Why So Hospitable?

            Hospitality in Homer’s time was well shown through long travels such as Odysseus' in *The Odyssey* as well as the guest-friend relationship, known as *xenia*. There are many possible reasons why hospitality was more prevalent in those times. Traveling in Homer’s time was much more extensive and lengthier than in modern times.  The less advanced methods of transportation used in Homeric times, such as by boat or by foot, were much slower than modern forms of transportation.  Because of this, many more nights were spent away from home in many different locations.  Also, there were not hotels or inns where travelers could pay and stay the night.  Even if there were, travelers probably could not afford to pay for every night they were gone.  Because of this, travelers had to rely on the hospitality of others for shelter, food, and protection.  There was, however, some payment for this hospitality in the form of a gift exchange.  Another possible reason for this hospitality was the fact that there were not nations that would allow travelers to enter their territory safely.  Without such hospitality, strangers could be captured or even killed for entering a foreign land.  The Greek guest-friendship *xenia* may have been formed from this.  Xenia is the Greek relationship between two people from different regions.  This allowed for the members of the relationship to safely travel into the other member’s territory and receive a place to stay and something to eat. Another possible explanation for the amount of hospitality shown is that the Greeks believed the gods wanted them to show hospitality to anyone who showed up at their homes.  It was also believed that turning away someone and not providing them this hospitality would result in some form of punishment from the gods. Finally, hospitality could have been used to spread ones name and bring them a sense of fame if they would provide a high standard of hospitality to strangers.  It also could have been a way to show how wealthy one was.  These can be shown from this quote from *The Odyssey*:

“Come, friend, and give me something; for you seem to be no lowly man among the Greeks, but their most noble lord-indeed a chief.  So you should offer more than others can-I’d make you famous then in endless lands.  I, too, was once a man of means; my house was rich; I often gave to vagabonds, whoever they might be, who came in need” (Homer, p. 351).

            Is hospitality as customary now as it was in Homer’s time, and if not, why? It seems as though modern people do show hospitality towards others, but in a different way than those in Homeric times.  It is not custom anymore to provide food, protection, and shelter to a stranger that arrives at someone’s door.  This could be because there are hotels and restaurants almost anywhere one can go.  There is no need to for someone to ask for these.  Also, protection is not a large concern for most travelers, especially in the United States.  Hospitality is still shown, however, in modern society.  For example, when someone’s car breaks down most people would welcome them into their homes and help them in any way they can without even asking who they are.  Also, most people know of someone, be it family or friend, in a different city that would welcome them and provide them with a place to stay and food, which is similar to the *xenia* in Homer’s time.  Although the hospitality customs of Homer’s time are not still around, there are similarities to them and hospitality is still visible.

 Fear of Gods

            Throughout *The Odyssey* there are many ongoing themes, but one of the most important themes of this story is the tradition of Greek hospitality or xenia. This type of hospitality was very unique and it played an important role in the ancient Greek society.  As a matter of fact, this kind of hospitality was so unique that it almost seems unbelievable, because very few societies have behaved in this manner towards their guests.  From the very nature of this behavior, one can easily come to the conclusion that the people of ancient Greek society were truly hospitable.  However, fear of the gods, rather than pure decency, is a possible cause of the actions of ancient Greeks towards their guests.

            The hospitality of ancient Greek society is very clearly seen throughout the Odyssey.  During the travels of both Odysseus and Telemacus, one can easily see how strangers were greeted and treated upon their arrival to a new place.  It seems as if strangers were invited in for a feast, showered with gifts and luxuries, and then asked who they were and what their business was.  As anyone can see, this type of hospitality is very unusual and distinctive.  Not very many cultures would treat strangers in this manner.  Therefore we are led to believe that there is some other reasoning behind all of this generosity.

            The people of ancient Greek society did not show all of this hospitality solely out of the goodness of their hearts, but rather they did it for the gods.  During this time, hospitality was treated as a test from the gods.  In Book XIV on page 275 Eumaeus says: “for it is Zeus who sends to us all beggars and strangers; and a gift, however small, means much when given by a man like me…”  This means that it is the god Zeus who demands magnificent hospitality upon all mortals.  Since hosts had no way of knowing who their visitors were, they were forced to treat every visitor as if they were a god.  By treating every guest like a god, there is no mistake of accidentally treating a god differently, just in case one was to show up at their door disguised as a stranger.  This appears to be done through fear, not generosity.

            The fear of the gods’ wrath is seen in many of Odysseus’ travels.  Many of the hosts ask Odysseus to pray for their happiness to the gods in return for their hospitality.  This leads us to believe that they only shower him with gifts and feed him because it is what the gods want.  There is, however, an adventure where Odysseus is not shown good hospitality.  This adventure is the encounter with the Cyclops, Polyphemus.  When entering the cave ofPolyphemus, Odysseus relies on the expectation of hospitality and helps himself to food and shelter. When Polyphemus returns, however, we see that he does not follow the rules of Greek hospitality.  The reason he does not abide by these rules is because his father is the god Poseidon.  He does not fear the wrath of the gods because he feels his father will protect him.

            As anyone can see, the people from ancient Greece were very hospitable. It is possible, however, that this Greek hospitality comes from the fear of the gods, and not only from pure politeness.  Not only can this be seen in the story of *The Odyssey,* but it can be seen in other ancient Greek stories as well.

The Unwanted

            There are many things in life that come unwanted, and there are also things in life that we must do unwillingly.  In *The Odyssey*, providing hospitality often fell into these unwanted areas.  There were instances in this epic poem where Odysseus was offered and/or provided hospitality that he did not necessarily want, and there was also one major illustration of characters that felt obligated to provide hospitality that they did not want to provide.

            The fact that Odysseus wanted to get home to his wife, Penelope, and his son, Telemachus, is undisputable.  When speaking with Alcinous, he once said, “…For if a man is far from his own home and parents, then even if he is housed in opulence within that foreign land, no thing he finds can be more sweet than what he left behind” (Homer, p. 170).  This statement proves how Odysseus felt about the hospitality he had been offered and/or provided, and how he much more longed to be home.  Calypso, a fair goddess, had wanted to keep Odysseus in her cavern as her husband, but he refused.  Círce also tried to keep Odysseus in her halls and keep him there as her mate, but her attempts failed as well.  Although both of these women had fine homes and fine things to offer him, their hospitality was too much for Odysseus.  He instead left each with the goal of returning to Ithaca and reclaiming his family and his home.

            Another case where hospitality came in an unwanted abundance was when Telemachus encountered Nestor.  It was here that Telemachus found himself more welcome than he wanted. Nestor seemed to enjoy Telemachus’ company and entertained him by telling him many stories.  While Telemachus appreciated all the hospitality in this instance as well, he just wanted to continue his journey and learn about his father’s whereabouts.

            Throughout his journey, Odysseus also begins to reject hospitality when he finds himself encountering troubles at each place he comes to.  Eventually he is the only man left alive.  When he first wakes up on the island of Schería, he says, “What misery is mine?  What mortals must I meet in this new land that I now touch?” (Homer, p. 119)   The hospitality he is offered is unwanted because he has begun to question the motives of the people he meets.  He starts to wonder if they are actually kind or if they are only trying to please the gods with their hospitality.

            On the opposite side, back at home, Telemachus and Penelope found themselves feeling obligated to provide hospitality when they did not necessarily want to.  The suitors came to their home and expected proper hospitality to be offered to them.  Because of the importance of hospitality back in those times, most people assumed it.  In the case of the suitors, however, there was a larger assumption made on their part.  When the suitors first showed up at the doors of the palace, Penelope and Telemachus intended for them to stay for a feast or two.  The suitors more or less intruded and welcomed themselves far more than Penelope and Telemachus had wanted them to.  Even after the prophecy of Halithérses, who said: “Odysseus…won’t stay away from those he holds most dear; he is already near; and he has planted the seed of death and slaughter for the suitors…” (Homer, p. 28), the suitors remained in the palace and continued to feast and try to impress Penelope until Odysseus returned and slaughtered them.

Hospitality… Or Else!

            Hospitality in today’s world has become little more than being friendly and considerate to your guest.  There are no universal rules for the conduct of the host or the guest; much less a threat of violence if a person does not behave in a certain manner.  *The Odyssey,* takes its reader to a very different world of rules and manners.  In the story, the importance of hospitality goes beyond being a gracious host; there is a threat of violence if the host or guest does not fulfill their responsibilities.

            When Odysseus arrives on Kirké’s island, his men are being turned into animals and he goes to confront the witch.  On his way to met with her Hermes advises him on how to deal with the witch.  The ways in which Odysseus must deal with Kirké is by threatening her with his sword.  There are a few factors that may have motivated Hermes to help Odysseus confront Kirké.  One very important reason is that the goddess was violating the code of conduct between host and guest and not even a goddess can violate the rules.  From her confrontation with Odysseus, Kirké was taught a lesson by the other gods so that she would become more hospitable.

            The meeting with the Cyclops, Polyphemos, is another violent example of what happens with there is a violation between host/guest relations.  When the Cyclops decides to eat rather than welcome Odysseus and his crew, the men poke his eye out.  This event does not bother the gods at all.  The father of the Cyclops, Poseidon, is only upset by the event because it was his son who was hurt.  Zeus even praises Odysseus after the event by claiming that, “There is no mortal half so wise” (Homer, p. 3).  This statement proves that violence was an acceptable answer when a host was not gracious.

            The most violent reaction to the disregard of the responsibilities between a host and his guests occurs when the suitors are killed. These men were not only killed with the gods’ permission, but they were killed with the help of the gods.  Even when Odysseus wants to warn Amphînomos, the only suitor with honest intentions, he is bound to the palace by Athena.

            Violent penalties for not respecting the “rules” of hospitality are not only found in the world of the ancient Greeks.  In the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorra three angels search in the city for someone who will welcome them into their home. When they do not find anyone inside the city, they travel to the home of Abraham.  According to the story, Abraham was recovering from a circumcision and in a great deal of pain when he saw the strangers.  Even with his pain he welcomed the strangers and was saved from the destruction of the city.

            In both the Bible and The Odyssey violent penalties are given as a threat to anyone who is not hospitable and accommodating to their guest.  Because of this, it is not difficult to see that hospitality was one of the most important aspects to both societies.

Given and Received

            As we have seen, hospitality plays a major part in the Odyssey, but the actual hospitality is not as important as the way that that hospitality is received, and the consequences of that reception.  For our first example we will look at how the suitors respond to the hospitality given to them at the house of Odysseus.  Throughout the duration of Odysseus’ absence, the suitors are treated well, and in response to this, they refuse to leave when asked.  The suitors are fed and housed, and after a number of years they overstay their welcome.  In response to this Telemachus, prompted by Athena, informs the suitors that his father is returning home and they are all to vacate Odysseus’ home.  The suitors, in turn, ignore him and continue to eat drink and be merry, at the cost of Telemachus and Penelope’s household.  What are the consequences of these actions taken by the suitors? Although the primary consequence is their death, they also lose the hand of Penelope.  None of them are able to pass the test of stringing the bow of Odysseus except Odysseus himself.  This is followed by the main consequence of the suitors’ execution at the hands of Odysseus and Telemachus.  By not respecting the hospitality given by Penelope, they set the stage for their own deaths.

            Our next instance of hospitality occurs on the island of the Cyclops.  The Cyclops meets Odysseus and his crew with undesirable hospitality.   Although not without cause the Cyclops’ reaction and subsequent actions against Odysseus and his crew ultimately resulted in an attack on him.  Although the hospitality of the Cyclops was objectionable the reaction of Odysseus, in the form of blinding the Cyclops, brings only more trouble onto himself.  Since the Cyclops was Poseidon’s son Poseidon was angered and brought about more problems for Odysseus and his crew.  Just like with the suitors, undesirable hospitality and a bad reception of that hospitality ultimately results in a break in the sacred guest host relationship.

            Next we shall look at Odysseus’ stay on the island of Calypso.   Here he is met with exceptional hospitality.  Odysseus received this hospitality well and continued to please Calypso.  Only at the end did he ever try to refuse her hospitality and leave, and even this caused no serious problems.  Here we have an example of the guest-host relationship working well.  Calypso is provided with a companion, even if it was not permanent, and Odysseus was provided with shelter, provisions, and protection for his men.  In the end it proves to be a beneficial situation for them both.

            We have examined only a few instances of how the reception of hospitality is pivotal to the plot of Homer’s Odyssey.  The suitor’s reception of the hospitality provided by Penelope and Telemachus was negative; therefore the consequences of that reception were not what the suitors had wanted.  On the island of the Cyclops, Odysseus’ reaction, although somewhat warranted, resulted in only more complications for both the guest and the host.  The final example showed how a healthy guest-host relationship resulted in an advantageous situation for both parties involved.  All of these situations are excellent examples of the repercussions of not providing good hospitality, and how the consequences of this affected the story of*The Odyssey*.

 http://www1.union.edu/wareht/gkcultur/guide/8/web1.html

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Code of Hospitality (Xenia) in the Odyssey

A 3 way relationship between guest, host and Zeus Xenios: the god of hospitality

Procedure

Guest waits on the threshold of the palace or house

* Mentes (Pallas Athene) Book 1
* Odysseus in Aeolia

Host admits guest and sees to his every need

* Telemachus with Mentes
* Alcinous with Odysseus
* Menelaus with Telemachus

Only after a guest has washed, rested, eaten and drunk does a good host inquire as to his identity

* Telemachus with Mentes
* Alcinous with Odysseus

Host provides a bed for the guest usually in the portico (porch) of the palace

* Menelaus for Telemachus and Pesistratus
* Telemachus and Penelope for the beggar (Odysseus in disguise)

A good guest should ask permission to leave

* Telemachus with Menelaus
* Odysseus with Alcinous
* Odysseus (eventually forced by his men) with Circe

A good host should not detain his guest longer than he wishes

* Menelaus with Telemachus
* Alcinous with Odysseus

A good host not only gives his guest provisions for the journey but also gives a parting gift

* Menelaus’ bowl for Telemachus
* Aeolus’ bag of winds for Odysseus

There are several fine examples of good hospitality in the Odyssey but the best of them are

* Telemachus and Mentes – our first glimpse of Achaean hospitality
* Menelaus with Telemachus – a lavish host
* Alcinous with Odysseus – a very respectful and mindful host
* Eumaeus – a poor host, whose hospitality is every bit as important as Menelaus’ and more so because it is all the poor swineherd can afford, yet he gives it willingly.

The worst example of hospitality is Polyphemus, the Cyclops

Though you could also include Calypso and Circe – see comparison of the two.

Compare the roles of Calypso and Circe

As goddesses Calypso and Circe are alike in that they both go to bed with Odysseus but their motivations are very different.

Homer doesn’t tell us why Calypso lives on the lone island of Ogygia, which seems like a lonely place and since she is a goddess we wonder why she chooses to live there. Actually she didn’t make that choice. Zeus did. She supported her father Atlas during the Titanomachy (the divine war between the Olympian gods and the Titans) and was banished to Ogygia in punishment. When Odysseus washes up on the beach therefore he is probably her first house guest ever. Being so lonely however, as Calypso herself admits to Hermes, she decided to keep him as a plaything: essentially Odysseus becomes Calypso’ sex-slave. It is quite obvious who is in control of the relationship. Calypso is dominant and Odysseus subservient. Though their nights are passionate, Calypso, despite her best efforts, never makes Odysseus fall in love with her. As a hero (or perhaps as a man) Odysseus will never fully surrender his heart and soul to Calypso, though he is powerless to escape. He has no boat, no provisions and not the first clue as where he is. He is marooned and spends his days weeping for his homeland, his wife and his son. Our first glimpse of Homer’s hero is therefore a pathetic one, in complete contrast to the reputation we hear about in the first four books of the epic. This is entirely Homer’s point. Here was have a man who has been unmanned, a hero who has been captured and enslaved by a goddess. Calypso loves Odysseus but only as long as he remains wretched. Once Calypso receives word from Zeus through Hermes that she is to release Odysseus, she complains about the double standards between adulterous gods and chaste goddesses but she accepts the will of Zeus. She does however hold one more trick up her sleeve and tries one last time to keep her puppet from leaving her. By offering him the choice of immortality should he stay with he as her consort she surrenders her power over the hero and polymetis Odysseus rises to the occasion. We now see the hero Homer has built up in the first four books: a cunning wordsmith, who side steps Calypso’s verbal trap with nimble his nimble wits and poetic turn of phrase. But what we stand to miss if we move on too quickly is this point. As long as Odysseus was vulnerable and powerless Calypso loved him but once the chips were down, and the cards lay face up Odysseus did not return the same affections. When asked to choose Odysseus chose Penelope and death over Calypso and eternal life. Once Calypso accepts that Odysseus will not be hers it is interesting that she does the bear minimum to help him to leave. It is as if she simply does her job but no more than that. She gives him the tools to make the ship, shows him the forest where he will find the wood, gives him some provisions and retires to her house, as if Odysseus is now an irritation who has outstayed his welcome.

Circe on the other hand needs to be mastered before she will offer Odysseus her affections. She is a powerful and malevolent witch who seeks to transform Odysseus and his men into pigs. She too seeks to dominate mortal men but in a way that is more aggressive and active than Calypso. Odysseus arrived in Ogygia by chance (or by fate), quite unbeknownst to Calypso. Finding herself in a position of power she chose not to treat Odysseus like an equal but as a slave and having no other choice Odysseus complied until such time as he was given a choice and escaped. Circe however is more evil. She invites the Achaeans in, she seems in every way the good hostess like the witch in Hansel and Grettle until her charges are in her power. Then she springs her trap. But Odysseus is forewarned by Hermes and wisely goes along with her. Luring her into a false sense of security and watching her all the time, Odysseus is clearly the more cunning of the two. Circe is defeated the second Odysseus crosses the threshold. His tact and skill impresses and excites her and his heroic manliness charges the situation with a sexual energy. When he holds her neck to his blade she recognises him for *that polytropos man*, whom Hermes warned her about long ago. Finally she has met her match and melts before him. They now become lovers but equal lovers. Despite the shaky start the relationship is a strong one and the affection is on both sides. Odysseus becomes so lost in the affair that he even forgets about his mission. In the end he leaves only to satisfy his men. When he chooses to leave, unlike Calypos, Circe goes above and beyond the call of duty in helping him to prepare for the voyage. Here is goddess whose love for Odysseus is a natural and genuine one.

Circe and Calypso try to dominate mortal men but Calypso cannot abide the equal footing that a human relationship presents. With all the stubborn tenacity of Titaness she guards her dominant position fiercely and looses interest when it is lost, dropping Odysseus like a broken doll. Circe on the other hand wants nothing from Odysseus in the beginning but once he shows his manliness she becomes interested and changes tack. They both swear not to harm each other – as husbands and wives do and from then on Circe and Odysseus walk hand in hand as equals.

But for all their charms and powers Circe and Calypso are not good ambassadors for the gods. They covet the thrill of mortality. Who wants to live forever? For humans every second matters, every day is counted and every kiss means more than the last. For a goddess, what is love but a flimsy concept? It is a vague idea, something they will never know. Pallas Athene however practices her love for Odysseus in acceptable terms. Quite apart from the fact that she chose to remain a virgin she does not fancy the mortal but loves him as a mother loves a son. She takes pride in watching her protégé win renown and chuckles at his cheeky escapades. She sighs when he makes mistakes and helps him to learn the error of his ways. Her love for Odysseus is pure and virtuous and in the end she stands above and beyond Circe and Calypso; mere minor deities, obscure nymphs who dwell in obscure places. She is Athene glaukopis, the owl-eyed daughter of Zeus and she has sense enough not to cross the line with a mortal, especially a mortal like Odysseus and for that, we love her all the more.

Nausicaa

She is the epitome of a 1950’s stereotype: the catholic school girl. She is educated, pious, chaste and very eligible (quite the catch) and she’s looking. Yet despite her high opinion of herself she is equally naïve. She is young and cocky and underestimates Odysseus. She thinks he is interested in her, when in fact he is only interested in what she can do for him. But Odysseus is mindful of her fragility. He thinks her beautiful but equally, like Calypso perhaps, beneath him. She presents him with no challenge whatsoever. Ultimately, whist she provides nice eye candy she is also boring.

In Book 6 Homer introduces comedy to an epic; something quite novel. The meeting of Odysseus and Nausicaa seems like a tongue in cheek attempt at a racy novel. Homer is even self-consciously aware of it. Odysseus finds himself in a fine pickle this time: naked, covered in brine and in need of the help of a teenage girl. How does one go about that exactly? Homer likens him to a furtive mountain-lion stalking antelopes. Nausicaa and her handmaidens are likened to nymphs frolicking in a meadow. It’s all far too cheesy to be accidental. There’s too much name dropping in Odysseus’ speech and too much tact on his behalf. For example he wisely decides not to actually drop to his knees and embrace her ankles because, naked as he is, that might scare the poor girl. Instead he remains where he is but simply says he is on his knees. Nausicaa has been emboldened by Athena and does not bolt from what to a modern audience seems like a flasher coming out of the trees in a park. And then this flasher turns on the charm. He says she reminds him Apollo’s palm in Delos, which implies he’s been there (a traveled man) and he goes on to explain how he came to see it revealing that he once commanded an armada of ships which he lost on his return voyage from Troy. So in one fell swoop he gets her eyes flicking with a compliment and her heart fluttering at the knowledge that he is rich and successful. Now all he need do is ask her help, which he does, and she’s left quivering with excitement. Here surely is a prospective husband: a fine man of whom her parents will surely approve. And of course, and this is the clincher, he’s in need of her help. Nausicaa can do something for him. Oh thank you gods, she must have whispered inwardly. But don’t let on that you fancy him now girl! No no keep up appearances. Make him walk behind the wagon so the locals don’t start a rumour – a rumour which may one day come true … That was easy thinks Odysseus as he strolls along the road toward Scherie. Nice girl he thinks to himself. Better not lay it on any thicker than that though or she really will fall for me, poor thing.

### [Code of Hospitality (Xenia) in the Odyssey - CAI Teachers](http://www.caiteachers.com/download/Classics/Leaving%20Cert/Odyssey/Code%20of%20Hospitality.doc)

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