**The *Odyssey* as Moral Fable**

**Date:** 1971
On the *Odyssey* by Homer
**Author:** Hugh Lloyd-Jones
**From:** *Homer*, Bloom's Major Poets.

Soon after the opening of the poem, Zeus in the assembly of the godscomments on the death of Aegisthus, the murderer of Agamemnon, at the hands of his victim's son Orestes. Mortals, he complains, blame the gods for sending them evil, but in truth they themselves through their wicked recklessness have to endure pains beyond what is fated. When Aegisthus was plotting to make love to Agamemnon's wife and kill her husband, the gods even sent their messenger Hermes to warn him of the inevitable consequences, but Aegisthus rejected the warning and has now paid the penalty. This speech of Zeus implies a belief radically different from that found in the *Iliad* . There the god puts evil ideas, no less that good ideas, into men's minds; that is how men's *moira*, the portion assigned them by the gods, comes to be fulfilled. When the god wishes to destroy a man, he sends Ate to take away his wits. But now Zeus denies that the gods put evil ideas into the minds of men, and even claims that they warn men against the evil ideas they themselves have thought of.

"Placed where it is, at the very beginning of the poem," says Dodds, "the remark sounds . . . programmatic": and in the *Odyssey* as a whole the programme which it announces is carried out. In the first half of the poem, the companions of Odysseus are warned by Tiresias of what will happen if they slaughter the cattle of the Sun; in the second half, the suitors are warned first by the old man Halitherses and later by the prophet Theoclymenus of what will happen if they persist in their wooing of Penelope. Gods often put good or clever ideas into the minds of men; Athene, for example, is constantly inspiring Odysseus with such notions; but evil ideas the gods never inspire.

Achilles and Hector, Helen and Agamemnon are not easily to be classified as good or bad; the issues between Greeks and Trojans, between Achilles and Agamemnon are not (despite the considerations regarding justice) easily to be seen as conflicts between black and white. In the *Odyssey*, moral issues are infinitely simpler; not only during the adventures narrated by Odysseus, with their marked element of folktale, but even in Ithaca, where daily life is depicted with such great naturalism, good and bad and right and wrong are separated almost as clearly as in a Western film. True, one or two characters have an intermediate status; there are the suitor Amphinomus, to whom Odysseus gives good advice that is not taken, and Phemius and Medon, who keep company with the suitors against their will; but these exceptions hardly do more than heighten the contrast between black and white. It seems most unsafe to conclude that the comparative moral simplicity of the *Odyssey* is due simply to ethical progress made by the Greek world in the interval between the composition of the two poems. The truth is that the *Odyssey* is not an epic poem of the same kind as the *Iliad*. It is a poem linked with the true heroic epic through the person of its hero and other characters, yet containing a strong element of folklore and distinguished by a marked moralising strain, conducive to the triumph of the hero, and a happy ending, from the tragic character of the other epic.

Lloyd-Jones, Hugh. *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): pp. 28–29, 31. Quoted as "The *Odyssey* as Moral Fable" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Homer*, Bloom's Major Poets. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2001. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 23 Oct. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMPHom23&SingleRecord=True>.

**Zeus' Justice and Poseidon's Revenge**

**Date:** 1974
On the *Odyssey* by Homer
**Author:** Bernard Fenik
**From:** *Homer*, Bloom's Major Poets.

Aigisthus slew Agamemnon in pre-meditated murder and then married his victim's widow, both deeds in defiance of the gods' express admonitions that Orestes would be sure to exact revenge. Evil intent, warning from on high, persistence in criminal action, deserved retribution—the suitors, whose fate the story of Aigisthus is meant to illuminate and predict, follow an identical course into the same ruin. The gods' concern for human behavior, and the ethical categories which the story of the hero's return will exemplify, and in terms of which the suitors' catastrophe is to be judged, are thus established right from the start. The fate of Odysseus' crew is explained in the same terms: like Aigisthus (and therefore like the suitors) they perished because of their own —reckless folly—and accordingly lost their chance to make it home.

But when we consider how Odysseus incurs the wrath of Poseidon, it becomes immediately clear that the same motif of wise advice disregarded conceals a profound difference in the circumstances and acts that call forth the punishment. . . . The blinding was justified in terms of Homeric or any other morality: Odysseus and his men would have perished if they had not acted, and the hero's furious boasting does not turn the deed from self-defense into wanton criminality. Odysseus makes a bad mistake, a tactical error, but he does not commit a "sin".

It is impossible to justify Odysseus' suffering at the hands of Poseidon in terms of Zeus' explanation of guilt and punishment in the prologue, or to catalogue Odysseus along with Aigisthus and the suitors as another example of how man brings his own troubles upon him. Zeus was clearly thinking of men of a genuine and consistent criminal temper, not of somebody like Odysseus who suffers for a momentary and understandable aberration. We are forced to conclude that the ethical standards set forth by Zeus do not apply to the Poseidon-Odysseus story, or to put it another way, that the religious and moral outlook of the Odyssey is not uniform.

Helios' anger, like Poseidon's, focuses upon a factual guilt consequent upon a single act: the crew *did* eat the sacred cattle, just as Odysseus *did* blind Polyphemos. But the men are actually driven to the act by the very gods who punish them for it.

I conclude that neither the anger of Helios nor of Poseidon conforms to Zeus' excursus in the prologue, but that together they form a pair in their divine character, as they do in the external similarities of narration.

The epics represent a historical, cultural, linguistic and intellectual amalgam. They are a rich storehouse of contributions from many epochs and generations of poets. Their unity does not consist of a logically conceived philosophical or theological system, in which everything in this world is integrated into a neatly distributed whole. Unity consists rather in certain narrative structures and in dominant emphases imposed upon a complex substructure. The angers of Helios and Poseidon do indeed contradict Zeus' words in the prologue. But they are so similar to each other both in general and in so many particulars as to belong unmistakably to the whole larger class of doublets in the Odyssey. They contribute to the stylistic unity of the epic as much as they disturb its ethical uniformity. The story is always the same: strong stylistic tendencies and narrative emphases take precedence over a consistent world-outlook.

Fenik, Bernard. *Studies in the Odyssey* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974): pp. 210, 211, 213, 215, 219. Quoted as "Zeus' Justice and Poseidon's Revenge" in Harold Bloom, ed. *Homer*, Bloom's Major Poets. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2001. (Updated 2007.) *Bloom's Literature*. Facts On File, Inc. Web. 23 Oct. 2015 <http://www.fofweb.com/activelink2.asp?ItemID=WE54&WID=19618&SID=5&iPin=BMPHom24&SingleRecord=True>.