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## Commentary

The *Odyssey* is one of two great epic poems ascribed to the poet Homer, about whom little is known. Scholars have debated the existence of a historical person named Homer and, if such a person existed, whether or not he wrote both poems (see *Homer* for more detailed discussion of the "Homeric Question"). Putting aside the question of the historical author(s), it remains striking how the two epics complement each other and avoid replicating each other. The *Iliad* is an epic focused on warfare in a single setting, the fields of Troy. The *Odyssey*concerns the aftermath of the Trojan War and, in particular, the return journey*(nostos)* of the hero; the settings are multiple, since it is an epic of wide-ranging travel and adventure. The *Iliad* depicts largely the conflict and interactions among heroes on the battlefield, yet also includes some domestic scenes within the walls of Troy. The action of the *Odyssey* occurs largely within houses and palaces. Questions of hospitality, manners, decorum, and family dynamics, therefore, occupy a great deal of space in the epic, by contrast with the martial focus of the *Iliad.* Women, moreover, enjoy more significant roles in the *Odyssey*, since the household as a sustained setting affords more scope for their actions than the battlefield or the besieged city.

The *Iliad* is about destroying a city, a civilization, and the royal house of Priam. In the course of this terrible process, individuals gain glory *(kleos)* through their deeds. The *Odyssey* shows the crucial counterpart to the hero's acquisition of martial glory. To make it all worthwhile, the hero must return home with his material treasures and his immaterial glory in tow and reestablish himself in his ancestral home. Dying on the battlefield is undoubtedly a fine thing in the Homeric view, but best of all, perhaps, is to return home and enjoy the prestige conferred by successful warfare. If the *Iliad* is about the desperate struggle to win glory and to win a war, the *Odyssey* is about the struggle to regain enjoyment of one's life afterward. The two epics between them manage to address what contemporary Greeks would have seen as the most important aspects of life: the pursuit of glory in battle and the cultivation of prestige, happiness, and security at home.

The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, then, manage to share out portions of the archaic Greek worldview between them with impressive economy. This principle of nonreplication and complementarity extends even to individual episodes. The*Odyssey* includes narration of certain key post-Iliadic episodes, for example, that are not contained within the tight narrative focus of the *Iliad.* Prime among these are the story of the Trojan Horse (related by the bard Demodocus) and the funeral of Achilles (described by Agamemnon in the underworld). We also hear stories of the return journeys *(nostoi)* of the Greek heroes and are even able to satisfy our curiosity as to the restored domestic life of Menelaus and Helen. The *Odyssey*, in short, does not provide a continuous, full account of everything that happened between the death of Hector and the return of the Greeks, but does offer, through ingeniously embedded narratives, significant glimpses and résumés of some of the key developments.

The fundamental values of the epic match the character of the epic hero. Underlying all of Achilles' decisions and an integral part of his greatness is the awareness of his early death: He is not fated to return home from Troy. Achilles is violent, impulsive, unrestrained, and ferociously honest. He must maximize his *kleos* for the short time he is alive, and so the virtues of the survivor—patience, restraint, diplomacy, tactical deception—are irrelevant and even despicable to him. In his withdrawal from battle, or in his abuse of Hector's corpse, Achilles is unreasonable and impolitic, since, ultimately, he does not have a great investment in the banal maintenance of polite social relations with those around him: He is locked in a struggle with the limits of his own mortality. Odysseus's situation and goals are profoundly different. He has survived the war and now needs to survive the journey home. He must constantly restrain himself and check his impulses. He needs to keep his hosts (even his violent, lawless ones) reasonably happy to gain his own way in the end. Odysseus is a master of concealing his identity, testing his interlocutors, withholding strategically valuable information, and enduring outrageous insults. Odysseus possesses character traits that are nearly the diametric opposite of Achilles', and although, in the end, he shares with him the basic substratum of the warrior ethos—which includes the primacy of honor and revenge—the means of attaining his goals are markedly distinct. Odysseus possesses the virtues necessary for survival, continuing on after the war, and enjoying the remainder of his life.

The *Odyssey* is a return or *nostos* epic, and thus the qualities of the hero are suited to the challenges of long voyages, unexpected situations, and extended sojourns as a guest in others' houses. Few other Greek heroes were as successful in their return home as Odysseus. We learn from Menelaus that Athena was angry at the Greeks for sacrilegious acts during the sacking of Troy, and punished them with a terrible storm. Many perished in the storm itself; others, such as Menelaus and Odysseus himself, were forced to endure long wandering before arriving back home. Agamemnon managed to arrive home, but his wife Clytaemnestra's lover, Aegisthus, killed him. This story of a failed*nostos* is particularly relevant to Odysseus's situation and recurs throughout the epic as a foil. His wife is also tested by men who wish to replace her husband and usurp his role, and his son, like Orestes, is in danger of losing his inherited estates, if not his life. Odysseus's extreme caution and circumspection on arriving home in Ithaca effectively counter the negative example of the heedless Agamemnon, who fell instantly into the trap laid in his absence. Likewise, we may contrast Penelope's steadfast loyalty with Clytaemnestra's betrayal.

Both Agamemnon and Achilles, as represented in the voyage to the underworld in Book 11, are dead but find solace in the knowledge of their sons' deeds. Odysseus, we are to understand, is more fortunate than both. He will return to his loyal wife, enjoy the company of his son, and console his aging father in person. Achilles' shade emphatically states that he would rather be the lowliest serf among the living than the king of all the dead. We see here clearly marked the difference in underlying values between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as represented concretely in the aims and character of the central heroes. Achilles, in the *Odyssey*, is made to renounce, in effect, the Iliadic primacy of maximum glory within a short lifespan. Now that he is dead, he appears to admit the value of life itself independent of status or honor. Odysseus is only a sojourner in the land of the dead; he still has his life to return to. Odysseus, as it happens, will manage to win both life and glory. His fate is superior to Agamemnon's in that he will retain possession of his house and wife, and superior to Achilles' in that he wins glory without losing his life. His fate is also arguably superior to that of Menelaus in that he happily possesses a wife of proven virtue and loyalty, whereas Menelaus's domestic peace in Sparta is marred by barely suppressed tensions and the difficult legacy of the past.

We will not see the full span of Odysseus's life within the epic, but the dead Tiresias offers a prophetic vision of it: Odysseus will live to a ripe old age, surrounded by his prosperous people, and a gentle death will come, as he mysteriously declares, from the sea. The sea, controlled by the angry god Poseidon, is Odysseus's chief antagonist, and thus it makes sense that, on returning home, he must ritually remove himself from the sea's power. According to Tiresias, Odysseus must go so far inland that the local inhabitants will mistake the oar on his shoulder for a winnowing fan. Then he must plant his oar in the ground and offer a sacrifice to Poseidon. The sea will still claim Odysseus's life in the end, but gently and painlessly, and only after he has been allowed to live out all the years allotted to him. This emphasis on Odysseus's life span as peacefully completed is very different from the Iliadic focus on Achilles' tragically brief flash of brilliance.

Both epic poems, despite their significant differences, have one striking trait in common: They intensify suspense and anticipation by withholding the appearance of the hero. Achilles astonishingly withdraws from battle for the majority of the epic devoted to his *kleos.* The withdrawal magnifies his *kleos* by demonstrating his crucial importance to the Greeks and building up the importance of his return to battle. The *Iliad*, up to the point of Achilles' return, represents the courage and diverse aptitudes of warriors in battle. When Achilles finally does return, we can appreciate both the framework of Homeric warfare and his extraordinary status within that framework. The anticipation of Achilles becomes particularly intense as we near the point of his return, since Patroclus takes on his appearance and (to a limited degree) his excellence in donning his armor. He represents a weaker version of Achilles—an inferiority we can appreciate all the more when Achilles subsequently takes the field.

The *Odyssey*, similarly, withholds the appearance of its hero: Odysseus is kept from the view of both his family and the audience of his epic. At the opening of the poem, we learn that Calypso holds Odysseus prisoner in her cave. Commentators have noted that Calypso's name is related to the Greek word meaning "hide, conceal." Odysseus remains hidden in the straightforward sense that his family does not know where he is or even whether he is alive; but he also risks being hidden in the sense of losing his distinctive *kleos* by simply disappearing from the face of the earth. In short, he risks losing his identity. If he returns to Ithaca, he has property, a wife, a son, and a story of accomplishments with a clear beginning and end. If he vanishes mysteriously, there is no tomb to maintain his memory, no completed life story to cement his reputation. Odysseus will remain in this difficult condition of concealment for the first four books of the epic.

In the meantime, the narrative focus falls on his son, Telemachus. Telemachus does not know whether his father is alive or dead and, if alive, where he is. At Athena's urging, he goes on a voyage to learn news of his father from Nestor in Pylos and Menelaus in Sparta. Telemachus, who was an infant when Odysseus departed for Troy, is now on the verge of manhood. His travels allow him to begin to build his own network of *xenia* (guest-host relations, guest friendship) to introduce himself to his father's friends and comrades, and to build up his own reputation in the world at large. These four books of the *Odyssey*, sometimes called the *Telemacheia*, may well be one of the earliest examples of the bildungsroman in Western literature.

Growing into manhood means various things for Telemachus. First, it means occupying a more commanding role as Odysseus's heir and ruler of his own household. Unfortunately, he cannot assume this role forcefully, because, as he observes, the suitors are more numerous and powerful than he is, and his ability to control them is tenuous. All the same, under Athena's tutelage, he begins to assert himself more aggressively—very much to the surprise of the suitors. He also surprises his mother by occasionally rebuking her and reminding her of her proper role within the household. Penelope, in Odysseus's absence, has had to take on more of a masculine role as head of the household, but Telemachus now begins to assert his rights and to claim authority over his mother.

Growing into manhood also means assuming some aspects of his father's character, albeit on a smaller scale and in less masterful ways. Friends and hosts comment on his amazing resemblance to Odysseus, but the similarity goes beyond appearances. The opening books, which tell of Telemachus's travels in search of news about his father, are focused on the fine points of social behavior in the aristocratic households of heroic Greece. Telemachus must learn to be sensitive to etiquette; at the same time—and this is more difficult—he must also understand how to exert a modest degree of independence and to insist on his own priorities. Telemachus is at first diffident and overawed by Nestor. Nonetheless, encouraged by Athena, he learns to act decisively on his own behalf, controlling, rather than being controlled by, the rules of hospitality. The ability to refuse politely an inappropriate gift (Menelaus's offer of horses), or to avoid an occasion of extended hospitality when the moment calls for swift departure, is crucial for a man who wants to be, and to *appear* to be, in control of his own affairs. In small matters, Telemachus shows the beginnings of his father's shrewd practical judgment and tough-minded self-determination.

It is impossible to overrate the importance of *xenia* in the Homeric worldview. Zeus, as Homer frequently reminds us, is the guardian of hospitality. The Iliadic expedition against Troy is premised on a violation of *xenia*: Paris stole his host Menelaus's wife. The *Odyssey* presents a more fine-grained, varied, and quotidian picture of guest-host relations. Odysseus, in his travels, must seek hospitality in the different lands he visits, and his hosts represent different standards and styles of hospitality. Odysseus, for his part, is a master of *xenia*: No one understands the rules as thoroughly as he does, and consequently, no one is as masterful in stretching, breaking, or manipulating them when necessary. In a relatively short time, and without even revealing who he is, he impresses king Alcinous in Phaeacia to the extent that the king effectively offers him his daughter Nausicaa in marriage. Circe is a host who turns her guests into swine, but Odysseus, with Hermes' help, controls the situation, rescues his men, and becomes Circe's lover. Odysseus's true tour de force is saved for last: He makes himself a guest in his own palace in the guise of beggar. In this humble condition, he manages to gain the trust and admiration of the mistress of the household, and even to inspire fear in the arrogant suitors. At the same time, he secretly makes preparations for their slaughter.

A major component of Odyssean heroic character is his ability to conceal his identity and exert control over his emotions and impulses. When Odysseus stays as a guest among the Phaeacians, he conceals his identity from them for a surprising extent of time; only after Antinous observes Odysseus hiding his tears behind his cloak during Demodocus's songs about the Trojan War does he finally insist on knowing who he is. He similarly conceals his identity from Polyphemus, calling himself "Nobody," and from the suitors, before whom he assumes the guise of a beggar. Again, Telemachus offers a prelude to Odysseus's astonishing feats in this arena. When he goes to visit Menelaus, he does not immediately announce who he is. This suppression of identity is perhaps a sign that, after his experience at the palace of Nestor, he is gaining confidence, self-awareness, and restraint. There is no obvious tactical reason for Telemachus to conceal who he is, and Menelaus and Helen are not fooled for long, but the ability to withhold information about himself is nonetheless potentially useful in other contexts. Telemachus is coming into his inheritance of Odysseus's distinctive character.

The *Telemacheia* thus performs a precise narrative function. Not only does it introduce the character of Telemachus, provide an opportunity for him to garner*kleos*, and keep us in suspense regarding the appearance of Odysseus; these first four books also enable us to appreciate better the amazing feats of *xenia*, concealment, and self-control of the seasoned hero himself when he finally takes the stage. Telemachus performs a function comparable in some ways to that of Patroclus in the *Iliad*: He lays the narrative groundwork for the main player, whose exceptional abilities will be all the more conspicuous in comparison with the actions of his admirable, but still inferior, predecessor on the epic stage. Telemachus enacts his own miniature odyssey. He goes on a trip to Pylos and Sparta and is entertained by genial hosts without serious incident or challenge. Odysseus's assignment is more difficult: He is the prisoner of a man-eating giant, sojourns with a witch who turns men into swine, and goes on a trip to the underworld.

The episodic adventures narrated by Odysseus to the Phaeacians present exotic extremes of hospitality behavior. The Cyclops Polyphemus undoubtedly represents the most reprehensible version of the bad host. Homer's framing of the episode in terms of the *xenia* theme is explicit. On arriving in the empty cave, Odysseus's men wish simply to steal some provisions and flee, while Odysseus (with ruinous consequences for some of his men) insists on carrying out the proper rituals of hospitality. He will wait for the Cyclops and exchange hospitality-gifts. The Cyclopes, however, are stereotypical barbarians. They do not practice civilized arts such as farming and sailing; nor do they have laws. Polyphemus, rather than offering his guests food and lodging, eats them. It is hard to imagine a more total subversion of *xenia* principles. To Odysseus, he tauntingly offers the "*xenia* gift" of eating him last. Odysseus offers a *xenia* gift that is more appropriate, yet conceals a hidden sting. The powerful wine, which the Cyclops in barbaric manner drinks unmixed with water, causes him to fall into a deep sleep, thereby rendering him vulnerable to attack. The entire episode is an allegory of *xenia* in its confrontation between the barbaric Cyclops and civilized Greekness.

It is hardly coincidental that the Phaeacians are the audience of these stories. As hosts, they could hardly be more civilized, but it would not be beyond Odysseus's cunning to offer self-serving paradigms of hostly behavior. Indeed, they end up sending Odysseus home laden with immense treasure. The culmination of this sequence is Odysseus's assumption of the guise of beggar in his own house. We have been schooled in the distinctions between good and bad hospitality throughout the course of the epic, and have had occasion to appreciate Homer's fundamental equation between *xenia* behavior and moral worth. The suitors are unruly and unwanted guests, who are eating their way through their host's stores without permission, sexually exploiting the serving maids, threatening Odysseus's son and heir, and attempting to steal his wife. They represent a shocking perversion of *xenia* on a mass scale. Conversely, when Odysseus arrives on the scene, they turn out to be terrible hosts. They effectively (if illegitimately) control the household and its resources, yet they do not even share out another man's resources generously and hospitably. In numerous scenes, Penelope and Telemachus must protest the suitors' discourteous treatment of the stranger, appealing to Zeus's guardianship of strangers and beggars.

Homer is preparing in advance the justification for the suitors' slaughter. The carefully recorded insults—e.g., throwing a stool or cow's hoof at the stranger—are implicit acts of war, which will be avenged later in earnest. It is hardly accidental that an especially sinister omen, which occurs shortly before the killing of the suitors, takes the explicit form of a grotesque perversion of banqueting: Athena makes the suitors laugh uncontrollably, and it seems to them that they are spattering blood on their food. The seer Theoclymenus suddenly sees a palace filled with ghosts. When the time for killing comes, Homer is attentive to the convivial nature of the suitors' transgression. In his first kill, Odysseus targets Antinous, who is reaching for a goblet of wine. Before he can swallow, Odysseus's arrow pierces his neck, and blood sprays onto his food. The *Odyssey* culminates with this strikingly original battle scene in a banqueting hall, where blood flows instead of wine, and groans are heard instead of laughter. The location of the slaughter is not merely novel, however, but thematically appropriate, for the punishment is meted out in the very setting of the crime. The suitors deserve punishment precisely for their behavior as guests and perpetual banqueters in the absent Odysseus's hall. Now they die amid their cups and half-eaten food.

The final episode of the epic thus represents an intensification and expansion, as in the *Iliad*, of the themes and narrative patterns enacted throughout the entire poem. Just as Achilles' terrible display of excellence in battle near the epic's close wildly exceeds the battle fury of lesser warriors exhibited previously, so Odysseus's mastery of *xenia* and punishment of *xenia* transgression rises to a new level in the closing books. Other patterns are expanded and intensified as well; in particular, we might note the recurrent scenario of being trapped in a hostile environment, humiliated, threatened, and deprived of status and identity. In Polyphemus's cave, Odysseus assumes the identity of "Nobody," miserably watches his comrades being eaten, and endures the Cyclops's grotesque taunts. He is trapped in a hostile environment and must rely on his wits to overcome his adversary. When he finally escapes the cave and is sailing away, he taunts the Cyclops, revealing his name. Odysseus goes from "Nobody" to a hero with a name, a father, and a place of origin. Commentators have observed that the alias "Nobody" conceals a further play on words. One form of "no one" in Greek resembles the word for cunning *(metis).* The use of such an alias was itself an act of cunning, and gave Odysseus his victory over the Cyclops.

We might compare a similar narrative pattern in Helen's story about Odysseus. He flogged himself and dressed in rags to look like a beggar, infiltrated Troy in this disguise, gathered information, killed a number of Trojans, and returned to the Greek camp triumphant. The pattern is distinctive to Odysseus: self-abasement and negation/concealment of identity followed by a victorious revelation of identity at the moment the *kleos* (fame) of his deed has been established. Odysseus's story follows a recurrent arc from concealment to revelation, from absence and namelessness to triumphant, glory-conferring return. Again, at the heart of Odysseus's victory is his self-control, powers of concealment, and *metis.*

This pattern characterizes both the microcosm of individual episodes and the larger narrative drive of the epic itself. We should not be surprised if the same pattern characterizes the final portion of the epic in intensified and expanded form. Here, Odysseus conceals himself in rags once again, suffers humiliating insults, hides his identity, and survives by his wits and resilience in a dangerous environment, surrounded by numerous enemies. Then, in a surprise reversal, he takes possession of his bow, announces his identity as Odysseus, and inflicts terrible vengeance on the suitors. What provides this episode with its culminating power is, first, that Odysseus's enemies are so numerous and, second, the fact that his period of self-concealment has been expanded remarkably. He must live under his assumed identity for a significant amount of time, deceiving not only all the suitors but even his own wife. Finally, the reclamation of his identity is now total and concretely grounded in a place and role. Odysseus reinstalls himself as the master of his bow, his household, his wife, his immoveable bed, his property, and his kingship of Ithaca. In a single battle, he reassumes his full identity as Odysseus.

Recovering one's identity after so many years demands not only cunning but also memory. Eurycleia remembers Odysseus's scar instantaneously. The loyal herdsmen cherish the memory of Odysseus, and the final reunion of Odysseus and Penelope is premised on their shared memory of how he constructed their bed. Returning home requires memory on the part of both the hero and those to whom he returns. The opposing impulse is forgetfulness, which recurrently threatens to destroy the hero's *nostos* (return journey). While Calypso conceals Odysseus in her cave, he is threatened with the fate of oblivion. In an especially explicit version of this theme, the lotus-eaters nearly cut off the possibility of*nostos* for some of Odysseus's men by giving them the memory-destroying lotus plant to eat: They immediately lose all desire to return. At Circe's luxurious palace the days go by so smoothly that Odysseus spends a year there before one of his men finally reminds him of their *nostos.* The alluringly beautiful voices of the Sirens cause sailors to abandon their destination and wreck their ships on the rocks. Homer aligns oblivion and abandonment of *nostos* with pleasure and feminine allure. A particularly intriguing instance arises during Telemachus's visit to Sparta. Helen mixes into the drinks a drug that causes oblivion and forgetting of sorrows. Her feminine guile includes an ability to make others forget about the Trojan War and, presumably, her role in causing it.

If a numbing, pleasurable oblivion obstructs *nostos*, remembering one's true identity and homeland usually involves pain. When, at the court of Alcinous, Demodocus sings of the Trojan War and Odysseus's role in it, the hero covers his face with his cloak to hide his tears. The episodes recounted are not particularly sad ones; the Trojan Horse, for example, constitutes a signal victory for the Greeks in general and Odysseus in particular. The reason Odysseus cries is because he is being reminded of who he is, what he has done and suffered, and how he continues to be doomed to wandering. It is painful for Odysseus to hear his name and be reminded of his heroic status in the world, because he has been exiled from his own identity. This painful awareness of exile, however, is a necessary, catalyzing pain, because without it, Odysseus would have no motivation to continue struggling to achieve his *nostos.* The Sirens, Calypso, Circe, and the lotus-eaters all offer forgetfulness and the absence of pain. Odysseus, although repeatedly subjected to the temptations of pleasurable oblivion, steadfastly weeps for his homeland and yearns to return to his imperfect, mortal wife.

Homer is capable of manipulating the themes of *nostos* and forgetfulness in surprising and subtle ways. When Odysseus finally sails in to the coast of Ithaca in a magical Phaeacian boat laden with treasures, he is blissfully asleep. The poet makes a point of noting the poignant irony. A man who has suffered so much on land and sea is now, as he approaches his goal, shrouded in deep sleep, oblivious of everything he has endured. More vigilance and endurance will soon be required, but for the moment, Odysseus is at last allowed to rest. Perhaps now that his return to Ithaca is assured, he can finally relax his watch and cease to subject himself to the constant, painful struggle to remember who he is and where he comes from.

Identity is at the center of the epic. Odysseus's deeds are important and justly famous, but the simple fact that he *is* Odysseus is of fundamental importance. Homer marks key moments in his epic through reference to concrete tokens of Odysseus's identity. At one such moment, the nurse Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus from the distinctive scar on his leg while washing his feet. This moment of recognition leads into an inset narrative of how Odysseus got the scar. The embedded narration in turn establishes crucial aspects of Odysseus's identity. His mother's father, Autolycus, gave Odysseus his name. Drawing on the similarity between the name "Odysseus" and the Greek word for "hate," Autolycus declares that he names the child for the many enemies he has made for himself in the world. Homer describes Autolycus, whose name means "the very wolf," as the most notable thief and liar of his times. We can already see how aspects of Autolycus correspond to elements in Odysseus's distinctive character. Later, when Odysseus is older, he visits Autolycus and his sons and is wounded in a boar hunt, in which he also wins glory by slaying the boar. This visit represents Odysseus's coming-of-age, the beginnings of his *kleos* and public identity. The scar that confirms the hero's identity is inflicted, significantly, during this initiatory episode that occurs in the company of the man who gave him his name.

The scar is at the center of Odysseus's identity. Other concrete tokens establish specific aspects of his character. The bow represents Odysseus's heroic status and his position as master of his household. As significant object, the bow has a multilayered story: Odysseus received it from Iphitus, who inherited it from his father, Eurytus. We also hear that Heracles subsequently hosted Iphitus in his own house, then killed him. The bow thus interestingly carries associations with slaughter in a specifically domestic setting: Its previous owner was killed in this way. Odysseus chose not to bring the bow with him to Troy but kept it in his house for use on his own estate. The bow—thus defined as a domestic weapon—is appropriately used in Odysseus's banqueting hall to kill the suitors. In Odysseus's case, however, the killing is not an outrageous violation of *xenia*, as Iphitus's murder was, but a merited punishment of *xenia* violators on the part of the lord of the household. Finally, the story of the bow confirms Odysseus's identity by his flawless mastery of it: He strings it effortlessly, and his arrow flies straight through the 12 ax heads. The arrow's perfect trajectory represents the irreducible specificity of Odysseus, the "perfect fit" between object and owner. Odysseus's reclamation of his household from the suitors naturally follows.

Odysseus's bed serves a function similar to that of the bow in grounding and authenticating his identity, but this time specifically as Penelope's husband. Penelope cunningly tests Odysseus by affecting to request that the bed be moved from the bedroom. She know that the bed cannot be moved, since Odysseus made it out of a deeply rooted olive tree, and the hero is accordingly outraged at the suggestion that it might be moved. The symbolism here is overpoweringly clear: The bed has not been moved, and cannot be moved. Odysseus has wandered the world and even sojourned with other women, but his true bed and loyal wife have remained steadfastly in place. These three tokens of Odysseus's identity—the scar, the bow, the bed—thus concretely establish his name and *kleos* as hero, his mastery of his household, and his marriage to Penelope.

Penelope is not simply loyal in the passive sense of not welcoming the advances of a lover or new husband. Resisting the constant pressure of the suitors occupying her home requires a more active and cunning resistance. In putting up such resistance, Penelope assumes a quasi-heroic feminine role unparalleled by anything in the *Iliad.* The most famous instance of Penelope's active defense of her fidelity is the ruse of Laertes' shroud. She claims that she will choose one of the suitors to marry only when she has completed the shroud, yet every night she unravels what she wove during the day. Penelope thus maintains the suitors' goodwill by leading them on, yet continually defers the day of decision that would force her to marry. Later, she induces the suitors to give her gifts, counteracting, to some extent, the damage they have done to the house's resources. Odysseus, in beggar's guise, secretly rejoices in her act. Penelope's accomplishments in many ways recall and even match Odysseus's own. Like Odysseus, she is a master of deception and succeeds in eliciting valuable gifts from others. Odysseus typically tests his interlocutors with leading remarks and suggestions; Penelope brilliantly succeeds in testing Odysseus himself with the pretense of the movable bed. It is significant that Odysseus, as beggar, opens his speech to Penelope with praise of her fame, which he compares to that of the king of a prosperous people. In ruling her household, Penelope has indeed taken on an almost masculine role, and like her husband, she has won *kleos*through her cunning deeds.

There is no question but that Odysseus is allowed relations with other women that Penelope could not have entertained with other men without damage to her reputation; and there is no question but that in broader terms, she occupies a subordinate role and that her *kleos* is of a lesser kind in accordance with her status as woman. It is still striking that she occupies so substantial and positive a role in an epic poem. The *Iliad*, by contrast, is firmly centered on masculine action and prestige. Also remarkable is Homer's highly nuanced picture of married, companionable, middle-aged love—a rare occurrence even in later literature. Odysseus and Penelope are well matched in many ways, and one of the highlights of their reunion is the long-anticipated opportunity to talk with each other and to share stories with each other.

The telling of stories supplies a fitting closure for the sequence of reclamation and reunion. The reunion can be complete only when Penelope and Odysseus possess not only each other but the stories of what happened to each other during their long separation. Odysseus as a hero, moreover, is endowed with a special meta-narrative significance: He himself is a masterful teller of tales and is, in fact, the narrator of a key portion of the epic. The traveler's tales that Odysseus tells to the Phaeacians in Books 9–12 constitute, not by accident, the most exotic, colorful, and supernatural episodes in the poem. Given Odysseus's immense propensity for lying and misrepresentation of his life story even in relatively benign circumstances, it is not overly ingenious or perverse to ask (and many have asked) to what extent these stories are strictly true.

Yet, since there can be no answer to this question, it is perhaps more helpful to consider how the traveler's tales recapitulate in more insistent form the broader question of poetic fiction and truth that informs the epic as a whole. Odysseus displays a seemingly endless capacity to produce stories about himself and invent identities for himself. Like a Hesiodic Muse, he knows how to make false things seem true, and sometimes also tells the truth. His lying tales include a multitude of singular, authenticating details and are just near enough to the truth to deceive. The broader motifs of exile, wandering, adventure, suffering, and misfortune help the teller shape his tales convincingly. Odysseus hides his true identity behind the stories, and yet the stories could only have been produced by Odysseus: Like the alias "Nobody," the deceiving fiction contains an inalienable kernel of truth about the hero. Athena laughs when Odysseus attempts to lead even her astray with an improvised narrative on the shores of Ithaca. What trait is more inveterate and singular to Odysseus than the nearly compulsive invention of fictional identities?

All this staging of metafictional scenarios must reflect at some level the activity and position of the epic poet himself. The *Odyssey* situates us in a post–Trojan War world in which song traditions based on stories of the war are beginning to emerge: Demodocus and Phemius sing about the war and its heroes; aristocratic lords in their palaces are trading stories and reminiscences. Everyone has heard of the fame *(kleos)* of the main heroes such as Odysseus, Achilles, and Agamemnon. Deeds continue to be done, by Odysseus in particular, but the*nostos* phase has as its special concern the establishment of reputations and story traditions when the heroes return laden with the prestige of what they have done. In this *nostos* phase, the talents of a master narrator become extremely valuable, and it is no accident that the hero of Homer's return journey epic is unique for his capacity to do great deeds and simultaneously to recount/create/invent them with words. Not by accident does Eumaeus the swineherd advertise the stranger's merits to Penelope by praising his ability to tell spellbinding tales and by comparing him explicitly to a bard. Once again, the nature of the epic accords with the character of the epic hero. The sublimity and extremity of the *Iliad* match Achilles' own ferocious and exhilaratingly transgressive character. The *Odyssey*, with its intricately inset narratives and subtle interweaving of truth, fiction, and deception, matches Odysseus's own mastery and cunning as teller of tales.

####  Further Information

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**Background to *The Odyssey***

**Date:** 700 B.C.,
**From:** *The Odyssey*, Bloom's Guides.

No artist of our time can rival Homer in cultural importance and pre-eminence. From him the Greeks derived their core ethics and values; an educated Greek would have huge portions—if not all—of his epic committed to memory. An example from history will give an idea of his centrality: In the sixth century BCE, Athens and Megara were continually contending for control of the important island of Salamis. They agreed to submit the dispute to binding arbitration, and chose a neutral third party. The arbiter ruled in favor of Athens, because the Catalogue of Ships in Book II of the *Iliad* tells that Salamis stationed her ships next to the Athenians. An inconsequential detail of the *Iliad* legislated the outcome of a war.

The Greek historians, looking backward, could see no further than Homer. He was their earliest history; for the later Greeks, the world of Odysseus was their direct past. Techniques of modern archaeology have revealed to us information that could not possibly have been available to Herodotus, and so the relationship of the Homeric epics to the history they purport to describe has been re-evaluated.

Two recent discoveries upended previous approaches to the veracity of Homer's history. The first was a series of digs carried out by an amateur archaeologist named Henrik Schliemann, an avid lover of Homer. Convinced of the essential truth of the tales, he set off (somewhat quixotically) in search of Troy and Mycenae, while less enthusiastic classicists looked on condescendingly, and unearthed several archaeological remnants of Greece. He found ruins in Troy, and upon finding a massive vaulted tomb with a masked corpse in Mycenae, he sent a telegram back to Germany that stated tersely: "I have found the mask of Agamemnon."

Modern dating techniques have shown that the tombs Schliemann found were earlier than when Agamemnon would have lived, but his discoveries totally changed our understanding of early Greek history. Though Schliemann himself did not find it, one ruined city was dug up in Troy that was destroyed violently by fire at the end of the thirteenth century BCE. Most historians believe, or at least find it plausible, that this was the sight immortalized by Homer's poems.

Schliemann's discoveries created many questions. For one, there was no way decisively to connect these early inhabitants of the Peloponnese to the classical Greeks. In 1951, a second groundbreaking discovery was made by an enthusiastic amateur. Thousands of clay tablets had been dug up in Mycenae and in Knossos in which was etched a syllabary script called Linear B. The script went undeciphered and untranslated for many years until Michael Ventris, an architect, decrypted it and showed that it was an early form of Greek. A bridge of language connected the Age of Heroes to the Age of Homer.

The basic picture of early Greece that emerges is this: Around the end of the third millennium BCE, proto-Greeks entered the Peloponnese. They were part of the migrations of several Indo-European peoples at that time, including the Hittites and the Luwians. They probably infiltrated Greece slowly, rather than conquered violently, since many of the place and divinity names are not Indo-European but were borrowed from the original inhabitants.

For the next several hundred years these Indo-European migrants developed into a strong and complex civilization. Mycenae is the most spectacular of the ruins from this time, with its gigantic "Cyclopean" walls and famous Lion's Gate, both still visible today. As it was the most powerful state, and probably responsible for the political and social unity, the entire era from the early second millennium bce until about 1100 BCE is called the Mycenean Age. The general idea of Mycenean Greece that archaeology provides is a period of strong kings with elaborate beaurocracies and palace economies. The Mycenean Age was closer to its contemporary Near Eastern civilizations than to classical Greece. It ended mysteriously at the end of the second millennium. Later Greeks attributed this decline to a "Dorian invasion" from the north, but the true reasons remain obscure.

The most likely date for the composition of the Homeric poems is the late eighth century BCE, so a gap of at least three or four centuries separates Homer from Mycenean times. Which society is depicted in Homer's poems? Dark Age Greece or the Mycenean Age? M. I. Finley aptly reminds us that this "Mycenean Age" is a purely modern construct, and unknown in ancient Greece. Homer's only past was what he had heard from bards before him. There are important differences between the world described by Homer and the Mycenaean world described by archaeology: his arms bear resemblance to the arms of his time; his gods have temples, while in Mycenae there were none; Homer cremates his dead, the Myceneans built huge vaulted tombs.

While Homer stubbornly retains certain archaic practices—such as bronze weapons and war chariots—he mostly portrays his own society, or perhaps that of a century earlier. This is logical for a poet at the end of a long oral tradition: each of the multitude of bards through whom these heroic songs passed, naturally would appropriate, add, modify, or refine them. The poems, then, are amalgams of these various additions and editions, with a few remnants of the actual Mycenean past.

Two social features of Dark Age society in Greece merit mention. The economic, political, and cultural center of any region was the *oikos*, usually translated as the "household," which included the family, the retainers, bards, shepherds, or farmers that clustered around a single royal family. The households of Odysseus, or Nestor, or Menelaus, which we visit in the*Odyssey,* are typical Dark Age *oikoi.* They provided security and sustenance, as well as *mores*and values.

A second central Dark Age institution is denoted by the Greek word *xenia*, which means "guest-friendship" or hospitality. In a world without real cities or centralized authority, and riddled with pirates, all travel depended upon the mutual obligations of *xenia*. In the first Book of the*Odyssey*, Athena visits Ithaka in the guise of Mentor. Telemachus spots him tarrying at the door, and is irked that this *xenos*, guest-friend, has been waiting. He invites him to a generous feast before inquiring his name and home. The appearance of a *xenos,* then, demands certain rights and behaviors. It is the closest thing in the world of Homer to an absolute moral mandate: one of Zeus' epithets is *Zeus xenios*, protector of strangers. Much of the *Odyssey*concentrates on the fulfillment and perversion of the demands of *xenia*.

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1. **Nature versus culture:** What is the relationship between nature and culture in the *Odyssey?*

Often in this epic a stranger will ask his new host what kind of men he has reached, savage or civilized. Yet as we see in book 5, danger is not always located beneath the human community of hospitality; Calypso is a goddess, yet she has violated *xenia* for years by keeping Odysseus at her home against his will. Their business on Ogygia is natural; it is an expression of their sexuality. What releases him is culture: on the one hand, a chain of messages from Athena to Zeus to Hermes to Calypso to Odysseus; on the other, the construction, by labor and tools and artifice, of a raft with a rudder and sail. Opposed to that raft of art and human knowledge is the primal force of Poseidon's savage storm. In book 9, Poseidon is again the sponsor of savage nature, this time in the form of his offspring the Cyclops, whose savagery is all the more intense for its admixture of civilization—when a lion devours a man it does no evil, but the Cyclops is a speaking subject who makes cheese, herds sheep, and devours his human guests. Indeed the story of Odysseus can be thought of as the triumph of Athena (and by extension, her father Zeus) and civilization over Poseidon and nature.

When the hero is first washed onto the shore of the Phaeacians, he has been stripped of every outward sign of civilization. The simile that here compares Odysseus to a lion is appropriate. Yet the thicket in which he sleeps is said to be made of "two bushes growing from the same place, one wild, one domestic." This may be symbolic of his own nature, or of his adaptability to diverse environments. It also looks forward to the revelation about Odysseus's bed, with its olive tree bedpost still rooted in the earth (by contrast to the wandering Odysseus himself). Another implication, albeit perhaps somewhat farfetched, is that this is a spot that used to be an orchard and has been left to grow wild again—a common situation for the Homeric audience. Since olives do not tend to thrive without cultivation, this strange thicket is an apt site for Odysseus's rebirth into civilization after the raw savagery of the stormy sea. The bed of Odysseus and the handles of the axes in the archery contest at the poem's climax are further examples of the association between the protagonist and olive wood.

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