin to build a raft.

Like Odysseus, Penelope is cautious. She has been chaste for 20 years, and she does not want to sleep with the wrong man now — or with a god. Penelope would make a very bad mistake if she were to sleep with Zeus, a god who can make himself look like Odysseus, even down to his distinctive scar. Of course, she would also make a mistake if she were to sleep with an old beggar who just happened to look like an older Odysseus.

Penelope is cautious. Penelope is circumspect. Homer gives major characters characteristic epithets that appear over and over. Penelope is known for her caution.

Circumspect: prudent, carefully considers possible consequences.

Penelope may also want to be cautious here as a way of letting Odysseus know that she has been careful to preserve her chastity.

• **How does Odysseus react when Penelope says that “we two have secret signs” (Fagles 23.124)?**

Penelope says to Telemachus, who has been criticizing her for not greeting Odysseus,

[...] “I’m stunned with wonder,

powerless. Cannot speak to him, ask him questions,
 look him in the eyes ... But if he is truly
 Odysseus, home at last, make no mistake:
 we two will know each other, even better —
 we two have secret signs,
 known to both but hidden from the world.”
 (Fagles 23.119-125)

Compare:

“My child, inside my chest
 my heart is quite amazed. I cannot speak
 or ask questions, or look directly at him.
 If indeed it’s true he is Odysseus
 and is home again, surely the two of us
 have more certain ways to know each other.
 We have signs only we two understand.
 Other people will not recognize them.”
 (Johnston 23.131-138)

Odysseus’ reaction to her words is a smile. Probably, Odysseus is happy that Penelope is so cautious. After all, he is cautious, too. Odysseus may be happy that she is cautious because she knows that she is preserving her chastity, which is something that he has wanted her to do while he was away.

Odysseus is confident that he and Penelope will eventually get back together. Whatever “secret signs” (Fagles 23.124) she is referring to, he is confident that he will pass the test.

Right now, Odysseus has other things to do.

• Odysseus is still thinking ahead. He knows that the suitors’ relatives will want vengeance, so what does he have Telemachus do?

The suitors are dead, but killing the suitors is only one challenge that Odysseus has to meet. Soon the suitors’ families will learn that the suitors are dead. Soon the suitors’ families will come and collect the bodies of the suitors, and soon the adult male relatives of the suitors will think about blood revenge: Odysseus killed our relatives, and therefore we will kill Odysseus.

Odysseus says to Telemachus,
 “But we need to think
 how this matter can best resolve itself.

Anyone who murders just one person
 in the district, even when the dead man
 does not leave many to avenge him later,
 goes into exile, leaving his relatives
 and his native land. But we have slaughtered
 the city's main defense, the best by far
 of the young men in Ithaca. I think
 you should consider what that means."

(Johnston 23.146-155)

Telemachus defers to Odysseus' judgment.

One thing that Odysseus can do is to buy time. He tells Telemachus to get the bard, Phemius, and to have a dance for the slaves in the Great Hall. Phemius will play, and Telemachus and the slaves will dance. Anyone who passes by will think that Penelope has gotten married to one of the suitors and so a wedding feast and dance is being held.

If the palace were silent, passersby would wonder why. The palace must have usually been noisy, with 108 suitors eating and drinking and partying.

However, we should be aware that this is a wedding dance, and soon Odysseus will pass Penelope's test and their wedding will be renewed. So, in a way, this is the wedding dance of Odysseus and Penelope.

In the meantime, Odysseus can attend to other matters, one of which is passing whatever test Penelope lays out for him. Another will be to be reconciled with his father, Laertes. Another will be to get some help in fighting off the male relatives of the suitors.

We find out what the Ithacans would have thought of Penelope if she had married one of the suitors. People who pass by and hear the music and the dancing say,

"That callous woman
 too faithless to keep lord and master's house
 to the bitter end — "

(Fagles 23.167-169)

Compare:

"It seems that someone
 has married the queen with all those suitors.
 A heartless woman. She lacked the courage
 to maintain her wedded husband's home

and persevere till he arrived back home.”

(Johnston 23.187-191)

• **The main characters of the *Odyssey* miss out on some things that they have wished to see.**

The main characters of the *Odyssey* miss out on some things that they have wished to see. Odysseus misses out on seeing his day of homecoming because he is asleep when the Phaeacian sailors carry him on the shore of Ithaca. In addition, when he wakes up, he does not recognize Ithaca because Athena has shrouded it in mist.

Telemachus must have looked forward to the reunion of his parents — the two of them rushing into each other’s arms. He does not see that. He is dancing in the Great Hall what that moment occurs — when Penelope learns for certain that the old beggar really is her husband.

No doubt Penelope dreamed of rushing into her husband’s arms the moment he returned to Ithaca. That doesn’t happen.

• **Odysseus bathes, and Athena transforms him, but Penelope is unimpressed. Why isn’t she impressed?**

After Telemachus leaves, Odysseus bathes, and Athena once again transforms him. He no longer looks like a beggar. He looks younger, stronger, and more handsome:

Meanwhile, Eurynome,
the housekeeper, gave brave Odysseus a bath,
rubbed him with oil, and put a tunic on him,
a fine cloak, as well. Athena poured beauty on him
in large amounts to make him taller, more robust
to look at, and on his head she made his hair
flow in curls resembling a hyacinth in bloom.
Just as a man sets a layer of gold on silver,
a skillful artisan whom Pallas Athena
and Hephaestus have taught all sorts of crafts,
so he produces marvelous work, that’s how Athena
poured grace onto his head and shoulders, as he came
out of his bath, looking like the immortal gods.

(Johnston 23.193-205)

Penelope is unimpressed. Gods can transform themselves, and Penelope does not want to sleep with a god, mistakenly thinking that the god is Odysseus.

• **Odysseus asks Eurycleia to make a bed for him outside his and Penelope’s bedroom.**

Odysseus then sits by Penelope again, and he says to her what Telemachus had earlier said to her:

“What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*
after bearing twenty years of brutal struggle — ”
(Fagles 23.188-190)

Compare:

“Strange lady,
to you those who live on Mount Olympus
have given, more so than to other women,
an unfeeling heart. No other woman
would harden herself and keep her distance
from her husband, who, in the twentieth year,
came back to her in his own native land,
after going through so much misfortune.”
(Johnston 23.207-214)

Penelope is assertive. Odysseus calls her “strange woman” (Fagles 23.186), but Penelope is right back at him by calling him “Strange *man*” (Fagles 23.192).

Odysseus then asks Eurycleia to make a bed for him outside his and Penelope’s old bedroom.

Odysseus is not a rapist, unlike some of the suitors.

Odysseus is tired, and he needs to sleep, but he will not force Penelope to sleep with him.

Penelope cleverly seizes this opportunity to test Odysseus.

• **What is the test of the bed? How does Odysseus prove his identity to Penelope?**

Penelope tests Odysseus by giving orders to Eurycleia:

“Come, Eurycleia,
move the sturdy bedstead out of our own bridal chamber —
that room the master built with his own hands.
Take it out now, sturdy bed that it is,
and spread it deep with fleece,
blankets and lustrous throws to keep him warm.”

(Fagles 23.197-202)

Compare:

“So come, Eurycleia, set up for him
outside the well-built bedroom that strong bed
he made himself. Put that sturdy bedstead
out there for him and throw some bedding on,
fleeces, cloaks, and shining coverlets.”

(Johnston 23.224-228)

Penelope’s order to Eurycleia makes Odysseus angry. What Odysseus says now makes Penelope know that the old beggar is without any doubt her husband.

The bed is not an ordinary bed. It is immovable. One of its posts was made from a deeply rooted olive tree. Odysseus had built his bedchamber first over a living olive tree, then he had made the bed, using the olive tree as a post.

No one — not even a god — knows that the bed is immovable, except for Odysseus, Penelope, and one servant. Odysseus built the bedchamber first, then he built the bed. A roof covered the area before Odysseus began to build the bed. Gods can’t see through things. The ancient Greek gods are not omniscient.

This is how Odysseus describes how he made his bed:

But among men there is no one living
no matter how much energy he has,
who would find it easy to shift that bed.
For built into the well-constructed bedstead
is a great symbol which I made myself
with no one else. A long-leaved olive bush
was growing in the yard. It was in bloom
and flourishing — it looked like a pillar.
I built my bedroom round this olive bush,
till I had finished it with well-set stones.
I put a good roof over it, then added
closely fitted jointed doors. After that,
I cut back the foliage, by removing
branches from the long-leaved olive bush.

I trimmed the trunk off, upward from the root,
cutting it skillfully and well with bronze,
so it followed a straight line. Once I'd made
the bedpost, I used an augur to bore out
the entire piece. That was how I started.
Then I carved out my bed, till I was done.
In it I set an inlay made of gold,
silver, and ivory, and then across it
I stretched a bright purple thong of ox-hide.
And that's the symbol I describe for you.

How can the bed be moved? The only way the bed can be moved is if some male had been in the bedchamber and cut the post away from the roots. This, Odysseus says, is the "secret sign" (Fagles 23.227):

"There's our secret sign, I tell you, our life story!
Does the bed, my lady, still stand planted firm? —
I don't know — or has someone chopped away
that olive-trunk and hauled our bedstead off?"
(Fagles 23.227-230)

Compare:

"[...] that's the symbol I describe for you.
But, lady, I don't know if that bed of mine
is still in place or if some other man
has cut that olive tree down at its base
and set the bed up in a different spot."
(Johnston 23.260-264)

The bed is still rooted firmly, and so is the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope. No male has been in their bedchamber, either to damage the bed or to sleep with Penelope.

• What is a symbol?

According to the 6th edition of *A Handbook to Literature*, by C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, "A *symbol* is something that is itself and also stands for something else; as the letter *a p p l e* form a word that stands for a particular objective reality; or as a flag is a piece of colored

cloth that stands for a country. All language is symbolic in this sense, and many of the objects that we use in daily life are also” (466).

• **In which ways does the bed serve as a symbol?**

The bed serves as a symbol in many ways:

1) The bed is a symbol of the stability of the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope.

Both the bed of Odysseus and Penelope and the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope have a firm foundation.

2) The bed is a symbol of Athena's patronage.

The immovable post of the bed is made from an olive tree, the tree that is sacred to Athena, the patron goddess of Odysseus.

3) The bed is a symbol of Penelope's marital fidelity.

No male has been in the bedchamber to cut the post and move the bed while Odysseus was gone. In addition, no male has been in the bedchamber to sleep with Penelope while Odysseus was gone.

Penelope knows that the old beggar is Odysseus because Odysseus is the only male who knows about the immovable bed. Penelope mentions

“the secret sign of our bed, which no one's ever seen
but you and I and a single handmaid, Actoris,
the servant my father gave me when I came,
who kept the doors of our room you built so well...”
(Fagles 23.254-257)

Compare:

“But now you've mentioned that clear symbol,
our bed, which no one else has ever seen,
other than the two of us, you and me,
and a single servant woman, Actoris,
whom my father gave me when I came here.
For both of us she kept watch at the doors
of our strong bedroom.”
(Johnston 23.292-298)

• **The bed is the secret sign that Penelope had mentioned earlier.**

Of course, the bed is the secret sign that Penelope had mentioned earlier. Penelope says,

[...] “I’m stunned with wonder,
powerless. Cannot speak to him, ask him questions,
look him in the eyes ... But if he is truly
Odysseus, home at last, make no mistake:
we two will know each other, even better —
we two have secret signs,
known to both but hidden from the world.”

(Fagles 23.119-125)

And:

Odysseus knows that the bed is their secret sign. He says,
“There’s our secret sign, I tell you, our life story!
Does the bed, my lady, still stand planted firm? —
I don’t know — or has someone chopped away
that olive-trunk and hauled our bedstead off?”

(Fagles 23.227-230)

• Is myth always logical? Does it make sense that Odysseus built his bed, bedroom, and palace in this way?

Myth is not always logical. Odysseus built his bedchamber around a living tree, then he built his bed, and then he apparently built the rest of his palace.

Would anyone build a house in this manner?

And what about the fact that no one other than Odysseus, Penelope, and one servant knows the secret of how the bed was built? What about the fact that no other servants had ever been in the bedchamber and noticed that the bed could not moved?

Is that logical?

Of course, it is not logical, but the symbol of the bed is so appropriate that I doubt that anyone will care. The immovable bed is a perfect symbol of the stability of the marriage of Odysseus and Penelope.

• Is Odysseus angry at Penelope for testing him?

Penelope and Odysseus are reunited. Odysseus has passed the test of the bed, and now Penelope knows that this man really is her husband. At this point, Penelope does all of the things that Telemachus must have longed to see but is not now present to witness:

Eyes full of tears,
she ran to him, threw her arms around his neck,

kissed his head,
(Johnston 23.270-272)

Penelope also says,

“Don’t be angry, Odysseus,
not with me. In all other matters
you’ve been the cleverest of men.
(Johnston 23.270-272)

She adds,

“In my heart of hearts I always cringed with fear
some fraud might come, beguile me with his talk;
the world is full of the sort,
cunning ones who plot their own dark ends.”
(Fagles 23.242-245)

Compare:

“But in my dear breast
my heart was always fearful, just in case
some other man would come and trick me
with his stories. For there are many men
who dream up wicked schemes.”
(Fagles 23.279-283)

Odysseus is not angry at Penelope — he understands and appreciates what she is doing.

Penelope’s caution matches the caution of Odysseus. The two are a good husband-and-wife team. Odysseus is a man of twists and turns, and Penelope is a woman of twists and turns.

• **What is unusual about the simile at Fagles 23.262-272 / Johnston 23.301-309?**

One of the most famous similes in the *Odyssey* describes their reunion of Odysseus and Penelope. We read:

The more she spoke, the more a deep desire for tears
welled up inside his breast — **he** wept as he held the wife
he loved, the soul of loyalty, in his arms at last.
Joy, warm as the joy that shipwrecked sailors feel

when they catch sight of land — Poseidon has struck
 their well-rigged ship on the open sea with gale winds
 and crushing walls of waves, and only a few escape, swimming,
 struggling out of the frothing surf to reach the shore,
 their bodies crusted with salt but buoyed up with joy
 as they plant their feet on solid ground again,
 spared a deadly fate. So joyous now to **her**
 the sight of her husband, vivid in her gaze,
 that her white arms, embracing his neck
 would never for a moment let him go ...
 (Fagles 23.259-272)

Compare:

As he held his loyal and loving wife,
he cried. Just as it's a welcome sight for swimmers
 when land appears, men whose well-constructed ship
 Poseidon has demolished on the sea, as winds
 and surging waves were driving it, and a few men
 have swum to shore, escaping the grey sea,
 their bodies thickly caked with brine, and they climb
 gladly up on land, evading that disaster,
 that how **Penelope** rejoiced to see her husband.
 (Johnston 23.301-309)

I have bolded the two pronouns to emphasize the shift from **he/Odysseus** to **her/Penelope**.

In the *Odyssey*, we have been reading about two major stories:

- 1) Odysseus' attempt to get home and be reunited with his family. This is the story of Odysseus.
- 2) The urgent need of his family for Odysseus to get home and be reunited with his family. This is the story of Penelope.

In the simile, the two stories are united.

The passage starts with a reference to Odysseus:

he wept as he held the wife

he loved

(Fagles 23.260-261)

The simile comes next (the joy is like the joy of shipwrecked sailors sighting land) and ends with a reference to Penelope:

So joyous now to **her**

(Fagles 23.269)

Earlier, Odysseus had been shipwrecked near the Island of the Phaeacians. His joy at seeing land is like the joy of Penelope seeing her husband again now.

Homer's simile links the two stories together. If anyone doubts the greatness of Homer, this simile should go a long way toward removing that doubt.

• **Why has Penelope been so cautious?**

Penelope has been cautious for a few reasons:

- 1) She does not want to make a mistake now, after waiting so many years for Odysseus. She does not want to go to bed with a stranger/deceiver after being faithful so long to Odysseus.
- 2) She probably knows that Odysseus will appreciate her caution — and the test of the bed. Penelope is a worthy wife to Odysseus. She can be as tricky as he.
- 3) In Greek myth are many stories of mortal women being deceived by gods who pretend to be their husbands. For example, Zeus once fell in love — or lust — with a mortal woman named Io. Zeus, by the way, is the father of Helen of Troy.

• **If you feel like doing research, retell the story of Alcmena and Amphitryon.**

Zeus is devious enough to disguise himself as a mortal man so that he can sleep with the mortal man's wife.

For example, Zeus is the father of Heracles. Heracles' mother was Alcmena, who was married to Amphitryon. Zeus disguised himself as Amphitryon so that he could sleep with Alcmena. Amphitryon was away fighting a war, but he was able to come home to visit his wife. Zeus, disguised as Amphitryon, arrived first and slept with Amphitryon's wife, Alcmena. The next day, Amphitryon came home and also slept with Alcmena. Alcmena gave birth to fraternal (not identical) twins. One twin was Heracles (Hercules), the son of Zeus. The other twin was Iphicles, the son of Amphitryon.

Of course, Hera hates it when Zeus sleeps with mortal woman and has children by them. That is why Hera hated Hercules.

Penelope does believe in the gods, and let us remember that at this time and in this setting the gods walk the earth and have interaction (and sometimes sexual intercourse) with human beings. When Penelope hears that Odysseus has returned and killed the suitors, this is her response:

“But this story can’t be true, not the way
you’ve told it. One of the immortal gods
has killed the noble suitors out of rage
at their heart-rending pride and wicked acts.”

(Johnston 23.78-81)

• **Athena makes the night longer than usual for Odysseus and Penelope. Why do Odysseus and Penelope need a longer night than usual?**

Having a goddess as a patron has its advantages. Athena holds back the dawn so that Odysseus and Penelope have time together:

And rose-fingered early Dawn
would’ve appeared with them still weeping there,
if goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes,
had not thought of something else — she prolonged
the lengthy night as it came to an end, keeping
Dawn and her golden throne waiting by Ocean’s stream —
she would not let her harness her swift horses,
who carry light to men, Lampros and Phaeton,
the colts who bring on Dawn.

(Johnston 23.311-319)

Odysseus and Penelope first talk, then they have sex, and then they talk some more. Finally, they sleep.

Athena realizes that Odysseus and Penelope need time to do these things:

- They need time to talk and get reacquainted.
- They need time to go to bed and make love with each other.
- They need time to talk about their adventures.
- They need time to sleep.

Telemachus, Phemius, and the slaves are holding a wedding dance in the Great Hall. After 20 years apart, Odysseus and Penelope are celebrating their new marriage night.

• **How does Odysseus show consideration for Penelope when they are in bed together?**

I think Odysseus shows consideration for Penelope by talking to her before jumping into bed with her, although he is eager to do that. The becoming reacquainted is an important part of renewing their marriage. It’s not a good idea to simply jump into bed together and have sex (not

after being separated for 20 years) without talking first, although Penelope says that she will not deny Odysseus sex:

“If it’s bed you want,” reserved Penelope replied,
 “it’s bed you’ll have, whenever the spirit moves you,
 now that the gracious gods have brought you home again
 to native land, your grand and gracious house.
 But since you’ve alluded to it,
 since a god has put it in your mind,
 please, tell me about this trial still to come.
 I’m bound to learn of it later, I am sure —
 what’s the harm if I hear of it tonight?”

(Fagles 23.291-299)

Compare:

“You’ll have a bed
 when your heart so desires, for the gods
 have seen to it that you’ve returned back here
 to your well-built home and native land.
 But since you’ve thought of it and some god
 has set it in your heart, come and tell me
 of this trial. For I think I’ll hear of it
 in future, so to learn of it right now
 won’t make things any worse.”

(Johnston 23.330-338)

• Odysseus tells Penelope about his future travels and Tiresias’ prophecy. Is this news good?

Odysseus does have a future journey ahead of him — a journey that Tiresias, the Theban prophet, told him about in the Land of the Dead. He tells her about this journey. This allows them to get reacquainted a little more before they have sex.

Tiresias told Odysseus that yet another adventure is in store for him. He must undertake another journey before he dies. He must carry an oar on his shoulder and journey until he comes across someone who thinks that the oar is a winnowing fan. Then he must sacrifice to Poseidon. The idea is that Odysseus will carry the worship of Poseidon to a people far inland who have no knowledge of the sea. Once Odysseus does this, Odysseus can return home and offer more

sacrifices to the gods. Odysseus will die “a gentle, painless death far from the sea” (Fagles 11.154).

Odysseus is home, yes, but he has another journey to take. Odysseus has yet another adventure ahead of him. This reunion with Penelope is only temporary. This must, I think, cause sadness for Penelope.

• Odysseus and Penelope tell each other their stories. Does Odysseus tell her about his affairs?

Eurycleia and the housekeeper Eurynome make up the bed, and so two other servants now know the secret of the bed.

Odysseus and Penelope have sex together, and then they tell their stories to each other.

Penelope tells Odysseus about the suitors who besieged her.

Odysseus tells Penelope all about his adventures, in the same order in which he told them to the Phaeacians. It is possible that the story that Odysseus told to the Phaeacians is the same story that Odysseus tells here to Penelope. If so, Odysseus is once again quite the bard. If it took four hours for Odysseus to tell his story to the Phaeacians, it takes him four hours to tell his story to Penelope. It's no wonder that Athena decided to make the night longer than usual.

Apparently, Odysseus does not engage in self-censorship. When he told Penelope about what the prophet Tiresias had told him, he said, “I'll hide nothing now” (Fagles 23.302). He seems to have told Penelope about his sleeping with Circe and with Calypso. We are also told by the bard that Penelope “listened on, enchanted” (Fagles 23.352).

Why would Penelope not be upset here? As you might expect, concubines make married women angry. In Book 1, we read that Laertes, Odysseus' father, had purchased the slave-woman Eurycleia (eu ry CLEYE a) when she was young and desirable, but he had not slept with her, because his wife would have been angry:

Laertes had paid a price with the woman years ago,
still in the bloom of youth. He traded twenty oxen,
honored her on a par with his own loyal wife at home
but fearing the queen's anger, never shared her bed.
(Fagles 1.490-493)

Compare:

Some years ago Laertes
had purchased her with his own wealth — at the time,
she was in her early youth — paying twenty oxen.
In his home he honoured her the way he did
his noble wife, but not once did he have sex with her,

because he wanted to avoid annoying his wife.

(Johnston 1.575-580)

We can come up with a few reasons:

- 1) Penelope is so happy that her husband has returned and killed all the suitors that she can forgive him a lot.
- 2) The bard (and Odysseus) make it clear that the goddesses forced Odysseus to sleep with them. Not obeying a goddess can be fatal.
- 3) Odysseus had the chance to continue to be the lovers of these goddesses, and yet he returned to Penelope. Calypso even offered Odysseus immortality and agelessness, and yet Odysseus turned her down because he wanted to return home to Penelope. This has got to be flattering to Penelope.

Finally, Odysseus and Penelope sleep. After Odysseus and Penelope have slept long enough, Athena lets the next day begin.

• How does Book 23 end?

When Odysseus and Penelope wake up, Odysseus says that he will be able to recoup the herds of animals that the suitors have slaughtered. For one thing, he will be a pirate and make raids on other people. For another, he will tax his own people.

Odysseus also says that he must see his father, Laertes.

Conclusion

In Book 24, of course, we have the end of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus reveals himself to his father; Odysseus, his father, and his son, Telemachus, then must deal with the angry male relatives of the dead suitors.

By the end of Book 24, peace comes to Ithaca, but it is, I believe, an uneasy peace.

Odyssey, Book 24:

“Peace”

“Zeus and Athena End the Fighting”

Important Terms

Deus ex machina: Occurs when a god or goddess solves a seemingly insoluble problem.

Nekuia: A work describing a visit — usually by a living person — to the Land of the Dead.

Introduction

Of course, Book 24 ends the *Odyssey*. In it, Odysseus is reunited with his father, Laertes. In addition, we see the male relatives of the suitors attempt to avenge the deaths of the suitors by killing Odysseus.

• Is Book 24 spurious or genuine?

Lots of speculation has arisen about the *Odyssey*. We simply don’t know much about its author or creator. Some critics have speculated that the *Odyssey* does not have one creator. Instead, they believe that at one time the *Odyssey* was much shorter and that other bards have added books to it. One of those books is claimed to be Book 24.

To me, these critics are wrong. The *Odyssey* can’t end with Book 23. Over and over again, we have heard about blood revenge. One man kills another man, and then he has to flee for his life; otherwise, the male relatives of the man he killed will kill him. If the *Odyssey* ends with Book 23, the audience is left hanging: What happens when the families of the dead suitors find out that the suitors are dead?

• Book 24 opens with what is often called a “second *nekuia*,” a second visit to the Underworld.

Book 24 opens with a second *nekuia*, a second visit to the Land of the Dead. This time, the bard takes us there. No living hero visits the Land of the Dead this time. Instead, Hermes leads the souls of the dead suitors to the Underworld. When he does so, the cries of the suitors are like the cries of bats (Fagles 24.5-10).

• What is the relationship between Achilles and Agamemnon in the Underworld?

In Book 24, we see that Achilles and Agamemnon are friends in the Land of the Dead. For most of the *Iliad*, they were enemies, but of course they were reconciled because Achilles wanted to go into battle to avenge the death of Patroclus.

We find out that Achilles is respected in the Land of the Dead. Agamemnon describes his funeral in detail. Achilles died on the battlefield, and his *kleos* will never die. Agamemnon then compares his own death — unfavorably, of course — to the death of Achilles. Agamemnon did not die on the battlefield. Instead, his wife and her lover murdered him. This is the last time we hear of Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. It is time that we put this comparandum to rest. We know Penelope, and she is no Clytemnestra.

Can the end of the *Odyssey* also be regarded as the end of the *Iliad* as well? Perhaps. Here we see that Achilles and Agamemnon are reconciled.

The friendliness of Achilles and Agamemnon shows that peace is possible even when there have been major disagreements. Peace, of course, is the theme of Book 24. By the end of the book, peace will be made between the suitors' families and Odysseus.

• **Are the pictures of the Underworld in Book 11 and Book 24 inconsistent?**

The pictures of the Underworld in Book 11 and Book 24 are inconsistent. We remember that in Book 11, Tiresias was the only ghost who still has his wits. Tiresias needed to drink blood in order to regain the gift of prophecy. The other ghosts needed to drink blood to regain their wits.

However, here we see the ghosts talking together. They know who they are, and they know many of the other ghosts. And if they don't know a ghost's story, they can ask him to tell his story. These ghosts have their wits, even without drinking blood.

In addition, the suitors have not had a funeral yet, yet they are in the Underworld.

We can look at the difference in the two accounts of the Underworld as being due to the purposes of the narrative:

1) In Book 11, Odysseus uses a *Nekuia* to tell a fascinating story to the Phaeacians so that they will give him magnificent guest-gifts. He may be exaggerating or even lying in parts. For example, Odysseus uses his sword to prevent the shades from drinking the blood, but when he tries to embrace his dead mother, he cannot. If Odysseus is unable to touch a shade, why would they be afraid of his sword? A sword would be unlikely to touch or hurt them.

2) In Book 24, the bard uses a *Nekuia* to put to rest the comparandum of Odysseus to Agamemnon, and of Penelope to Clytemnestra. Odysseus did not experience the homecoming that Agamemnon did. Penelope is very much different from Clytemnestra. Even Agamemnon praises Penelope.

It is possible that the ghosts need a drink of blood to talk to a living soul, but that they don't need a drink of blood to talk about themselves. At the beginning of Book 24, we read that when Hermes leads the souls of the suitors to the Underworld, they make cries like bats. However, in the Underworld, they speak to each other normally. Note that the suitors have not yet been buried. A little later, after this second *Nekuia*, the poet sings that the deaths of the suitors become known, and families gather and bury their dead: Fagles 24.456-464.

• **What happens when the spirits of the suitors arrive in the Underworld?**

The ghosts of the dead suitors arrive in the underworld, and Agamemnon recognizes one of the suitors: Amphimedon. The theme of *xenia* is present once again because Agamemnon was once a guest at the home of Amphimedon. Agamemnon and Menelaus stayed at Amphimedon's father's house as they sought to convince Odysseus to fight in the Trojan War.

Agamemnon asks Amphimedon how he and the other ghosts died. Amphimedon explains their story: how Odysseus killed them all. He admits that they courted Penelope, Odysseus' wife, hoping to marry her — "a marriage she despised" (Fagles 24.137). He explains Penelope's

weaving trick, and he explains the archery contest and how Odysseus and Telemachus killed them all.

By the way, Amphimedon believes that the archery contest was Odysseus' idea:

“Then, with his great cunning,
he told his wife to place before the suitors
his bow and gray iron axes, a contest
for those of us who bore an evil fate,
the prelude to our death.”

(Johnston 24.219-223)

Of course, Amphimedon does not know that the archery contest was the idea of Penelope — not Odysseus.

Even though Agamemnon does not know that the archery contest was Penelope's idea, he still knows enough about her to praise her highly. He also praises Odysseus.

• **What does Agamemnon say about Penelope?**

Agamemnon praises Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, highly. Agamemnon's treacherous wife, Clytemnestra, was nothing like Penelope:

“The fame of her [Penelope's] great virtue will never die.
The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind,
a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope.
A far cry from the daughter of Tyndareus, Clytemnestra —
what outrage she committed, killing the man *she* married once! —
yes, and the song men sing of her will ring with loathing.
She brands with a foul name the breed of womankind,
even the honest ones to come!”

(Fagles 24.216-223)

Compare:

“Oh, son of Laertes, happy Odysseus,
a resourceful man, who won himself
a wife whose excellence was truly great.
How fine the heart in faultless Penelope,
daughter of Icarius! She remembered well

the husband she was married to, Odysseus.
 The story of her excellence will not die —
 immortal gods will make a pleasing song
 for men on earth about faithful Penelope.
 Tyndareus' daughter acted differently,
 when she planned to carry out her evil acts
 and killed her wedded husband — among men
 there'll be a hateful song for her. She gives
 all women an evil reputation,
 even one whose actions are done well."

(Johnston 24.252-266)

Odysseus' homecoming was nothing like the homecoming of Agamemnon, although if Penelope had been like Clytemnestra, Odysseus' homecoming could also have been tragic.

Note that there is an emphasis on *kleos* in the *Nekuia*. Achilles' funeral is described in great detail. In addition, Penelope has good *kleos*, while Clytemnestra has bad *kleos*.

Achilles and Penelope have a good reputation forever, while the suitors and Clytemnestra have a bad reputation forever.

• **Odysseus visits Laertes in the countryside. What is Laertes' life like?**

Here in Book 24, the bard ties up the loose ends. Odysseus still needs to be reunited with his father, and so he goes and visits Laertes in the countryside.

Laertes is living the life of a poor farmer. He is almost like a slave. We remember the words of Achilles in Book 11, in which he says that he would rather be alive than dead:

"By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man —
 some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive —
 than rule down here over all the breathless dead."

(Fagles 11.556-558)

Compare:

"Don't try to comfort me about my death,
 glorious Odysseus. I'd rather live
 working as a wage-labourer for hire
 by some other man, one who had no land

and not much in the way of livelihood,
than lord it over all the wasted dead.”

(Johnston 24.622-627)

Laertes’ life is like the life of the “dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive” (Fagles 11.557). It is not a good life. We can guess how bad it is to be dead in the Land of the Dead.

Odysseus sees his father and is distressed by the way he looks; he looks like a poor slave dressed in rags. Laertes has not aged well.

We have heard about Laertes’ life since Odysseus went off to Troy. It has not been good. For one thing, Laertes was too old to go to Troy, and when the suitors arrived Laertes was too old to keep them from entering the palace. Now, Laertes is very old.

Not only is Laertes old, but his only son has been missing for 20 years. Odysseus has lost 20 years of being with his father. Odysseus has not been around to take care of his aged father.

We have heard about Laertes in other books and from other characters:

Athena-Mentes in Book 1: Laertes is now like a hermit. He never goes into town. He simply works on the farm like a slave.

Anticleia, his dead wife, in Book 11: In winter, Laertes sleeps on the ashes by the fire with the slaves. In summer, Laertes sleeps on dry leaves.

Eumaeus, the swineherd, in Book 15: Laertes prays for death as he grieves for Odysseus and for his dead wife:

“Well, stranger, I’ll tell you the honest truth.

Laertes is still living, but all the time
inside his home he keeps praying to Zeus
the spirit in his limbs will fade away.

He grieves excessively for his own son,
who’s gone, and for the wife he married,
a wise lady, whose death, above all else,
really troubled him and made him old
before his time.”

(Johnston 15.449-457)

• **What is Odysseus’ purpose in talking with Laertes?**

Odysseus does have an important purpose in talking to his father.

Laertes is living in a self-imposed prison of grief.

Odysseus wants to reawaken in Laertes a sense of manhood and awareness of the fact that he has dignity as a man and as a king.

We should note that Laertes has not entirely given up. He is working in an orchard when Odysseus sees him. He is still productive. He is still preserving the property of Odysseus and Telemachus. One of the most important jobs — and the most necessary job — a human being can do is to grow food. However, his life — of course — should be much better than it is. The suitors have made his life much worse than it should be by not showing him and his family respect.

• **Why does Odysseus lie to his father?**

Odysseus lies to Laertes instead of immediately telling him that he is Odysseus and has returned home to Ithaca.

First, Odysseus reproaches Laertes — and not gently. He remarks on Laertes' shabby clothing. He compliments Laertes by saying that he works hard and with skill and that there's nothing of the slave in his build or bearing, but then he asks:

“whose slave are you? whose orchard are you tending?”

(Fagles 24.284)

This lets Laertes know that he has fallen into a degraded condition. By letting Laertes know that, apparently Odysseus is hoping that Laertes will make the decision not to be in a degraded condition.

Alfred Heubeck writes in his commentary on Book 24:

By posing questions, awakening memories, and stirring long-repressed feelings, Odysseus forces his father not only to answer the questions put, but to ask questions in return, and so, step by step, to emerge from his self-inflicted isolation and apathy.

Source: *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Volume 3*, p. 390.

Odysseus then says he met Odysseus — five years ago. Because that does not give Laertes much hope that Odysseus is alive now, Laertes cries. At that time, after giving pain to his father, and after receiving pain in seeing his father cry, Odysseus tells his father that he is Odysseus and has returned to him.

• **Which strategies does Odysseus have for identifying himself?**

Laertes is cautious like Odysseus — Laertes wants proof that this is really his son:

“if you are indeed my son Odysseus
and have come back, show me some evidence,
something clear so I can be quite certain.”

(Johnston 24.425-427)

Odysseus is able to convince Laertes that he is his son by doing two things:

- 1) Showing Laertes the scar on his knee.
- 2) Sharing a mutual memory with him.

The mutual memory that Odysseus shares with Laertes is about the trees in the orchard where they are standing.

Laertes refuses to believe that Odysseus is his son, without proof. When Laertes asks for proof, Odysseus gives him two kinds of proof. Odysseus shows him the scar on his knee, and he refers to when he and Laertes had planted the trees in this very orchard when Odysseus was a little boy:

“Come, I’ll tell you the trees you gave me once
 in the well-established vineyard — back then
 I was a child following you in the yard,
 and I asked about each one. It was here —
 we walked by these very trees. You named them,
 and described them to me. You offered me
 thirteen pear trees and ten apple trees
 along with forty fig trees. In the same way,
 you said you’d give me fifty rows of vines,
 bearing all sorts of different types of grapes,
 when Zeus’ seasons load their tops with fruit.”
 (Johnston 24.437-447)

These things convince Laertes that this is truly Odysseus.

In all the recognition scenes we have seen, Odysseus has two available strategies for identifying himself:

- 1) He can show his distinctive scar, the visible, tangible proof of his identity,
- 2) He can refer to a shared memory.

• Which strategy or strategies — if any — does Odysseus use for identifying himself to the slaves?

Eurycleia, Eumaeus, and Philoetius — the slaves — recognize him through his distinctive scar. Eurycleia recognizes the scar while she is washing the old beggar’s feet. The old beggar shows his scar to Eumaeus the swineherd and Philoetius the cowherd.

• Which strategy or strategies — if any — does Odysseus use for identifying himself to Penelope? Why doesn’t Odysseus simply show Penelope his scar?

Odysseus does not show Penelope his scar. Penelope and Odysseus share an emotionally significant memory: the memory of how Odysseus constructed his bed.

Why didn't Odysseus simply show Penelope his scar — it would have been a quick and easy and realistic way of revealing his identity? For one thing, it would not have been a memorable scene. Instead, the test of the bed is so much more memorable, and the bed itself is a wonderful symbol of their marriage. Showing his scar would be like showing an ID card. In addition, gods such as Zeus can disguise themselves as women's husbands in order to sleep with the wives. Zeus is very capable of reproducing a distinctive scar.

• Which strategy or strategies — if any — does Odysseus use for identifying himself to Laertes?

Laertes is Odysseus' father, and as an old man as well as a father, he deserves respect. Therefore, he is offered absolutely convincing proof that this man is his son. Odysseus shows Laertes his distinctive scar, and he recounts an emotionally significant memory that he and Laertes share about the orchard they are standing in.

• Which strategy or strategies — if any — does Odysseus use for identifying himself to Telemachus?

Telemachus is not offered any proof at all because in the days before genetic testing no proof can be offered. Showing Odysseus his scar will not help because Telemachus doesn't remember the scar — he was an infant when Odysseus left to go to the Trojan War. Sharing an emotionally significant memory is impossible because Odysseus and Telemachus have no shared emotionally significant memories — once again, Telemachus was an infant when Odysseus left to go to the Trojan War. Telemachus, like all sons back then, has to trust that this man who claims to be his father is in fact his father. This is still true to a large extent today. Think of all the children who have discovered that they are adopted.

By the way, the dog, Argo, recognizes smells, and so recognizes Odysseus by his scent. Human beings do not have that ability.

• Laertes does become a man again.

Odysseus' testing of his father has good results. Laertes becomes a man again. Immediately, he begins thinking about the relatives of the suitors and how he, Odysseus, and Telemachus can handle them. Laertes says,

“Father Zeus, it seems you gods are still
on high Olympus, if it's true those suitors
have paid the price of their proud arrogance.
But now my heart contains a dreadful fear —
all the men of Ithaca will soon come here
against us, and they'll send out messengers
all through Cephallenia, to every city.”

(Johnston 24.455-461)

One advantage that Odysseus has, of course, is that the avengers of the suitors' deaths will be old men, probably as old as Laertes.

Laertes bathes, and Athena transforms him, making him taller and sturdier. He seems like a god to Odysseus. Laertes has become a man again.

• **The death of the suitors has been discovered. What do the relatives of the suitors do?**

The death of the suitors has been discovered, and their bodies have been removed. Some of the suitors lived on other islands, and ships are returning their bodies to their families. Other suitors lived on Ithaca, and their bodies have been returned to their families.

Over and over, we have heard of cases in which the slaughtered man's family seeks blood vengeance. Someone killed a male relative of theirs, and so they want to kill the killer. That happens here. Some relatives of the dead suitors want to kill Odysseus.

Over and over, we have had references to blood vengeance. Many people in Odysseus' situation would flee for their life.

• **Which complaints do the relatives of the suitors have against Odysseus?**

The suitors' relatives have two main complaints against Odysseus:

1) Of course, the fathers and the brothers of the suitors have against Odysseus the fact that he killed the suitors.

2) Antinous' father, Eupithes, points out that Odysseus sailed away with ships and men, but he returned home alone, without ships and men.

All of those men who sailed with Odysseus are now dead:

“My friends, this man has planned and carried out
dreadful acts against Achaeans. He led
many fine courageous men off in his fleet,
then lost his hollow ships, with all men dead.
Now he's come and killed our finest men by far
among the Cephalenians.”

(Johnston 24.546-551)

Eupithes wants revenge, and he is afraid that the killers will flee before he can kill them.

• **What do Medon and Halitherses tell the suitors' families?**

Medon

Medon tells the suitors' families that an immortal god helped Odysseus and Telemachus. Of course, we know that Athena helped Odysseus and Telemachus to kill the suitors, so Medon is not lying. That news is enough to make some members of the families not wish to fight Odysseus and Telemachus, but more than half the members of the suitors' families still want vengeance.

Halitherses

Halitherses says that he and Mentor warned the old fathers about their sons' folly. Of course, these fathers were old — too old to go to war — and they did nothing about their sons. Halitherses says,

“Hear me, men of Ithaca. Hear what I have to say.
 Thanks to your own craven hearts these things were done!
 You never listened to me or the good commander Mentor,
 you never put an end to your sons' senseless folly.”
 (Fagles 24.503-506)

Compare:

“What's happened now, my friends, has come about
 because of your very own stupidity.
 You just would not follow my instructions
 or Mentor's, that shepherd of his people,
 and make your sons stop their reckless conduct,
 their monstrous acts of wanton foolishness,
 squandering a fine man's property and then
 dishonouring his wife, claiming the man
 never would come back.”
 (Johnston 24.582-591)

Note that just having a father present is not enough for a son to grow up well. The father must teach the son well.

• Odysseus gets help in fighting the suitors' relatives from his slave Dolius and Dolius' six sons.

It's interesting that Odysseus gets help in fighting the suitors' relatives from his slave Dolius and Dolius' six sons. Dolius was the father of Melantho and Melanthius, the treacherous slaves who have been killed by Odysseus — Odysseus, by the way, has not informed Dolius of their deaths. I think what Homer has in mind here is showing that society in Ithaca is being set right. Once again, Odysseus' slaves are showing loyalty to him.

Dolius, of course, is a father. He did not sail away to Troy because he is a servant. We should note that the six sons who have stayed under Dolius' influence have remained loyal to Odysseus, as has Dolius himself. The son and daughter who worked in the palace rather than in the fields were not under Dolius' influence and so did not remain loyal to Odysseus.

We should note that the old servants tend to remain loyal to Odysseus. For one thing, they knew Odysseus. For another, they grew up before so many fathers left Ithaca.

Old Dolius wants to know whether they should send news of Odysseus' return to Penelope. Odysseus "brusquely" (Fagles 24.450) tells him that Penelope knows and not to bother himself with sending her news. Of course, he is brusque because he has not told old Dolius that he killed the suitors (and old Dolius' son and daughter) and because he had been keeping his identity secret from the suitors lest they kill him. Old Dolius seems to be unaware of the danger that Odysseus would be in if he were to go to the palace undisguised and without an army.

• **Three generations fight together: Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachus.**

Laertes is happy that three generations — grandfather, father, and son — all fight together. Telemachus tells his father that he will not disgrace him. His last words in the *Odyssey* are these:

“Now you’ll see, if you care to watch, father,
now I’m fired up. Disgrace, you say?
I won’t disgrace your line!”
(Fagles 24.563-565)

Compare:

“Dear father, if that’s what you want, you’ll see
that I, with my heart as it is at present,
won’t shame your family. I’ll do what you say.”
(Johnston 24.657-659)

For Laertes, this is a great day:

“What a day for me, dear gods! What joy —
my son and my grandson vying over courage.”
(Fagles 24.567-568)

Compare:

“You dear gods, what a day this is for me!
I’m really happy when my son and grandson
compete for excellence with one another.”
(Johnston 24.661-663)

Laertes is happy that his son and grandson are vying over courage. This is a great day for him.

• **Both Zeus and Athena want peace. How does Athena bring about peace?**

Both Zeus and Athena want peace between Odysseus and the suitors' families. Zeus tells Athena,

“[...] Since lord Odysseus
has paid back the suitors, let them swear
a binding oath that he'll remain their king
all his life, and let's make them forget
the killing of their sons and brothers.
Let them love each other as they used to do,
and let there be wealth and peace in plenty.”

(Johnston 24.620-626)

Laertes kills Eupithes, father of Antinous — a moment of glory for him — but then Athena and Zeus stop the battle to keep the suitors' male adult relatives from being killed.

Athena makes both sides to pledge peace, and the conflict and the *Odyssey* come to an end.

What does it mean to “purge their memories of the bloody slaughter / of their brothers and their sons” (Fagles 24.534-535)? It seems to mean that the suitors' families will forget how their brothers and sons died. That really would be a *deus ex machina*, but it would stop a blood feud.

• **The conflict has a *deus ex machina* ending. What does that mean?**

The conflict is thus ended, but with a *deus ex machina* ending. The term comes from Greek tragedies written centuries after the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written down. A playwright would write a play in which some crisis seemed unsolvable. A god or goddess would then appear on stage and solve the problem. *Deus ex machina* means “god from the machine.” A piece of machinery would allow the actor playing a god to fly down on stage.

Many critics regard such an ending as unsatisfactory. It's like the cavalry suddenly appearing and rescuing the heroes.

However, we can ask, How else could the conflict be solved? Blood feuds, such as the one between the Hatfields and the McCoys, can go on for years.

One advantage of this conclusion is that it is based on a judge. Athena is the judge, and her judgment becomes law. We strongly prefer a society that is based on justice and the rule of law rather than a society that is based on the principle of might makes right.

• **Does the *Odyssey* have a happy ending?**

The ending of the *Odyssey* is not entirely happy, I think, although Odysseus has regained his place in his palace and his place in his family.

Odysseus and his family and the families of the suitors have lost so much. Odysseus and his family have lost 20 years that they could have spent together. The families of the suitors have lost the suitors.

Truly, even more tough times lie ahead for Ithaca. We have seen the problems that Ithaca had when one generation of fathers was missing. Now that the suitors are dead, another generation of

fathers is missing — if the suitors had not died, they would have married women other than Penelope and they would have raised families. Losing two generations of fathers cannot be good for Ithacan society.

In addition, Odysseus will leave Ithaca again. Poseidon is still angry at Odysseus. When Odysseus was in the Land of the Dead, the Theban prophet Tiresias told him what he had to do to make peace with Poseidon. Tiresias told Odysseus that yet another adventure is in store for him. He must undertake another journey before he dies. He must carry an oar on his shoulder and journey until he comes across someone who thinks that the oar is a winnowing fan. Then he must sacrifice to Poseidon. The idea is that Odysseus will carry the worship of Poseidon to a people far inland who have no knowledge of the sea. Once Odysseus does this, Odysseus can return home and offer more sacrifices to the gods. Odysseus will die “a gentle, painless death far from the sea” (Fagles 11.154).

The *Odyssey* ends with many unresolved questions:

- The suitors’ families who came seeking revenge are from Ithaca, but what about the suitors’ families from Dulichion or Same or Zacynthus? (Perhaps Athena will make peace with them as well. Perhaps the gods will purge their memories.)
- How long will the peace be maintained? As we have seen in the *Iliad*, peace can be broken by the gods, and Poseidon is still angry at Odysseus.
- How will Ithaca be governed when Odysseus is off on his next journey?
- How will Telemachus maintain the rule with the suitors’ families full of resentment (assuming that their memories have not been purged)?
- How will any sons be brought up now that two generations of fathers are missing?
- The suitors did not have children. Where will the next generation come from?

Conclusion

This is not a conventionally happy ending.

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Paper Topics

- Analyze the theme of *xenia* in the *Odyssey*. (It is OK to define unfamiliar terms such as *xenia* in papers; however, you need to avoid defining commonly known terms in your papers — many students do that in introductions and conclusions although they ought not to.)

- Analyze Odysseus' skill in speaking and rhetoric in the *Odyssey*.

Rhetoric is defined as “The art or study of using language effectively and persuasively” in *The American Heritage College Dictionary*.

- Trace Telemachus' development from immaturity to maturity in the *Odyssey*.

- Write an analysis of the suitors in the *Odyssey*, paying special attention to the two leaders: Eurymachus and Antinous.

- What does the *Odyssey* tell us happens in a society where sons grow up without fathers?

- Write a character analysis of Penelope.

- Write about the emotional trials of Odysseus, especially once he returns to Ithaca.

- Compare and contrast the characters of Telemachus and Odysseus in the *Odyssey*.

- Compare and contrast the characters of Telemachus and Penelope in the *Odyssey*.

- Write an analysis of the females in the *Odyssey*. Don't write a little bit about one female character, then a little bit about another female character, and so on. Rather, analyze what you can learn about the roles of mortal women and immortal goddesses in the society depicted in the *Odyssey*.

Paper Hints

Analyze the theme of *xenia* in the *Odyssey*.

Of course, the theme of *xenia* appears throughout the *Odyssey*, but one way to organize a major part of your paper is to write about the formulaic lines that Odysseus speaks three times (6.131-133, 9.195-196, and 13.227-229).

Organization of Paper on *Xenia*: If you are planning to write a paper on *xenia*, one way to organize it would be first to define *xenia* (in the introduction), then to write about *xenia* working properly (Telemachus and Nestor and Menelaus), then to write about the three places where Odysseus says these important lines and the kind of *xenia* that he finds there, then to write about the suitors, and finally to write a conclusion.

A few questions to ponder — listed in no particular order — and maybe write about:

- What is *xenia*? (Define this term in your introduction.)
- In Book 6, when Odysseus is about to meet the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa, he says,

“Man of misery, whose land have I lit on now?

What *are* they here — violent, savage, lawless?

or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?”

(Fagles 6.131-133)

Note: Odysseus says these lines only three times; he does NOT say them every time he visits a new place.

What kind of *xenia* does Odysseus receive from the Phaeacians?

- In Book 9, when Odysseus is about to meet the Cyclops, he says,

“What *are* they — violent, savage, lawless?

or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?”

(Fagles 9.195-196)

What kind of *xenia* does Odysseus receive from the Cyclops?

- In Book 13, when Odysseus has reached Ithaca but does not yet know it, he says,

“Man of misery, whose land have I lit on now?

What *are* they here — violent, savage, lawless?

or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?”

(Fagles 13.227-229)

It’s ironic that Odysseus must rely on *xenia* on Ithaca because it is his own island and he is its lawful king. What kind of *xenia* does Odysseus receive from the suitors?

- What kind of *xenia* does Telemachus receive from Nestor and Menelaus?

- What kind of *xenia* does Telemachus give to the disguised Athena in Book 1?
- What are the rules of *xenia*?
- Which god oversees *xenia*?

Write about Odysseus' skill in speaking and rhetoric in the *Odyssey*.

Rhetoric is “the art or study of using language effectively and persuasively.” — the *American Heritage College Dictionary*.

A few questions to ponder — listed in no particular order — and maybe write about:

- Does Odysseus employ good rhetoric when talking to Calypso in Book 5?
- Does Odysseus employ good rhetoric when talking to Nausicaa in Book 6?
- Does Odysseus employ good rhetoric when he tells the Phaeacians of the Great Wanderings?
- Does Odysseus employ good rhetoric when he talking to the Cyclops in Book 9?
- Does Odysseus employ good rhetoric when talking to Telemachus and Penelope?
- Does Odysseus employ good rhetoric when talking to Eumaeus?
- Does Odysseus employ good rhetoric when telling numerous lies in the second half of the *Odyssey*?

Trace Telemachus' development from immaturity to maturity in the *Odyssey*.

A few questions to ponder — listed in no particular order — and maybe write about:

- How does growing up without a father affect Telemachus?
- Is Telemachus immature in Book 1?
- Does Telemachus become more mature in Books 2-4?
- Does Telemachus become more mature in his speaking abilities in Books 1-3?
- Does Telemachus become more mature when Odysseus entrusts him with responsibility in Book 16?
- Does Telemachus become more mature when he nearly strings the bow in Book 21?
- Does Telemachus become more mature during the battle with the suitors?
- Does Telemachus become more mature in the aftermath of the battle with the suitors?
- In Book 22, Telemachus saves the lives of two innocent men: the herald and the bard. Does that show maturity?
- In Book 22, Telemachus makes a mistake that could get him and Odysseus killed. Although he could easily not admit that he made the mistake, he does admit that the mistake was his. Does that show maturity?

- Telemachus occasionally speaks sharply to his mother, Penelope. Is this a sign of growing up?
- Does Telemachus show maturity when he orders Penelope to leave the Great Hall before the battle with the suitors begins?
- Do Telemachus' final words in the *Odyssey* (Fagles 24.563-565) show maturity?

Write an analysis of the suitors in the *Odyssey*, paying special attention to the two leaders: Eurymachus and Antinous.

A few questions to ponder — listed in no particular order — and maybe write about:

- What does Eurymachus' speech in Book 2 tell you about him and the suitors?
- What does the suitors' plotting against Telemachus tell you about them?
- What kind of *xenia* do the suitors practice?
- What does Antinous' throwing a stool at Odysseus in Book 17 tell you about Antinous?
- In Book 16, we learn that Eurymachus remembers Odysseus. We also learn that Antinous' father was saved by Odysseus. What do these things show about Eurymachus and Antinous?
- In which ways are the suitors hypocrites?
- What does the suitors' inability to string Odysseus' bow tell you about them?
- After one suitor is killed by Odysseus, the other suitors try to make peace with Odysseus. Can they be trusted?

What does the *Odyssey* tell us happens in a society where sons grow up without fathers?

Sons can grow up to be like Telemachus or like the suitors when they grow up without fathers.

A few questions to ponder — listed in no particular order — and maybe write about:

- Is Telemachus mature at the beginning of the *Odyssey*?
- What are the suitors like?
- The Phaeacians have a society with fathers. How does their king Alcinous help the young Phaeacian Broadsea grow up correctly in Book 8?
- Where are the fathers on Ithaca? During Odysseus' absence, which men have been on the island?
- When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, does he help Telemachus to grow up?

• Write a character analysis of Penelope.

Readers' reactions to Penelope vary widely. Some readers think that she is a weak woman, while other readers think that she is a strong woman and a worthy wife to Odysseus.

A few questions to ponder — listed in no particular order — and maybe write about:

- Many characters in Homer have epithets applied to them. Achilles is swift-footed Achilles, Hector is Hector of the glancing helmet, and Odysseus is the man of twists and turns. Which epithets does Homer use to describe Penelope?
- What does the famous weaving trick described in Books 1 and 19 tell you about Penelope?
- What does the trick of getting gifts from the suitors in Book 18 tell you about Penelope?
- What does the testing of the old beggar/Odysseus in Book 23 tell you about Penelope?
- How does Penelope compare to Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra?
- Is Penelope a good wife and mother? In this society, is she allowed to be more than a wife and mother?
- Penelope doesn't know whether Odysseus is alive or dead for much of the *Odyssey*. What is she expected to do if he is dead? What is she expected to do if he is alive?
- Has Penelope raised Telemachus correctly? What do we learn from Book 1 that shows that Telemachus is a good person?
- How does Penelope test the old beggar in Book 19 to see if his story that he saw Odysseus is correct?

Write about the emotional trials of Odysseus once he returns to Ithaca.

- In what way is Odysseus' first learning that he is on Ithaca an emotional trial?
- In what way is Odysseus' first meeting Telemachus an emotional trial?
- In what way is Odysseus' seeing Argos an emotional trial?
- In what way is Odysseus' speaking to Penelope for the first time in 20 years an emotional trial?
- In what way is Odysseus' first meeting Melanthius an emotional trial?
- In what way is Odysseus' knowledge of the ruttng of the disloyal woman servants an emotional trial?
- In what way are Odysseus' interactions with the suitors an emotional trial?
- In what way is Odysseus' speaking to Laertes for the first time in 20 years an emotional trial?

Short Reaction Memos

The questions in this discussion guide to Homer's *Odyssey* can be used in discussions; however, they can also be used for short reaction memos. For example, I do this at Ohio University. See below for the assignment and sample short reaction memos.

How Do I Complete the Reaction Memo Assignments?

During the quarter, you will have to write a series of short memos in which you write about the readings you have been assigned.

Each memo should be at least 250 words, not counting long quotations from the work of literature. Include a word count for each memo, although that is not normally part of the memo format.

Following the memo heading (To, From, Re, Date, Words), write the question you are answering and the part of the book that the question applies to.

You may answer one question or more than one question. I will supply you with a list of questions that you may answer.

Note that a Works Cited list is needed if you use quotations.

For examples from my Great Books courses at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, see the following pages.

To: David Bruce

From: Jane Student

Re: *Odyssey*, Book 12 Reaction Memo

Date: Put Today's Date Here

Words: 323

Odyssey, Book 12: Is Odysseus a bad leader?

This is an important question in the *Odyssey*. After all, Odysseus leads 12 ships and many men to Troy, but the ships are all destroyed and all of his men die and he returns home to Ithaca alone. Who is responsible for the deaths of Odysseus' men? Is Odysseus responsible for their deaths, or do the men bear some responsibility for their own deaths? Many readers prefer Odysseus, the great individualist, to Aeneas, the man who founds the Roman people, but then they realize that all of Odysseus' men died, while Aeneas succeeded in bringing many Trojans to Italy. When readers think of that, they begin to have a greater respect for Aeneas.

From the beginning of the *Odyssey*, this has been an issue. The bard says that the men perished because of the "recklessness of their own ways" (1.8). However, we notice that Odysseus is asleep at odd times. In Book 10, Aeolus gives Odysseus a bag in which the contrary winds have been tied up. This allows Odysseus to sail to Ithaca safely. However, they reach the island and see smoke rising from the fires, Odysseus goes to sleep and his men open the bag, letting the contrary winds escape, and the ship is blown back to King Aeolus' island. Similarly, in Book 12, on the island of the Sun-god, Odysseus is asleep when his men sacrifice the Sun-god's cattle.

It does seem that Odysseus does not bear the blame for his men's death. In many cases, they do perish through their own stupidity. In other cases, of course, they die during war or during adventures, but in those times, Odysseus was with them, and he could have died, too.

One other thing to think about is that Odysseus is telling his own story. Could he be lying? After all, some of the adventures he relates are pretty incredible. (Probably not. The gods vouch for some of what he says.)

Works Cited

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1996. Print.

To: David Bruce

From: Jane Student

Re: *Inferno*, Canto 1 Reaction Memo

Date: Put Today's Date Here

Words: 263

Inferno, Canto 1

- What do you need to be a member of the Afterlife in Dante's *Inferno*?

To be a member of the afterlife in Hell, you must meet a number of criteria:

- 1) You must be dead.
- 2) You must be an unrepentant sinner.
- 3) You must be a dead, unrepentant sinner by 1300.

Of course, only dead people — with a few exceptions such as Dante the Pilgrim — can be found in the *Inferno*.

Only unrepentant sinners can be found in the *Inferno*. Everyone has sinned, but sinners who repented their sins are found in Purgatory or Paradise, not in the *Inferno*.

Dante set his *Divine Comedy* in 1300, so the characters who appear in it are dead in 1300.

Inferno, Canto 1

- What does it mean to repent?

A sinner who repents regrets having committed the sin. The repentant sinner vows not to commit the sin again, and he or she does his or her best not to commit the sin again.

Inferno, Canto 1

- What is the geography of Hell? In *The Divine Comedy*, where is Hell located?

Hell is located straight down. We will find out later that when Lucifer was thrown out of Paradise, he fell to the Earth, ending up at the center of the Earth. The center of the Earth is the lowest part of Hell. Lucifer created the Mountain of Purgatory when he hit the Earth.

To: David Bruce

From: Jane Student

Re: *Candide*, Ch. 26-30

Date: Today's Date

Words: 368

Ch. 30: Write a brief character analysis of the old man and his family.

When Candide and his friends meet the old man, the old man is “sitting in front of his door beneath an arbor of orange trees, enjoying the fresh air” (119). The old man basically ignores politics that he cannot influence. Some people have recently been killed in Constantinople, and the old man does not even know their names. However, the old man does enjoy some material things, including good food, and he enjoys hospitality.

The old man invites Candide and his friends to enjoy some refreshments inside his house. They are served with “several kinds of fruit-favored drinks” and “boiled cream with pieces of candied citron in it, oranges, lemons, limes, pineapples, pistachio nuts, and mocha coffee” (119). The old man and his family have an abundance of food, but although Candide wonders if the old man has an enormous farm, the old man tells him, “I have only twenty acres of land, which my children and I cultivate. Our work keeps us free of three great evils: boredom, vice, and poverty” (119).

From this brief encounter, we learn several things:

- The old man and his family are content — even happy.
- The old man and his family ignore the wars and murders and crimes that happen elsewhere.
- The old man and his family have enough. They work hard on their little farm, and they have plenty of food and good things to eat.
- The old man and his family have only 20 acres, but 20 acres are enough.

Candide and his friends decide to emulate the old man and his family. Each of them begins to work hard on their little farm. Cunegonde learns to make pastry, Paquette begins to embroider, and the old woman does the laundry and repairs the linen. Brother Giroflée becomes a carpenter, and Candide and the others grow “abundant crops” (120). At the end of the short novel, the group of friends seem to have come the closest they can to happiness in a world filled with evil, but it does take an effort on their part. As Candide says in the short novel's last words, “... we must cultivate our garden” (120).

Works Cited

Voltaire. *Candide*. Trans. Lowell Bair. New York: Bantam Books, 1981. Print.

To: David Bruce

From: Jane Student

Re: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Ch. 1-4 Reaction Memo

Date: Put Today's Date Here

Words: 286

CH. 3: "KNIGHTS OF THE TABLE ROUND"

- What hints do we have of the relationship between Queen Guenever and Sir Launcelot?

Some hanky-panky is going on between Sir Launcelot and King Arthur's wife, Queen Guenever. Some six or eight prisoners address her, and they tell her that they have been captured by Sir Kay the Seneschal. Immediately, surprise and astonishment are felt by everybody present. The queen looks disappointed because she had hoped that the prisoners were captured by Sir Launcelot.

As it turns out, they were. Sir Launcelot first rescued Sir Kay from some attackers, then he took Sir Kay's armor and horse and captured more knights. All of these prisoners were actually captured by Sir Launcelot, not by Sir Kay at all.

Two passages let us know that something is going on between Sir Launcelot and Queen Guenever:

1. The first is subtle; she looks disappointed when Sir Kay says that he captured the knights: "Surprise and astonishment flashed from face to face all over the house; the queen's gratified smile faded out at the name of Sir Kay, and she looked disappointed ..." (503).
2. The other is much more overt and occurs after Guenever learns that the knight who really captured the prisoners was Sir Launcelot: "Well, it was touching to see the queen blush and smile, and look embarrassed and happy, and fling furtive glances at Sir Launcelot that would have got him shot in Arkansas, to a dead certainty" (503).

Works Cited

Twain, Mark. *Four Complete Novels*. New York: Gramercy Books, 1982. Print.

About the Author

It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly a cry rang out, and on a hot summer night in 1954, Josephine, wife of Carl Bruce, gave birth to a boy — me. Unfortunately, this young married couple allowed Reuben Saturday, Josephine's brother, to name their first-born. Reuben, aka "The Joker," decided that Bruce was a nice name, so he decided to name me Bruce Bruce. I have gone by my middle name — David — ever since.

Being named Bruce David Bruce hasn't been all bad. Bank tellers remember me very quickly, so I don't often have to show an ID. It can be fun in charades, also. When I was a counselor as a teenager at Camp Echoing Hills in Warsaw, Ohio, a fellow counselor gave the signs for "sounds like" and "two words," then she pointed to a bruise on her leg twice. Bruise Bruise? Oh yeah, Bruce Bruce is the answer!

Uncle Reuben, by the way, gave me a haircut when I was in kindergarten. He cut my hair short and shaved a small bald spot on the back of my head. My mother wouldn't let me go to school until the bald spot grew out again.

Of all my brothers and sisters (six in all), I am the only transplant to Athens, Ohio. I was born in Newark, Ohio, and have lived all around Southeastern Ohio. However, I moved to Athens to go to Ohio University and have never left.

At Ohio U, I never could make up my mind whether to major in English or Philosophy, so I got a bachelor's degree with a double major in both areas, then I added a master's degree in English and a master's degree in Philosophy. Currently, and for a long time to come, I publish a weekly humorous column titled "Wise Up!" for *The Athens News* and I am a retired English instructor at Ohio U.

Shameless Commerce

Visit David Bruce's storefront at

<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/brucebATohioDOTedu>

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/bruceb>

If all goes well, I will publish one or two books a year for the rest of my life. (On the other hand, a good way to make God laugh is to tell Her your plans.)

Appendix: Two Poems

“On first looking into Chapman’s Homer”

Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star’d at the Pacific — and all his men
 Look’d at each other with a wild surmise —
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Source: John Keats (1795–1821). *The Poetical Works of John Keats*. 1884.

“Petit, the Poet”

Seeds in a dry pod, tick, tick, tick,
 Tick, tick, tick, like mites in a quarrel —
 Faint iambics that the full breeze wakens —
 But the pine tree makes a symphony thereof.
 Triolets, villanelles, rondels, rondeaus,
 Ballades by the score with the same old thought:
 The snows and the roses of yesterday are vanished;
 And what is love but a rose that fades?
 Life all around me here in the village:
 Tragedy, comedy, valor and truth,
 Courage, constancy, heroism, failure —

All in the loom, and oh what patterns!

Woodlands, meadows, streams and rivers —

Blind to all of it all my life long.

Triolets, villanelles, rondels, rondeaus,

Seeds in a dry pod, tick, tick, tick,

Tick, tick, tick, what little iambs,

While Homer and Whitman roared in the pines?

Source: *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters (1868–1950)

Some Works by David Bruce

David Bruce's Smashwords Page

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/bruceb>

David Bruce's Blog

<http://davidbruceblog.wordpress.com/>

Author: Discussion Guides Series

Dante's Inferno: A Discussion Guide

Dante's Paradise: A Discussion Guide

Dante's Purgatory: A Discussion Guide

Forrest Carter's The Education of Little Tree: A Discussion Guide

Homer's Iliad: A Discussion Guide

Homer's Odyssey: A Discussion Guide

Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice: A Discussion Guide

Jerry Spinelli's Maniac Magee: A Discussion Guide

Jerry Spinelli's Stargirl: A Discussion Guide

Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal": A Discussion Guide

Lloyd Alexander's The Black Cauldron: A Discussion Guide

Lloyd Alexander's The Book of Three: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper: A Discussion Guide

Nancy Garden's Annie on My Mind: A Discussion Guide

Nicholas Sparks' A Walk to Remember: A Discussion Guide

Virgil's Aeneid: A Discussion Guide

Virgil's "The Fall of Troy": A Discussion Guide

Voltaire's Candide: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's Macbeth: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: A Discussion Guide

William Sleator's Oddballs: A Discussion Guide

(Oddballs is an excellent source for teaching how to write autobiographical essays/personal narratives.)

Retellings of a Classic Work of Literature

Dante's Inferno: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Purgatory: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Paradise: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Divine Comedy: A Retelling in Prose

From the Iliad to the Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose of Quintus of Smyrna's Posthomerica

Homer's Iliad: A Retelling in Prose

Homer's Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose

Jason and the Argonauts: A Retelling in Prose of Apollonius of Rhodes' Argonautica

Virgil's Aeneid: A Retelling in Prose

Author: Kindest People Series

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 1

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 2

Author: (Free) Kindest People Volumes

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 3

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 4

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 5

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 6

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds: Volume 7

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 1)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 2)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 3)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 4)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 5)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 6)

The Kindest People: Heroes and Good Samaritans (Volume 7)

The Kindest People: Be Excellent to Each Other (Volume 1)

The Kindest People: Be Excellent to Each Other (Volume 2)

The Kindest People: Be Excellent to Each Other (Volume 3)

Anecdote Books by David Bruce

250 Anecdotes About Opera

250 Anecdotes About Religion

250 Anecdotes About Religion: Volume 2

The Coolest People in Art: 250 Anecdotes

The Coolest People in Books: 250 Anecdotes

The Coolest People in Comedy: 250 Anecdotes

Don't Fear the Reaper: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Art: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books, Volume 3: 250 Anecdotes

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The Funniest People in Families, Volume 4: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 5: 250 Anecdotes

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The Funniest People in Movies: 250 Anecdotes

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The Funniest People in Relationships: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Sports: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Sports, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Television and Radio: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Theater: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People Who Live Life: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People Who Live Life, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds, Volume 1: 250 Anecdotes

The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

Maximum Cool: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Movies: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Politics and History: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Politics and History, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Politics and History, Volume 3: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Religion: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People in Sports: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People Who Live Life: 250 Anecdotes

The Most Interesting People Who Live Life, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

Resist Psychic Death: 250 Anecdotes

Seize the Day: 250 Anecdotes and Stories

Children's Biography

Nadia Comaneci: Perfect Ten

Chapter 1 of *Homer's Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose* by David Bruce

Chapter 1: Athena and Telemachus

Muse, goddess of inspiration, please help me. I have an important story to tell, and I need help to tell it. Please use me to tell the story.

Help me to tell the story of a man of twists and turns. His mind twists and turns to seek solutions to problems. His journey twists and turns in the Mediterranean—and beyond. His strategy conquered Troy. He is a man who tried mightily—but failed—to bring his companions home, fools though they sometimes were.

Help me to tell the story of Odysseus, the great individualist and mastermind and man who feels pain deeply.

All other heroes of the Trojan War were home by now—or dead. Only Odysseus remained away from his home. Odysseus was kept captive by Calypso the sea-goddess.

Still, most gods and goddesses pitied Odysseus now, so long absent from his island kingdom: Ithaca. But Poseidon, the great ruler of the seas, did not pity Odysseus. No, Poseidon was still angry. Poseidon still wanted Odysseus to suffer, to stay away from home, to long to see his day of homecoming. But Poseidon was now absent, away on a visit to the Ethiopians.

Zeus, the king of gods and of men, at home on Olympus among the gods and goddesses, spoke his mind about another homecoming: “Mortals have no shame, blaming the gods as they so often do for their own problems. Look at Aegisthus. Paris, Prince of Troy, visited Menelaus, King of Lacedaemon, and then ran away with his lawful wife, Helen, taking her to Troy. Angry, Menelaus and his older brother, Agamemnon, took hundreds of ships loaded with soldiers and fought a ten-year war to get Helen back. Clearly, pursuing another man’s wife is destructive, and Aegisthus should have realized that. But he didn’t, and he looked with desire at Clytemnestra, the lawful wife of Agamemnon. I even sent the messenger-god Hermes to tell him to leave Clytemnestra alone. Did he listen? No. Did he pay the price? Yes. Aegisthus killed Agamemnon when he returned home, and Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, kept anger in his heart. When Orestes became a young man, he exacted proper revenge and killed Aegisthus and avenged his father, exactly as a man ought to do.”

Athena, goddess of wisdom, sensing an opportunity to act and to help her favorite mortal, spoke to her father, Zeus, “Father, all you say is true. Aegisthus deserved what he got. He did the wrong thing, and he paid the proper penalty.

“But what about Odysseus? He has been cursed by fate. He is far from home, held captive on an island by Calypso. He longs to see his day of homecoming. He longs to see even the smoke of cooking fires rising from Ithaca. Is Odysseus your enemy? Has Odysseus shown you disrespect?”

Zeus replied to his favorite daughter, “No, Athena. Odysseus is not my enemy. Odysseus has never shown me disrespect. But Poseidon, the earth-shaking god of earthquakes and of the sea, hates Odysseus, who hurt his son, the one-eyed Cyclops Polyphemus. Poseidon knows that he cannot kill Odysseus—Odysseus is not fated to die just yet—but Poseidon knows that he can cause Odysseus great trouble and delay his day of homecoming.

“Still, Poseidon is gone now. So let us think together how we can help Odysseus to return home.”

“If you mean what you say,” Athena replied, “then send Hermes to Calypso to tell her that she must let Odysseus go free so he can attempt to return to Ithaca. I, meanwhile, will go to Ithaca, to see his son, Telemachus, and help him to grow up.

“I will put courage in Prince Telemachus’ heart. I will advise him to call an assembly and speak out against the suitors who are courting his mother—Odysseus’ wife, Penelope—even though Odysseus is still alive. I will advise him to speak out against the suitors who are treating him and his household badly, slaughtering his sheep, pigs, cows, and goats, partying on his property while showing him disrespect. I will also advise him to visit the mainland, to go to Pylos and Lacedaemon to seek news of his father.

“The son of a hero should also be a hero. It is time for Telemachus to stop being a boy and start being a man. Perhaps he will do a deed that will be remembered.”

Zeus agreed with her plan.

Athena armed herself with a spear and disguised herself as a mortal man: Mentès, lord of the Taphians. Then she flew—the gods and goddesses have that power—down to Odysseus’ palace on Ithaca to see Telemachus and the swaggering suitors for herself.

The suitors were behaving exactly as she had known they would. They were playing dice and drinking wine while servants heaped tables in Odysseus’ Great Hall with huge platters of meat—meat butchered from Telemachus’ own animals. Athena stood in the doorway, waiting to be noticed and hoping to be welcomed.

As all know, although not all act on their knowledge, strangers ought to be noticed and welcomed. What is the difference between a civilized society and an uncivilized society? A civilized society feeds the hungry. A civilized society takes care of the needs of guests. A civilized society treats strangers as guests. An uncivilized society does not do these things.

Of course, both host and guest must be civilized. The host must not rob or murder his guest. A guest must not rob or murder his host. A host must feed his guest, give the guest water to wash with, and give the guest a place to sleep. A guest must not run away with his host’s wife, as Paris, prince of Troy, did, and a guest must not stay too long, must not waste the property of his host, and must not treat his host with disrespect, as the suitors were doing to Telemachus.

The proper relationship between guest and host has a name: *xenia*. A civilized society is a society that observes *xenia*. An uncivilized society is a society that does not observe *xenia*.

Telemachus saw Athena, disguised as Mentès, first. She, of course, appeared as a mortal man and not as a goddess to him. Having been raised correctly, he went immediately to her, horrified that perhaps that she had been waiting a long time at the doorway for someone to notice her and to greet her. He shook her right hand, and then he took her spear, both to relieve her of her burden and to disarm her. Always, it is a good idea to disarm a guest until you are sure that the guest knows and observes *xenia* properly.

He led Athena into the Great Hall, put her spear on a rack filled with other spears, and then led her to a high seat of honor among the tables laden with platters piled high with meat. They sat

together, a servant brought them water so they could wash their hands, and they ate. Only after they had eaten did Telemachus, who had been raised properly, ask her who she was. He hoped to learn, if he could, news of his father. The suitors, having feasted while ignoring Telemachus' guest, danced to the music of the bard Phemius, a man who, like many of the other servants in the palace, was forced to serve the suitors. Unfortunately, some servants were loyal to the suitors, not to Telemachus.

Telemachus unburdened himself to Athena: "Look at these young men! They party every day, eating food that does not belong to them and drinking wine that does not belong to them. Their days are filled with games and feasts and music. They take and take, and they give nothing in return. If only my father, Odysseus, were alive, they would run away from the palace as fast as they can. But my father is dead. He will never return to Ithaca. But tell me about yourself. What is your story?"

"My name is Mentès," Athena said. "I had heard that my friend of long ago, Odysseus, had returned to Ithaca, but I see that I was wrong. The gods must be preventing his return. I will tell you that you are wrong about the death of your father. I know that Odysseus is alive. No, I am not a prophet, but the gods sometimes speak to people who are not prophets. Your father will return to Ithaca soon. But tell me about yourself. What is your story? You certainly resemble your father."

"Odysseus is said to be my father," Telemachus said, "but sometimes I wonder if that is true. We can know for certain who our mother is, but does anyone truly know who is his father? I wish that my father were here, and yes, people say that Odysseus is my father."

"All will be well in the end," Athena said. "Penelope has given birth to a fine son. But what is going on in the palace? Anyone would think from all the food and wine that this is a wedding-feast, but the young men are not acting like guests at a wedding. Anyone would think that they are uncivilized delinquents rather than guests."

"They are courting my mother—against her will! She is the wife of a man whose white bones lie unburied somewhere," Telemachus replied. "I wish my father had died among friends. If he had died at Troy, his friends would have raised a burial-mound for him and have properly mourned his death. If he had returned home to Ithaca and died, we would have raised a burial-mound for him and have properly mourned his death. But no, he died friendless and alone, far from home."

"The suitors are uncivilized. They waste all my possessions. They party all day. My mother does not know what to do. She does not know whether her husband is alive or dead, and therefore she does not know whether to remain faithful to a living husband or to seek a new husband because she is a widow. If Odysseus is alive, Penelope has a duty to remain faithful to him. If Odysseus is dead, Penelope ought to remarry. In the meantime, as we wait for reliable news about whether Odysseus is alive or dead, the suitors run wild. Someday, they will try to kill me to get me out of the way. There are over a hundred suitors. What can I do against so many?"

"The suitors are behaving shamefully," Athena said, "but if they knew Odysseus, they would leave the palace quickly. I know Odysseus, and he would not allow the suitors to run wild. The last time I saw Odysseus, he was on a mission to get poison to put on the heads of his arrows. If that Odysseus were to return to Ithaca, the suitors would soon be dead."

“But Odysseus is not here. You, Telemachus, are here. Think. What can you do to rid your palace of the suitors? You are your father’s son, and you know your father would not permit such outrageous actions in his own palace.

“Listen to me. In the morning, call an assembly of the men on Ithaca. Speak out against the suitors. Let the other men know what the suitors are doing. They are running wild. They are uncivilized. They do not respect *xenia*. They take and take, and they give nothing in return. They produce nothing of value. They live only to eat and to produce human excrement.

“In the assembly, tell the suitors to leave your palace and to return to their own homes. Tell them that with the lords of Ithaca and the gods as your witnesses.

“As for your mother, let her act as she thinks best. If she thinks that she ought to remarry, let her return to the house of her father so that he can arrange a suitable marriage for her. A marriage with one of the suitors is not a suitable marriage—not when they act like this!

“Also, Telemachus, get a ship ready and journey to the mainland to seek news of your father. Perhaps you will hear something of value. First go to Pylos to consult Nestor, the wise old man of the Greek forces during the Trojan War. Then visit Lacedaemon, where Menelaus is king. See what, if anything, they know of your father.

“If you hear that Odysseus is still alive, then wait one more year for him to return.

“But if you hear definitively that he is dead, then return home, raise a burial-mound for him, and mourn him. Find a husband for your mother. And then take thought of how to kill the suitors. They will not leave willingly—not when they can party at no cost to themselves here. You are not a boy any longer, so it is time for you to grow up. A beard is on your face, yet you are clinging to the ways of boyhood.

“Think of Orestes, a young man of your own age. Aegisthus killed Orestes’ father, so Orestes killed Aegisthus. For this righteous killing, Orestes has achieved renown throughout the world. If you succeed in killing the suitors, you also will achieve renown throughout the world.

“Telemachus, you are tall and handsome. Be brave, too. I must leave now and return to my ship, but think about and remember everything that I have advised you.”

A proper host, Telemachus replied, “I will. You have advised me the way a father would advise a son. But stay a while. Bathe, and then return to your ship bearing a gift from me to you. This is the way that *xenia* works.”

Athena, pleased with Telemachus, replied, “No, I must be going now. But I will return. Keep the gift until I return.”

Then Athena, shape-shifter extraordinaire, turned herself into a bird and flew away, letting Telemachus know that he had been honored with a visit from the goddess Athena.

Meanwhile, in the Great Hall, Phemius the bard sang of the Homecomings of Heroes from the Trojan War, a song that did not include the homecoming of Odysseus, whom Calypso was holding captive on an island.

In her quarters, Penelope heard the song of the bard and wondered whether she was a widow or a wife. If she was a widow, her society demanded that she remarry and go to live with her new

husband, turning over the palace to Telemachus. But if she was a wife with a living husband, her society demanded that she remain faithful to Odysseus and stay on Ithaca to preserve his property as much as she was able to.

Upset by the bard's song, Penelope went to the Great Hall, accompanied by two serving-women. Ever-prudent Penelope would never appear before men she was not related to without serving-women to accompany her.

"Phemius!" she cried. "Stop singing that song! It breaks my heart, knowing that Odysseus has not returned home although twenty years have passed. I need my husband here—now."

Telemachus spoke up, "Don't blame the bard for Odysseus' absence. So many warriors failed to return home from Troy. Let the bard sing. Go back to your quarters and attend to your work. I will look after things here."

Telemachus disliked his mother's appearing before the suitors, although she never appeared before them alone. Wild young men who drink and party are dangerous.

Penelope obeyed her son. She wanted him to grow up, become a man, and take command. In ancient Greece, women obeyed men. She left the Great Hall, and in her quarters, she wept for Odysseus.

In the Great Hall, the suitors spoke—loudly—about Penelope's beauty, and about how they wanted to go to bed with her.

Telemachus spoke to the suitors, "In the morning, I will call a council of all the men of Ithaca. You suitors who wish to marry my mother—although she is unwilling to remarry—must leave my palace and return to your own homes. You take and take, but you never give. Go to your own homes and devour your own possessions! Enough! I pray to Zeus that all of you will receive justice—justice of a kind that will make you regret what you have done to my possessions."

The suitors were shocked. Telemachus had never spoken to them with such daring before.

Antinous, one of the leaders of the suitors, spoke up: "Telemachus, you must have received encouragement from a god, if such a thing were possible. Otherwise, you would not dare to talk in such a way. Still, I doubt that you will ever be crowned King of Ithaca."

"If the crown ever comes to me, so be it," Telemachus replied. "Father Zeus can award the crown to whomever he desires. Still, many princes are on Ithaca, and one of them may hold the crown, now that Odysseus is dead. But whether I ever become King of Ithaca, I intend to be king of my own palace. Odysseus won this property for me, and I intend to keep it."

Eurymachus, the other leader of the suitors, countered, "All of this lies in the hands of the gods, but yes, of course, by all means you are the ruler here. I would be a hypocrite if I were to say anything but the truth. But who was your guest just now, the one who left so quickly? Did he bring news of your father?"

"My father will never return to Ithaca," Telemachus said. "I no longer listen to the rumors that are spread by strangers, although my mother insists on questioning them. But the guest was Mentos, a man who is a friend to my family from long ago." However, Telemachus knew that his guest had been the goddess Athena, not a mortal man.

The suitors resumed their partying, and then, late at night, they left the palace until the following morning.

Telemachus prepared for bed. An aged servant named Eurycleia, whom Laertes, Telemachus' grandfather, had bought when she was young and pretty, but had never bedded because he did not want to upset his wife, lit his way with a torch. That night, Telemachus did not sleep, but lay awake, thinking over everything that Athena had said to him.