

## 21L.012, The Odyssey

(11 September)

### 2 of the central characters in The Odyssey

- Poseidon, the god of the sea
  - “earth shaker” is Poseidon’s epithet
  - [epithet]
- Athene, the goddess of war and wisdom

Note about gods: in Homer’s world, a god does not embody only 1 idea; a god embodies a cluster of ideas.

Which qualities does Poseidon embody?

Note about ceremony at the start of Book 3:

- Ritual is prominent
- Hospitality, as displayed toward Telemachus, is a vital part of the ancient world

3.43-3.62

The passage illustrates manners

- When the visitors Telemachus and Athene arrive at Pylos, food and drink come first, before inquiries
- The king’s oldest son escorts the visitors to the king
- The cup is given first to Athene (who assumes the form of an older man)

Books 1-4: about getting Telemachus’s education underway

- he has not had education previously because of his father’s absence.
- Pylos serves as a good place for Telemachus to learn statecraft. Pylians represent a properly functioning society, which contrasts to the dysfunctional Ithaka. Note Peisistratus, a well-behaving prince, who accompanies Telemachus.
- The education of Telemachus involves copying a model

Notice that the ceremony occurring in Pylos when Telemachus and Athene arrive is for Poseidon

- Athene prays to Poseidon
- The conflict between Athene and Poseidon motivates the story

Athene

- According to classical mythology, Athene is born from the head of Zeus, wearing armor
- Represents strategic, crafty side of war
- Metis, Athene’s mother, means wisdom, cunning; was swallowed by Zeus, and remained inside, thus endowing Zeus with those qualities

Does Homer have an idea of general good that’s distinct from what’s good for Odysseus?

Athene is fond of Odysseus, favors him above all

- when with him during Trojan war, she appeared in natural form
- they shared qualities
- Odysseus did Trojan horse; built large enough so that Trojans dismantled gates

Notice that Athene prays to Poseidon

- Potential interpretations:
  - Poseidon is more senior than Athene
  - The prayer is empty
- When reading the story, we cannot foreclose which interpretation is best

In Homer's world, conflict between immortals (such as that between Athene and Poseidon) is different from conflict between mortals in that it's ongoing. Perhaps Homer shows that different qualities are established parts of the world, and that one must find balance between fighting and accommodating.

Notice that much of Greece is surrounded by water

- In the ancient world, the sea was mysterious and uncontrollable
- The sea is made of water, which is formless and changing, while we try to accomplish control, forming shelters, communities, rules, rituals
- This suggests a conflict between civilization and what threatens it
- An ancient Greek city was walled, which symbolized the walled space of civilized life

The Odyssey starts differently from The Iliad

- The Iliad: starts with wrath; the main character is introduced with his patronymic (lineage and place)

The Odyssey: the main character is introduced using his epithet "man of many ways;" from the Greek *polutropos*, which means "many qualities." Odysseus has gone many places and is resourceful; he has broader experience of the world, and survives. Notice that his companions died from recklessness.

(13 September)

Oral storytelling in ancient Greece

- Rhythm of Odyssey: dactylic hexameter (expand)
- An oral story is not set as a written one is; it changes and evolves over time
- The written version of The Odyssey likely came from professional poets in ancient Greece, which were important positions

Albert Lord and Milman Parry proved that the Odyssey came from an oral tradition by tracing formulae in the story: reused occurrences, which served as a mnemonic device for those who memorized it

1.420-1.444:

Telemachus ponders, but his thoughts are not revealed  
“he pondered in his heart” is a formula used repeatedly in The Odyssey  
Because characters’ inner thoughts are not revealed, characters lack individual details,  
which is a characteristic of an oral tradition

(18 September)

Opening question: how do you know who you are?

One common answer is that we know who we are from others’ recognition of us, from which we can observe that our own personal identities are not our own possessions.

How does this relate to The Odyssey? How are characters identified?

- Patronymic: the proper way of introduction: the character’s lineage and place, e.g., Odysseus son of Laertias of Ithaka
- Epithet: a term bestowed by others

The Odyssey opens with a kind of identity crisis

- In the first few books of The Odyssey, Telemachus needs to know who he is, which he doesn’t know because he doesn’t know his father
- “Nobody really knows his own father.” (1.216)

Books 1-4: Telemachy

- About Telemachus
- About problems that arise in Ithaka in Odysseus’s absence (e.g., in Book 2, following Athene’s advice, Telemachus calls an assembly for the first time—a kingly prerogative, but the assembly doesn’t go well (in contrast to the first assembly in The Odyssey, which is among the gods, and goes smoothly)
- After Telemachus’s assembly, Antinoos, who is a suitor of Telemachus’s mother Penelope and thus a guest at Telemachus’s house, invites Telemachus to join him for dinner at Telemachus’s house, which further conveys the dysfunction in Ithaka
- Note the roots of “Antinoos”:
  - Anti: against
  - Noos: mind or soul
  - He’s the antithesis of Odysseus
- In the background of the problems in Ithaka, the importance of a king is apparent

Evidence of The Odyssey’s oral tradition: the passages 3.71-3.74 and 9.252-9.255 are the same

These passages illustrate the lack of consensus in The Odyssey regarding whether people’s actions are determined by them or the gods:

- 2.206-2.242: Telemachus complains of Odysseus’s fate, raising the question of whose fault it is—Odysseus’s or the gods’?
- Note that recklessness is considered to be caused by Ate, a minor divinity

- 4.120: Helen is introduced in a matter-of-fact manner, not as someone who's oppressed by the past
- 4.240-4.279: Helen acknowledges the ability of divinity to influence; wavers about Odysseus
- A muse is invoked at the start of The Odyssey
- Telemachus needs a god's prodding to start
- In the ancient Greek world, claiming influence of divinity did not absolve one of responsibility for actions

In 2.230, Telemachus notes that Odysseus's ambiguous status is the worst fate that can befall someone. Oscar Wilde said, "The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about." There are more than a dozen Greek synonyms for honor, fame.

2.158-2.160: "they eat up the substance"

- Substance: Greek "biotot"
- Life: Greek "bios"
- In ancient Greece, possessions were an important part of the self
- Nowadays, there's more interest in a deep self, beyond what others know
- Conception of selfhood changes over time, influenced by technology (e.g., writing) or lack thereof

2.125-2.126: a suitor says of Penelope upon learning of her stalling, "she is winning a great name for herself"

- She weaves in honor of her father-in-law, but does so to stall until Odysseus returns, so in doing so she weaves a trap for the suitors
- What is the meaning of her reputation:
  - Cunning, as Odysseus? Or

Unusual for a woman?

(20 September)

What is the function in Book 4 of Sparta?

Start of Book 4: wedding, which can symbolize the continuation of life

- Jarring that Menelaus and Helen have only a daughter, while Menelaus has son with a slave, which casts complication on future

4.43-4.46: Telemachus and Peististratus marvel at Menelaus's palace and possessions, much of which he acquired in Egypt; he's the richest man they know

- But Menelaus laments the tragedies that have befallen him (4.90-4.92)
- He wishes that he could have fewer possessions in exchange for the men he lost in the Trojan war, which is radical, considering the importance placed on possessions in ancient Greece

- Casts a shadow on Greek values

4.219-4.229: Helen puts potion from Egypt in wine to purge men's sorrow

- Would that be desirable?
- It would be nice to be free from pain, but pain is the price paid for being human
- The human experience is mixed, though we imagine bliss (e.g., 4.561-4.570: "place of ease"); its appeal is questionable: immortality may be lonely, perfection boring

Narrative:

- The reader wants to get to the end of a compelling story, but the end of conflict ends the reader's interest
- Narrative is driven by conflict and tension; a good story cannot come from paradise

5.1: Tithonas

- connection between immortal and mortal, common in Greek mythology
- Tithonas granted immortality, but not immortal youth

Helen

- from Zeus and Leda
- Leda lays 2 eggs: Helen and Clytemnestra

The Old Man of the Sea

- Subdued by Menelaus
- Tells Menelaus of others
- Aias smitten because of pride

Protean: changing

Proteus and Poseidon: both of the sea: nature at its most uncontrollable, mysterious

First instance of Odysseus: weeping

- Arrives on shore naked: has nothing, has to rebuild

8.550-8.561: Odysseus's identity is questioned

- Name: a boundary marker for humans

9.16: Odysseus introduces himself, must tell others of his deeds because his companions perished

At dinner, Odysseus honors poet, offers to promote poet if poet promotes Odysseus

Phaiakians: seagoers with ships from Poseidon, isolated, between immortal and mortal, avoid struggle, queen is niece of king

(25 September)

From handout:

In *The Odyssey*, the divine is distinct from the human, which is distinct from the natural:

- Where and how you live
  - Divine: on Olympus, free to move, to change form at will
  - Human: in cities (end of nomadism); identity linked to place (e.g., Odysseus introduces himself with his patronymic)
    - Polis: significant, defines human's space
  - Natural: homeless, wandering (until domesticated)
- How related to other forms of life
  - Divine: receive sacrificed animals from humans
  - Human: sacrifice animals to gods
  - Natural: objects of sacrifice
- How related to others of same kind
  - Divine: constantly shifting alliances, jealousies, etc.
  - Human: strict hierarchies, ritualized interactions (“guest-friendship”)
  - Natural: no meaningful interactions (not “social”)
- How, what you eat
  - Divine: nectar and ambrosia (no labor to get it)
  - Human: cultivate crops; convert “raw” into “cooked” (labor, ritual)
  - Natural: eat what lives or grows (raw)
- Sex life?
  - Divine: any time, any one, anywhere (free choice)
  - Human: strict codes of behavior regulating partners (choice, but limited)
  - Natural: no codes; mating season (no choice; obey impulse)
- In general
  - Divine: agents of constant change, immortal; change without threat to identity
  - Human: subject to constant change; rituals give illusion of controlling change
  - Natural: changeless—endlessly repetitive
- Conclusion: civilization = (illusion of) controlled change (e.g.: royal succession)

Significant detail about Menelaus's story of Proteus:

1.45-1.54: Odysseus kept at “the naval of all the waters.”

The story of Odysseus is the story of someone being taken beyond human boundaries: explorations at borderlines of demarcations of humanity

The effort to make Odysseus's homecoming is effort to relocate him within human boundaries

Note how *Odyssey* is told: the order of events vs. the order of telling

What does order of telling emphasize?

- Starting with Ithaka: importance of Odysseus in social structure; highlights Telemachus and his education
- Books 1-4 and 5-8 feel simultaneous
- Odysseus is discussed, built up, before he's introduced
- Odysseus is introduced in a distressed setting

Odysseus is articulate and clever: does, and tells of doing

9.39-9.61: Odysseus and his men sack a city, not exciting

- Adversary is not unusual ( a group of men)
- Odysseus does not act distinctively
- Loss because of recklessness
- Failure of Odysseus's authority to control men

Recognition important:

- Sacking of city of Kikonians is unfruitful because Odysseus is not known as attacker
- Odysseus risks safety to claim responsibility to cyclops

What do unsuccessful encounters that Odysseus repeats reveal about meaningful parts of successful encounters?

- Contrast

Cyclops: border between humans and nature; if Odysseus failed, he'd risk becoming nobody; a recurring theme: each successful encounter expands name and reputation  
Cyclops: lack of depth perception and multiple perspectives

9.355-9.370: cyclops asks name, mocks notion of hospitality

(27 September)

Odysseus vs. Cyclops: about antithetics

Odysseus: man of many ways, polyvalent

Cyclops: small-minded (symbolized by 1 eye)

human: can have multiple perspectives

Democritus: no sight but gift of song

Cyclops not social

Thus cyclops parodies ritual when encountering Odysseus

- The host-guest relationship is vital to society; to violate relationship accords guest no recognition
- Odysseus says he's "nobody" (clever)
- Nobody: "outis" in Greek

In encounter with enemy:

A ==>	B ==>	A'
O. son of...	risks outis	O. son of...who accomplished...

If he fails, he becomes nobody

Odysseus is introduced on island that is the "naval of all the waters"

- He's "detained in her hollowed caverns"
- Kalupto: cover up for protection
- Similar to Kalypso
- In a sense, Kalypso is as much a threat as Cyclops

Encounter with lotus eaters: hospitable but dangerous because it threatens Odysseus's homecoming

Trojan War:

- After 9 years of fighting, the war was still not settled
- if nothing changed, the war would drag on indefinitely
- Odysseus changed the course of the war with the Trojan horse

9.413-9.415: "the pain of his agony"

- pain: "odino" in Greek: pain of birth
- agony: "odinesi" in Greek; similar to "odino"
- each of Odysseus's repeated successes: a rebirth, as in the Trojan horse
- Odysseus turns adversary into tool

Circe episode:

- 10.220-10.224: Circe identified with a loom; recall that Penelope weaved with a loom to stall her suitors
- 10.224-10.243: Circe turns men into beasts; she seduces them (but Odysseus resists)
- Why does Odysseus go to bed with her?
  - He gets oath from her

- He reasserts his authority

Note the threat of sexual desire in the ancient Greeks' male-dominated society:

- The Odyssey suggests such a threat, as Circe reduces men to beasts
- There's tension between the threat and the need of sex for procreation

#### Penelope vs. Circe

- Penelope seems subservient to men (she weaves for her father-in-law)
- Circe is dominant

#### Aiolos:

- Odysseus has the opportunity to get home, but near there, he falls asleep, and his men open the bag of wind
- Perhaps Odysseus wanted that to happen
- Characters are capable of having others' desires

“Yet all experience is an arch, wherethro’  
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margins fade  
For ever and for ever as I move.”

-Tennyson, “Ulysses” (1842)

dramatic monologue

Odysseus wants to add to reputation, but he must return home eventually to tell others of his accomplishments

As the monologue above suggests, there's a limit to Odysseus's actions; if he continued on, his identity would eventually include everything

11.100-11.111: “contain your own desire”

12.184-12.200: Odysseus contains his desire by being confined

(2 October)

“For all experience is an arch, wherethro’  
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever as I move.”

-Tennyson, “Ulysses” (1842)

#### Paradox of the quest for fame in The Odyssey:

- If one experiences everything, one is not distinct; to be everything is to be nothing
- In order for Odysseus to gain glory, he must “cash in” his experiences

11.104-11.109: Odysseus must contain desire to get home

- Otherwise he would approach the level of Helios (deity)
- “contain your own desire”
- Odysseus contains his desire in his encounter with the sirens by having himself confined
  - He becomes the only person to hear the sirens’ song and live to tell of it

12.184-12.191: the sirens offer Odysseus omniscience (a recurring theme in The Odyssey)

2 concepts of identity:

- One person vs. another
- Humans vs. others

In Greek mythology, to be human is to strive to be more

- E.g., the struggle between Menelaus and Proteus
- The sirens offer Odysseus the chance to be omniscient

Note 12.377: the consequences if Odysseus does not contain his desire

11.110-11.136:

- What’s the significance of the information?
- What light does it cast on the remainder of The Odyssey?
- Odysseus does not ultimately defeat Poseidon
- Details of Odysseus’s death
  - At sea
  - Unglorious
- The story of how Odysseus must make peace with Poseidon
- A journey inland, in contrast to earlier journeys at sea
- Odysseus must repay Poseidon after having his victory
- Struggle between human tendency to become more and forces that can’t be overcome

Notes on oral tradition of The Odyssey:

- Careful design regarding order of telling
- Book 11: midpoint, about descent of living man to realm of the dead
- Death: ultimate form of becoming nobody
  - Recall: a ==> b ==> a’

E.g., men ==> beasts ==> better men