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INTRODUCTION

The Odyssey, composed almost three thousand years ago, is an epic poem: "epic" both in the sense that it is long, and in the sense that it presents itself as telling an important story, in the traditional, formulaic language used by archaic poets for singing the tales of gods, wars, journeys, and the collective memories and experience of the Greek-speaking world.

Modern connotations of the word "epic" are in some ways misleading when we turn to the Homeric poems, the texts that began the Western epic tradition. The Greek word *epos* means simply "word" or "story" or "song." It is related to a verb meaning "to say" or "to tell," which is used (in a form with a prefix) in the first line of the poem. The narrator commands the Muse, "Tell me": *enn-epe.* An epic poem is, at its root, simply a tale that is told.

The Odyssey is grand or (in modern terms) "epic" in scope: it is over twelve thousand lines long. The poem is elevated in style, composed entirely in a regular poetic rhythm, a six-beat line (dactylic hexameter), and its vocabulary was not that used by ordinary Greeks in everyday speech, in any time or place. The language contains a strange mixture of words from different periods of time, and from Greek dialects associated with different regions. A handful of words in Homer were incomprehensible to

Greeks of the classical period (in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE). The syntax is relatively simple, but the words and phrases, in these combinations, are unlike the way that anybody ever actually spoke. The style is, from a modern perspective, strange: it is full of repetitions, redundancies, and formulaic expressions. These mark the poem's debt to a long tradition of storytelling and suggest that we are in a world that is at least partly continuous with a distant, half-forgotten past.

But in some ways, the story told in this long piece of verse is small and ordinary. It is a story, as the first word of the original Greek tells us, about "a man" (*andra*). He is not "the" man, but one of many men—albeit a man of extraordinary cognitive, psychological, and military power, one who can win any competition, outwit any opponent, and manage, against all odds, to survive. The poem tells us how he makes his circuitous way back home across stormy seas after many years at war. We may expect the hero of an "epic" narrative to confront evil forces, perform a superhuman task, and rescue vast numbers of people from an extraordinary kind of threat. Failing that, we might hope at least for a great quest unexpectedly achieved, despite perils all around; an action that saves the world, or at least changes it in some momentous way—like Jason claiming the Golden Fleece, Launcelot glimpsing the Holy Grail, or Aeneas beginning the foundation of Rome. In *The Odyssey*, we find instead the story of a man whose grand adventure is simply to go back to his own home, where he tries to turn everything back to the way it was before he went away. For this hero, mere survival is the most amazing feat of all.

Only a portion of the twenty-four books of *The Odyssey* describes the magical wanderings of Odysseus on his journey back to Ithaca. These adventures are presented as a backstory partly told by the hero himself (in Books 5 through 12). The poem cuts between far-distant and diverse locations, from Olympus to earth, from Calypso's island to the palace at Ithaca, from the underworld

to the cottage of the swineherd. Sometimes the setting feels entirely realistic, even mundane—a world where a mother packs a wholesome lunch of bread and cheese for her daughter, where there is a particular joy in taking a hot bath, where men listen to music and play checkers, and lively, pretty girls have fun playing ball games together. At other moments, we are in the realm of pure fantasy, inhabited by cannibals, witches, and goddesses with six barking heads, where it is possible to cross the streams of Ocean (the mythical river that encircles the known world), and come to the land of asphodel, where the spirits of dead heroes live forever. Different characters tell their own inset stories—some true, some false, of past lives, adventures, dreams, memories, and troubles. The poem weaves and unweaves a multilayered narrative that is both simple and artful in its patterning and composition.

The story begins in an unexpected place, *in medias res* ("in the middle of things"—the proper starting point for an epic, according to Horace). It is not the start of the Trojan War, which began with the Judgment of Paris and the Abduction of Helen and was fought for ten years. Nor does the poem start at the beginning of Odysseus' journey home, which has been in progress for almost as many years as the war. Instead, it begins when nothing much seems to be happening at all; Odysseus, his son, and his wife are all stuck in a state of frustration and paralysis that has been continuing for years and is becoming unbearable.

Odysseus, at the start of the poem, is trapped by the goddess Calypso, who wants to have him stay there as her husband for eternity. He could choose to evade death and old age and stay always with her; but movingly, he prefers "to see even just the smoke that rises / from his own homeland, and he wants to die." Odysseus longs to recover his own identity, not as a victim of shipwreck or a coddled plaything of a powerful goddess, but as a master of his home and household, as a father and as a husband. He sits sobbing by the shore of the island every day, desperately

staring at the "fruitless sea" for a boat that might take him back home.

Meanwhile, in Ithaca, Odysseus' wife, Penelope, is surrounded by young men who have forced their way into her home and are making merry with daily feasts, wasting the provisions of the household, waiting for her to agree to give up on Odysseus and marry one of them. Penelope has a deep loyalty both to her lost husband, for whom she weeps every night and whom she misses "all the time," and also to the "beautiful rich house" in which she lives, which she risks losing forever if she remarries. She has devised clever ways to put off the suitors, but it is clear that she cannot do so forever; eventually, she will have to choose one of them as her husband and perhaps leave the household of Odysseus for a new home. When that happens, either the suitors will divide the wealth of Odysseus between them—as they sometimes threaten—or the dominant suitor may gain the throne of Ithaca for himself. The ambiguity about what the suitors are seeking matches an even more central ambiguity, about what Penelope herself wants. Indefinitely, tearfully, Penelope waits, keeping everyone guessing about her innermost feelings and intentions. As the chief suitor complains, "She offers hope to all, sends notes to each, / but all the while her mind moves somewhere else." This premise allows for artful resonances with earlier moments in the myth of Troy. Much-courted Penelope resembles Helen, the woman to whom all the Greek heroes came as suitors (Menelaus, her husband, eventually won her hand by lot), and whom Paris, Prince of Troy, later stole away. Like Paris, Penelope's suitors threaten to steal away a married woman as if she were a bride. Penelope's house also echoes the besieged town of Troy, when the Greeks were fighting to take Helen back home—but there is here no strong Hector to defend the inhabitants.

Telemachus, Odysseus' almost-adult son, is in a particularly precarious situation. Left as a "little newborn baby" when

Odysseus sailed for Troy, he must be twenty or twenty-one years old at the time of the poem's action, but he seems in many ways younger. To fight off the suitors and take control of the household himself, he would need great physical and emotional strength, a strong group of supporters, and the capacity to plan a difficult military and political operation—none of which he possesses. Telemachus must complete several difficult quests in the course of the poem: to survive the mortal danger posed by the suitors; to mature and grow up to manhood; to find his lost father, and help him regain control of the house. The journey with which the story begins is not that of Odysseus himself but of Telemachus, who sets out to find news of his absent father. The son's journey away from home parallels the father's quest in the opposite direction. The poem intertwines the story of these three central characters—the father, the mother, the son—and shows us how something different is at stake for each of them, in the gradual and difficult struggle to rebuild their lost nuclear family.

The Odyssey puts us into a world that is a peculiar mixture of the strange and the familiar. The tension between strangeness and familiarity is in fact the poem's central subject. Its setting, in the islands of the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, would have been vaguely familiar to any Greek-speaking reader; but this version of the region includes sea-monsters and giants who eat humans, as well as gods who walk the earth and talk with select favorites among the mortals. We encounter a surprisingly varied range of different characters and types of incident: giants and beggars, arrogant young men and vulnerable old slaves, a princess who does laundry and a dead warrior who misses the sunshine, gods, goddesses, and ghosts, brave deeds, love affairs, spells, dreams, songs, and stories. Odysseus himself seems to contain multitudes: he is a migrant, a pirate, a carpenter, a king, an athlete, a beggar, a husband, a lover, a father, a son, a fighter, a liar, a leader, and a thief. He is a man who cries, takes naps, and feels homesick, but he

is also a man who has a special relationship with the goddess who transforms his appearance at will and ensures that his schemes succeed. The poem promotes but also questions its own fantasies and ideals, such as the idea that time and change can be undone, and the notion that there is such a thing as home, where people and relationships can stay forever the same.

Who Was Homer?

The authorship of the Homeric poems is a complex and difficult topic, because these written texts emerge from a long oral tradition. Marks of this distinctive legacy are visible in *The Odyssey* on the level of style. Dawn appears some twenty times in *The Odyssey*, and the poem repeats the same line, word for word, each time: *emos d'erigeneia phane rhododaktulos eos*: "But when early-born rosy-fingered Dawn appeared . . ." There is a vast array of such formulaic expressions in Homeric verse, which suggest that things have an eternal, infinitely repeatable presence. Different things will happen every day, but Dawn always appears, always with rosy fingers, always early. Characters and objects all have their own descriptive terms in Homer; these are known as epithets, rather than adjectives, because they express an essential quality or characteristic, rather than a trait that the object or person possesses only in a particular moment. Ships are "black," "hollow," "swift," or "curved," never "brown," "slow," or "wobbly." Chairs are "well-carved" or "polished," never "uncomfortable" or "expensive." Penelope is "prudent Penelope," never "swift-footed Penelope" even if she is moving quickly. Telemachus is "thoughtful," even when he seems particularly immature. Moreover, many types of scene follow a certain predictable pattern. There is a fixed sequence of events described, with variations, whenever someone gets dressed or puts on armor,

whenever a meal is prepared, or whenever a person is killed. Through its formulaic mode, *The Odyssey* assures us that, once we know the patterns, the world will follow a predictable rhythm. This feature of the Homeric poems is a mark of their debt to a Greek oral tradition of poetic song that extends back hundreds of years before the poems in their current forms came into existence.

In *The Odyssey* itself we meet two singers who play the lyre while they give their performances of traditional tales at the banquets of the rich. The first is Demodocus at the court of King Alcinous of Phaeacia, who tells stories about Odysseus himself and the Trojan Horse, as well as about the affair between the god Ares and the goddess Aphrodite. The second is Phemius, who performs under compulsion for the suitors of Penelope. These characters give us some important insights into the composition of the poem, and the person (or people) who composed it. In an obviously self-interested spirit, *The Odyssey* suggests that poets have a particularly honorable place in society. But the singer is also presented as a servant, perhaps a slave, who earns food and a place to rest by giving performances that are enjoyed by wealthy banqueters. Demodocus does not read out his poetry from a script; his inability to do so is underlined by the fact that he is blind (not incidentally, no one in the entire *Odyssey* reads or writes anything). Moreover, Demodocus does not invent an original story of his own composition. Instead, Demodocus is inspired by the Muse to sing the "deeds of heroes"—which are, at least in outline, already well-known to his audience. The skill and inspiration of these illiterate singers is shown not in the invention of entirely new stories, but in their ability to retell ancient stories, and to transport their audience to the scenes they describe.

But Homer himself—if there was such a person—was not exactly a Demodocus. A blind, illiterate bard could not, by himself, have written the monumental *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Homer is usually described in Greek sources not as a singer (*aoidos*) or rhapsode

("song-stitcher"), but as a poet, *poetes*—a word that means "maker." Indeed, a normal way to refer to Homer in Greek is as "the Poet"—the name Homer can be omitted, since there is only one primary poet in the canon.

The Odyssey as we know it is based, like almost all the Graeco-Roman literature we have, on medieval manuscripts. But there is an important difference with this text. The medieval manuscripts of an author like Virgil or Horace are based on earlier manuscripts, based in turn on earlier manuscripts, and so on, each scribe copying the work of a predecessor, and moving back from the medieval codex (a leaved book written on animal skin parchment) to the Byzantine and then ancient papyrus (a scroll written on a kind of thick paper made from papyrus leaves).

The Odyssey and *The Iliad* are different, not only because they are older than other ancient texts, but because of the specific difficulties of understanding how these poems were created—not, or not simply, from the mind of an individual creator, but also from a long oral tradition, which has been transformed into two monumental written texts. How exactly did this process happen? Did a single, particularly talented folk-poet learn to write? Or did an illiterate singer collaborate with scribes? Was there one creator, or many? At what time in the process of composition did writing enter the picture?

This takes us to what is known as the Homeric Question, which is really a whole cluster of questions about the composition of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The Question is given a capital Q, because scholars still disagree on some crucial issues even after a couple of centuries of discussion. How exactly did the Homeric poems as we have them emerge from the oral tradition that preceded them? Who was Homer? Was there a single author of *The Odyssey*, or several? Did the same person produce *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*? When exactly did the poems get written down, and how? Can we trace earlier and later parts of the poems, or tie particular

passages to different geographical locations? And to what extent do the poems reflect real historical events, cultures, and peoples—a real Trojan War, or the real Mycenean civilization of late Bronze Age Greece (which existed from the sixteenth to the twelfth centuries BCE)? Most generally, how exactly did multiple people over hundreds of years across the Greek-speaking world work together to create this magnificent, challenging, and coherent work of poetic storytelling? Design "by committee" has a very bad name, and yet *The Odyssey* seems like an unexpected success. How was it done?

During the Renaissance, when the Homeric poems were rediscovered in Europe, Homer was assumed to have been a writer, in the same way that Virgil or Dante were writers—albeit a writer from an ancient time. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dissenting voices began to emerge. In 1664, the Abbé d'Aubignac attacked Homer, arguing that *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* were incoherent, immoral, and tasteless poems, cobbled together out of an oral folk tradition. A generation later, the British scholar Richard Bentley studied Homer's language, and proved that it was much earlier than classical (fifth- and fourth-century) Greek, because it still showed traces of a letter of the alphabet that dropped out of the language: the digamma. Bentley argued that "Homer" was a prehistoric oral poet of about 1,000 BCE, whose disparate and rambling songs were not gathered into the epics we have until the late sixth century. Scholars began to apply new methods of historical and linguistic analysis, and to ask new questions about how and when these texts were produced. In his *Prolegomena to Homer* of 1795, a pioneering work in this "new philology," Friedrich August Wolf argued that the Homeric poems were transmitted orally, and that they had undergone a long period of change and adaptation, through multiple oral reperformances and multiple reformulations by literate editors to suit changing contemporary tastes. He suggested that the poems,

which he saw as the product of "the whole Greek people," were forged into their state of apparent unity only at the stage of transcription. Wolf's new vision initiated a fresh discussion of how the original Homer, or the original building blocks of the poem, might be uncovered out of the text as we have it.

During the nineteenth century, Homeric scholarship was divided between the Analytic and Unitarian schools. The Unitarians opposed Wolf's ideas, largely on literary grounds, and argued that the poems as we have them are not an aggregate of earlier, shorter compositions, but were composed by a lone author with a single overarching structure in mind. The Analysts, by contrast, argued that the epics were produced by many different hands. There were multiple theories about how exactly the compilation took place, and what the original kernel might have been. Some argued that there was an original core narrative, an *ur-Odyssey,* which had been encrusted with many later and clumsier accretions; their scholarly task was to strip away the layers of later sub-Homeric narrative and restore the original purity of the poems. Others believed that the poems as we have them are a compilation of originally separate folk stories welded together. The Analysts shared the view that the earlier, more original layers of the poems were superior to the later additions and edits, although they disagreed about where exactly the original Homer could be located in the poems as we have them. Even in more recent times, Homerists have been slow to shake off the notion that earlier means better, as well as to rid themselves of the hope that one might chisel a more perfect poem out of the rough marble of the text we have.

Up until the start of the twentieth century, scholars took the oral roots of Homeric poetry more or less for granted, not fully understanding the degree to which they can help us explain important features of Homeric style and narrative technique. The emergence of Homeric poetry from folk traditions explained its

"primitive" style, but the generic and stylistic structures of oral poetry and folk traditions were not examined in a systematic way. The state of Homeric scholarship changed radically and permanently in the early 1930s, when a young American classicist named Milman Parry traveled to the then-Yugoslavia with recording equipment and began to study the living oral tradition of illiterate and semiliterate Serbo-Croat bards, who told poetic folk tales about the mythical and semihistorical events of the Serbian past. Parry died at the age of thirty-three from an accidental gunshot, and research was further interrupted by the Second World War. But Parry's student Albert Lord continued his work on Homer, and published his findings in 1960, under the title *The Singer of Tales*. Lord and Parry proved definitively that the Homeric poems show the mark of oral composition.

The "Parry-Lord hypothesis" was that oral poetry, from every culture where it exists, has certain distinctive features, and that we can see these features in the Homeric poems—specifically, in the use of formulae, which enable the oral poet to compose at the speed of speech. A writer can pause for as long as she or he wants, to ponder the most fitting adjective for a particular scene; she can also go back and change it afterwards, on further reflection—as in the famous anecdote about Oscar Wilde, who labored all morning to add a comma, and worked all afternoon taking it out. Oral performers do not use commas, and do not have the luxury of time to ponder their choice of words. They need to be able to maintain fluency, and formulaic features make this possible.

Subsequent studies, building on the work of Parry and Lord, have shown that there are marked differences in the ways that oral and literate cultures think about memory, originality, and repetition. In highly literate cultures, there is a tendency to dismiss repetitive or formulaic discourse as cliché; we think of it as boring or lazy writing. In primarily oral cultures, repetition tends to be much more highly valued. Repeated phrases, stories, or

tropes can be preserved to some extent over many generations without the use of writing, allowing people in an oral culture to remember their own past. In Greek mythology, Memory (*Mnemosyne*) is said to be the mother of the Muses, because poetry, music, and storytelling are all imagined as modes by which people remember the times before they were born.

It is now generally agreed that, in broad terms, Parry and Lord were right. Many features of the Homeric poems are indeed formulaic (such as those standard "epithets" and those formulaic "type-scenes" of arming or eating), and must have originated from an oral tradition. But there is still a very wide range of opinion about how, exactly, the words of many generations of illiterate and semiliterate bards turned into the written texts of Homer that we have. Several essential factors need to be accounted for by any viable theory. Most obviously, the Homeric poems are written texts, not oral performances. Writing must have played a central part in the process of composition, so it is very misleading to describe *The Odyssey* simply as an "oral" poem, as is far too often done. It is a written text based on an oral tradition, which is not at all the same as being an actual oral composition. Moreover, these texts are far too long for any singer to perform them on a single occasion, and far too long for any individual to hold in memory without the use of writing. Songs that had an influence on the Homeric poems were sung for hundreds of years in preliterate Greece; but none of them was *The Odyssey.*

These are written texts that display the legacy of a long oral tradition. In important ways the poems are a patchwork. The language is a mishmash of several different dialects, which marks the fact that the Greek singers and storytellers lived and developed their legends in multiple different locations across the Greek-speaking world. Moreover, there are small inconsistencies in the narrative itself, which usually pass unnoticed by the casual reader (such as a slight confusion about how many cloaks Eumaeus

possesses, and an apparent switch in who sets up the axes for the contest in which the suitors and Odysseus compete for Penelope's hand). The inconsistencies could mark the text's emergence from multiple different earlier versions of the story of Odysseus, or they might suggest multiple stages of composition and revision, by one poet or by many. Yet despite their mixed language, and despite the few inconsistencies, both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* display striking structural coherence. There is a grand architecture to the storytelling, which might seem to imply the careful planning of a single architect, or architects.

It is possible, as Albert Lord argued, that an oral poet worked closely with a literate scribe or scribes over the course of many days, weeks, or months. On this model, the composition of *The Odyssey* may have been not so different from that of *Paradise Lost*, composed by a blind poet who dictated his work over a long period to a number of amanuenses. Lord and Parry thought that the composer of the poem could not have been literate, because in the Yugoslavian context, singers who acquired literacy tended to lose their ability to compose oral poetry. But it has now been shown that oral traditions, or "orature," can interact with literacy in a number of different ways, and they are not necessarily driven out as soon as literacy arrives; in Somalia, for example, oral poets have been able to continue their oral compositions even after acquiring literacy. Oral literature is more diverse than Parry, with a single point of cultural comparison, could discern.

Some scholars argue that *The Odyssey* was composed by a single person who was well acquainted with the oral tradition but had become literate. This is certainly possible, but there is really no evidence one way or the other. Alternatively, perhaps the poem was composed when one particularly talented illiterate or semiliterate poet (or several) teamed up with a scribe or a group of scribes. Perhaps the scribe or scribes were entirely passive in the process of writing down what the poet composed; or perhaps there

was an ongoing collaboration between two or more members of a group. Again, it is difficult to adjudicate between these various possibilities, in the absence of any solid evidence, or a time machine.

The same person could, in theory, have composed *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, though many scholars believe that different individuals wrote the two poems, because they are notably different in terms of language as well as narrative content. It certainly seems likely that the person or people who composed *The Odyssey* were aware of *The Iliad*, since *The Odyssey* supplements but does not repeat any incidents from *The Iliad*—which is unlikely to have happened by chance.

Scholars who claim that *The Odyssey* was composed by a single person acknowledge that this poet drew on a long and complex set of earlier poetic and folkloric traditions, and that the initial composition underwent considerable alteration in subsequent years, decades, and centuries. Homer—whoever he, she, or they may have been—composed this definitive version of the homecoming of Odysseus with a deep awareness of multiple different versions of the story, as well as a deep knowledge of multiple other parallel folk traditions and myths. For instance, there were probably versions of the story in which Penelope was aware of Odysseus' plans to slaughter the suitors at a much earlier stage, and thus proposed the Contest of the Bow in full knowledge that it would help further her husband's plot. *The Odyssey* is also influenced by other related archaic legends, originating both around the Mediterranean and the Near East; for instance, the ancient myth of Jason and the Argonauts seems to hover behind the story of Odysseus and his wanderings.

Maybe an individual genius, a "Homer," had a particularly important role in the creation of *The Odyssey.* But we should question the notion that a unified structure and coherent creative product must necessarily be seen as the result of an individual's

work. Scholars have tended to assume so, because many long-form narrative genres that we are familiar with, like novels, are produced that way. However, we are also familiar with long narratives that do not have single authors. Many movies, for example, are the product of a team. Most contemporary long-form television drama series are put together by multiple people, even if there is a single creator who came up with the show's initial premise. It may be helpful to think in these terms when considering the authorship of *The Odyssey*. Perhaps we are more prepared than readers of the past to approach *The Odyssey* as a poem that exists as a mostly unified whole, but which was created by multiple different people, over a long period of time.

When Was *The Odyssey* Composed?

The date of the poem, no less than its authorship, is a matter of serious disagreement. In the middle of the eighth century BCE, the inhabitants of Greece began to adopt a modified version of the Phoenician alphabet to write down their language. The Homeric poems may have been one of the earliest products of this new literacy. If so, they would have been composed some time in the late eighth century. But some scholars have suggested a significantly later date, in the early, middle, or late seventh century BCE; others, less plausibly, have suggested even later dates of composition. The near consensus is that, at some point between the late eighth and late seventh century, a hundred-year-long window, *The Odyssey* was composed.

It is frustratingly difficult to be any more precise. Arguments about dating the Homeric poems usually involve an appeal to material evidence. Objects can often be dated with some precision, especially since the advent of carbon dating and other technological advances in archaeology. People use different

artifacts as time goes by, or behave differently in ways that leave a material record: for instance, we know that people in the Mediterranean world switched from using bronze weapons to using, primarily, iron, once new metallurgical techniques developed. Ceramics survive well over thousands of years and are useful for tracking cultural change, since pottery fashions often change fairly rapidly. But it is extremely difficult to use any such evidence to date *The Odyssey*. For example, inscribed on a clay drinking cup that was found on the Italian island of Ischia there is the fragment "Nestor's cup, good to drink from." Some scholars, citing an extensive description of King Nestor's magnificent golden cup in *The Iliad*, have claimed that this inscription must be an allusion to the poem. It is nice to imagine that the words are a kind of joke: this simple, ordinary piece of crockery is identifying itself as a magnificent, heroic item. The cup can be dated to 750–700 BCE, so if this really is an allusion, *The Iliad* cannot be later than that date. But it is also quite possible that there were other poems and traditions about Nestor; the cup does not actually quote *The Iliad*, so it is not conclusive evidence that its maker knew the Homeric poem as such, rather than a set of associated Trojan legends—which we know also circulated in non-Homeric versions throughout the archaic period.

The Homeric poems reflect a mixture of artifacts and practices that existed at different historical times (such as divergent funeral practices, by burial or cremation, and different dowry practices). Indeed, the poems seem to have no interest in conveying an accurate, realistic account of the culture in which they were produced. Rather, they combine elements of a fictionalized, heroicized past with details of the more recent or contemporary world. Consider, as one example, the diets of characters in Homer. *The Odyssey*'s noble classes subsist on bread and, especially, wine and meat—usually large, impressive domesticated animals like pigs, sheep, and cattle (not chickens or geese, although Penelope

dreams of geese and geese are kept in the palace). Nobody ever drinks water, and the men eat fish only when the alternative is starvation—as when Odysseus and his men are stranded on the island of Thrinacia. In real life, as the archaeological record shows and as common sense would predict, the people who lived around the Mediterranean ate fish, vegetables, cheese, and fruit. It has been suggested that the diet of these heroes might reflect a vague memory of even more ancient Indo-European civilizations; the nomadic people of the steppes by the Black Sea ate far more meat than the Greeks ever did. But it seems most likely that Homeric elites do not eat meat as a reflection of reality, but because it is a way for the poem to demonstrate their distinguished and extraordinary status. Meat makes them strong, and it shows how strong and important they already are—the stuff of legends.

Questions of dating are further complicated by the fact that the Homeric poems, or sections of them, were performed regularly by rhapsodes for several hundred years. These "song-stitchers"—professional poetry performers—competed in public competitions, and imagined themselves as stitching together a quilt of poetic narrative out of an already existing cloth, one often presented as the poetry of "Homer." It seems likely that rhapsodes made use of written texts to learn their lines of Homer, although they may also have ad-libbed and riffed off the script. Rhapsodes presumably introduced variations on the texts in performance, until the first Homeric scholars, men associated with the library of ancient Alexandria in the second century BCE, tried to "correct" the texts. By this time there must have been many slight textual variants in the Homeric poems, and the Alexandrians tried to come up with the "best" reading at each moment when their manuscripts did not agree. We have evidence of the type of variant that existed in the texts of Homer in circulation in the classical period, because quotations of Homer by authors such as Plato are sometimes a little different from the text as we have it.

But *The Odyssey* as read by Sophocles or Plato in fifth- or fourth-century Athens was presumably not significantly different from our own. Minor variations aside, the Homeric poems existed by the late seventh century BCE, and they quickly claimed a canonical place all over the Greek world. By the sixth century, they had acquired a central place in the cultural institutions of ancient Athens. In 566 BCE, Pisistratus, the tyrant of the city (which was not yet a democracy), instituted a civic and religious festival, the Panathenaia, which included a poetic competition, featuring performances of the Homeric poems. The institution is particularly significant because we are told that the Homeric poems had to be performed "correctly," which implies the canonization of a particular written text of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* at this date. From that time onward, if not before, *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* acquired a central place in the cultural and educational life of ancient Greece and Rome. There was no holy scripture in the classical world, but everyone knew the stories of Achilles and Odysseus as told in the Homeric poems.

Homer's World

The geographical setting of *The Odyssey* is almost as hard to pin down as its temporal location. Some of the places visited by Odysseus are obviously fictional or mythical—the Land of the Dead, the island of the Sirens, the home of the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis, or the city of the giant, cannibalistic Laestrygonians. But even the places that seem less clearly unrealistic are often difficult to plot onto an accurate map. Ethiopia is the most distant place imaginable, located "between the sunset and the dawn." Libya is a mythically wealthy place where sheep produce lambs three times a year. Egypt is a little less hazy, but still not described with any precision: it is the fertile land

of the Nile, where traders or visitors (like Menelaus) can acquire fabulous amounts of wealth. Even the island of Ithaca itself is described in a muddled way. This may be a sign that the traditions that informed the poem developed primarily in the eastern part of the Greek world, so that the composer(s) had only a vague notion of the actual geography of the western islands like Ithaca. It is also a sign that the poem has little interest in the realistic depiction of geography.

Nevertheless, readers since antiquity have tried to locate the wanderings of Odysseus in the real Mediterranean and Aegean world. By the third century BCE, certain traditional identifications of Homeric geography with real geography had developed. Scylla and Charybdis were identified with the Straits of Messina (where there are often rough currents, though never six-headed sea-monsters). Sicily was identified as the Island of the Cyclops—a rich, fertile land inhabited by non-Greek people, whose customs and agricultural practices are different from those of Greece.

These identifications reflect an awareness that there is some correspondence between the world of Homer and the real world, although the relationship is partial and inexact; see Map 1, which depicts the fictional wanderings of the hero, in contrast to Maps 2, 3, and 4, which depict the geographical realities on which the fantasy is loosely based. *The Odyssey* explores the relationship of its central character, a man from the western Greek world, with people, gods, and monsters from many different regions, each of which has its own separate identity, and which correspond in wildly different degrees to real life.

"Greece," as a unified entity, is an invention of the classical age; in the sixth and especially the fifth centuries BCE, Greek-speaking people began to define themselves as Hellenes, in contrast to the "barbarian" (meaning "non-Greek-speaking") peoples of other civilizations, such as the Persians and the Egyptians. But in Homer, as Thucydides points out, there is no

single term for all Greek people. Those who sail to attack Troy from places that would later be defined as "Greek" are categorized by names for smaller ethnic tribes, or as the followers of individual leaders: the Danaeans, the Achaeans, the Myrmidons, and so on.

The Odyssey reflects an awareness of the many diverse peoples who inhabited the territories around mainland Greece. During the Bronze Age, in the fourth to second millennia BCE, the Minoans, who may have been proto-Greek speakers, inhabited Crete, while other proto-Greek speakers lived on the Cycladic islands of the Aegean, and others again on the mainland. These people left tantalizing glimpses of their cultures, through material remains, including wall paintings and pottery and ruined palaces and homes. In the sixteenth to twelfth centuries BCE, the so-called Mycenean Greeks established a powerful civilization on the Greek mainland, with grand palaces in locations such as Mycenae itself, but also in many other cities, including Pylos (home, in *The Odyssey*, of old King Nestor). The Myceneans had a system of writing known as Linear B, a syllabic script that was used by scribes to make administrative records on clay tablets. But when Mycenean civilization fell—perhaps due to invasion by non-Greek people or, more likely, because of civil warfare and possibly climate change—the great palaces were destroyed and, with them, the Linear B writing system was lost.

In the Greek "dark ages," from the twelfth to the eighth centuries BCE, Greece was illiterate, and it was in this period that the oral poetic tradition that led into *The Odyssey* developed. The stories and myths that circulated in this period reflected memories and fantasies about the lost cultures of the Minoans and the Myceneans—although they were also drawn from neighboring cultures, such as the civilizations of the ancient Near East (including Egypt, Iran, the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor). The oral tradition provided Greek-speaking people with a way to remember and memorialize the cultures that had been lost,

including the wealthy and hierarchical civilization of the Myceneans.

The legends of the Trojan War—tales of a great conflict, the fall of a mighty people, and the attempts of scattered survivors to regain or build new homes—are informed by folk memory of this fallen culture. *The Iliad* tells the story of a conflict between two elite warrior kings, Agamemnon of Mycenae and Achilles of Thessaly—perhaps echoing a real collapse of Mycenean civilization through civil war. In *The Odyssey*, the rich palaces of Nestor on Pylos and Menelaus in Sparta may reflect folk memories of Mycenean grandeur. Crete is another important point of reference in *The Odyssey.* When Odysseus in Ithaca tells false tales about himself, he often says that he comes from Crete—which may echo archaic Minoan or Mycenean myths, and reflect a cultural memory of the days when Crete was at the center of Greek-speaking civilization.

It is hard to say how much the Homeric poems depict the realities of actual historical events, such as "the" Trojan War. In the late nineteenth century, an amateur archaeologist named Heinrich Schliemann excavated a site in Turkey, Hissarlik, that he theorized was the original Troy. He made some extraordinary discoveries, including a cache of gold that he labeled "Priam's treasure"; later, on a different excavation in Mycenae, he claimed to have uncovered the real tomb of Agamemnon. Modern archaeologists tend to be more skeptical, and to lament the way in which Schliemann—like other archaeologists of his time—rashly shoveled his way into the earth, destroying a vast amount of evidence in the process. Hissarlik is still identified as the site of Troy, but it is now generally believed that there were at least nine towns built in the area over the course of some three millennia, from early Bronze Age settlements to a Roman imperial city. Some of these cities were destroyed by natural means, such as earthquakes, and others were destroyed by fire and war; but we

cannot identify any one of these multiple destructions with the single sacking of Troy described in Homer.

It was from the Phoenicians that, in the middle of the eighth century, Greece adapted their alphabetic system of writing. The Phoenicians, a trading, seafaring people who originated from the western part of the Fertile Crescent (in the area which now includes Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Israel, and Jordan), are portrayed in the poem as rich traders who are liable to trick, rob, and enslave the unwary. Odysseus tells his swineherd, Eumaeus, an elaborate false story that he came from Crete, stayed in Egypt for seven years getting rich, and then was tricked by a "cunning man" from Phoenicia into sailing with him; the Phoenician hoped to trade him as a slave, for a profit. Eumaeus replies with his own, presumably more truthful story, which again involves being tricked and trafficked into slavery—which explains how he has ended up in Odysseus' own household.

These sinister, deceitful, profit-mongering Phoenicians are ostensibly contrasted with Odysseus himself. Similarly, the seafaring people of Taphos are described as "pirates," who live by looting, robbing, and enslaving their neighbors—in contrast to the maritime wanderings of Odysseus, whose only goal is to reach his home. But the line is uncomfortably difficult to draw. Odysseus is depicted as a master of deceit, a compulsive liar; he is also, like a Phoenician or Taphian trader or pirate, hoping to return home with as large a pile of loot as he can. He enriches himself from the sacked city of Troy, and from various other places along the way, where the inhabitants either willingly equip him with presents (as in the case of Calypso, Circe, Aeolus, and the Phaeacians) or are robbed by Odysseus and his men. When telling the story of his various adventures to the Phaeacians, Odysseus begins with an episode in which he and his men stop by the city of the Cicones. He explains,

I sacked
the town and killed the men. We took their wives
and shared their riches equally among us. (9.41–43)

No justification is given for this act of plunder; it is presented simply as the kind of thing that Odysseus does, or perhaps the kind of thing that any Greek man would do, given the chance. A little later, Polyphemus the Cyclops asks Odysseus suspiciously if he is a "pirate," like people who "risk their lives at sea to bring disaster / to other people." Odysseus' answer is notably equivocal. He declares that he and his men are part of the great expedition to Troy, and claims

We are proud to be the men of Agamemnon,
the son of Atreus, whose fame is greatest
under the sky, for sacking that vast city
and killing many people. (9.263–66)

Being a "hero," *heros*—which in archaic Greek suggests a warrior, and does not imply virtue—is different from being a "pirate" in that it is a much more positive term, which a man can proudly apply to himself; nobody in Homer admits to being a pirate. Like pirates, warriors sack towns and kill the inhabitants; the main difference is scale. Odysseus goes on to infiltrate the enemy's dwelling, maim him, and poach his beloved sheep, the wealth of his household—an act that is clearly analogous to the hero's previous triumph over the Trojans.

The late eighth century was a period of increasing trade across the Mediterranean world—including trade of objects, stories, skills (like writing), ideas, and people. It was also a period in which Greek speakers had begun to create colonies. Colonization was a way to improve trading opportunities and increase the wealth of the originating city or settlement, as well as to house a growing population. Greek colonies developed in Libya, in southern France,

along the Black Sea, and on the southern coast of Italy and Sicily—later known as Magna Graecia, "Big Greece." *The Odyssey* shows an acute awareness of the processes of colonization, and Odysseus himself seems sometimes to think as much like a colonizer as a pirate. When scoping out the uninhabited island adjacent to that of the Cyclopes, he gives a description that sounds like an advertisement for prospective colonial inhabitants, as well as a critique, from the colonizer's point of view, of the natives who have failed to exploit their country's natural resources:

> *Cyclopic people have no red-cheeked ships*
> *and no shipwright among them who could build*
> *boats, to enable them to row across*
> *to other cities, as most people do,*
> *crossing the sea to visit one another.*
> *With boats they could have turned this island into*
> *a fertile colony, with proper harvests.*
> *By the gray shore there lie well-watered meadows,*
> *where vines would never fail. There is flat land*
> *for plowing, and abundant crops would grow*
> *in the autumn; there is richness underground.* (9.125–35)

It is not surprising that the island was identified in antiquity with Sicily, given both the lush natural resources of this location in the poem, and the ways that the Polyphemus episode seems to meditate uneasily on the processes of colonization. In real life, we know frustratingly little about the process by which the Greeks established their control. The Greek invaders quickly imported their own agricultural products—olives for oil, and grapes for wine—and later used slaves, perhaps including native Sicilians, to construct monumental architecture, vast temples to the Greek gods to represent Hellenic dominance in the region. The various tribes who inhabited Sicily before the Greeks took over do not

seem to have managed to fight back against the invaders, and there is no way to reconstruct what they felt about it all.

We can see in *The Odyssey* a complex response by the Greeks to their own growing dominance as traders, travelers, colonizers, pirates, leaders, and warriors. The Polyphemus episode, for example, can be read as an attempt to justify Greek exploitation of non-Greek peoples. Odysseus enters the Cyclops' cave without the host's permission, and then tricks, blinds, robs, and abuses the native inhabitant. As narrator, he makes his actions seem acceptable or even admirable, by emphasizing morally irrelevant considerations—such as the fact that the Cyclops lives by herding animals rather than growing crops (as presumably was also true of the native Sicilians), and by presenting his victim as loud, ugly, and oversized. Of course, Polyphemus also has the nasty habit of eating his human visitors. By this means, the text invites us to imagine that all non-Greek and pastoralist societies should be seen as barbaric and cannibalistic.

The narrative is told only through the mouth of Odysseus himself, and we may well see him as an unreliable narrator. Odysseus implies that the Cyclopic people (also known as the "Cyclopes," plural of Cyclops) are "lawless," or lacking in customs; but Polyphemus does his chores in an entirely regular and predictable fashion. Odysseus implies that these people are loners who care nothing for one another; but Polyphemus' neighbors arrive promptly when they hear him calling for help, and the Cyclops treats his animals with attentive care and affection—his blind petting of his favorite "sweet ram" is particularly touching. Odysseus first tells us that the Cyclopes "put their trust in gods," who provide them with crops (implying that these people can be blamed for their lazy lack of Greek-style agricultural practices), but then suggests that a failure to welcome strangers should be construed as an insult to "the gods," or at least to Zeus, the god of strangers—suggesting that the gods are all on the Greek side. In

fact, Polyphemus, the son of Poseidon, has some powerful divine backing of his own.

The Odyssey looks back to a lost heroic age, the time before the Greek dark ages, when elite Mycenean families, living in great palaces, dominated the surrounded regions, clashed with one another, and maintained power through wealth, military prowess, and a traditional way of life. But the poem also meditates on the social and geographical changes undergone by Greek society in the late eighth century, as the new literacy enabled new forms of communication with outsiders, and as colonizers, traders, and pirates pushed outward across the Mediterranean, encountering alien cultures and alien peoples.

Friends, Strangers, Guests

Before approaching the island of the Cyclopes, Odysseus tells his men that he has to find out some important information: whether the inhabitants are "lawless aggressors," or people who welcome strangers. Odysseus presents these categories as if they are mutually exclusive: the willingness to welcome strangers is figured as enough, in itself, to guarantee that a person or culture can be counted as law-abiding and "civilized." The Cyclopes would have good reason to be suspicious of these visitors, who have looted and slaughtered the inhabitants of the previous island that they visited. But the dichotomy hints at the importance in *The Odyssey* of *xenia*, a word that means both "hospitality" and "friendship." The cognate word *xenos* can mean both "stranger" and "friend"; it is the root from which we get the English word "xenophobia," the fear of strangers or foreigners, as well as the sadly less common "xenophilia," the love of strangers or of unknown objects.

Hospitality is important in all human cultures, ancient and modern; in this respect, there is nothing special about archaic

Greece. What is distinctive about the customs surrounding hospitality in this culture is that elite men who have entered one another's homes and have been entertained appropriately are understood to have created a bond of "guest-friendship" (*xenia*) between their households that will continue into future generations. Guest-friendship is different from *philia*, the friendship, affection, love, and loyalty that connects a person to his or her family members and neighborhood friends. It is created not by proximity and kinship, but by a set of behaviors that create bonds between people who are geographically distant from each other. *Xenia* is thus a networking tool that allows for the expansion of Greek power, from the unit of the family to the city-state and then across the Mediterranean world. It is the means by which unrelated elite families can connect to one another as equals, without having to fight for dominance. It is no coincidence that the origin of the Trojan War, the abduction of Menelaus' wife by his guest, Paris, is presented in Greek literature as an abuse of *xenia,* since the laws of hospitality are what stave off a world where men kill those who are different from themselves. When *xenia* is absent or is abused, violence follows.

Xenia acquired an extra importance in the era when Greek men were expanding their world. Travelers, in an era before money, hotels, or public transportation, had to rely on the munificence of strangers to find food and lodging and aid with their onward journey. *The Odyssey* suggests that it was the responsibility of male householders to offer hospitality of this kind to any visitor, even uninvited guests, strangers, and homeless beggars. Those who traveled to an unfamiliar land used the norms and expectations of *xenia* to form bonds with people who might otherwise have treated them as too ragged and dirty to deserve a welcome, or as too dangerous to accept into their home. Conversely, the promotion of Greek *xenia* as a quasi-universal and quasi-ethical concept can be used as imaginative justification for robbing, killing, enslaving, or

colonizing those who are reluctant to welcome a group of possible bandits or pirates into their home. *The Odyssey* shows us both sides of this complex concept, which hovers in an uneasy space between ethics and etiquette.

The poem's episodes can be seen as a sequence of case studies in the concept of *xenia*. In the first four books—known as the Telemachy, the story of Telemachus—Odysseus' young son grapples with the suitors, who are presented as bad guests: they have taken over Odysseus' household without his permission and are abusing its resources and inhabitants. By contrast, Telemachus shows that he himself is capable of being a good, polite guest who is more or less able to overcome his crippling shyness with the magical help of Athena. He thanks his hosts appropriately, and does not overstay his welcome. He manages to be a good host also, when he welcomes a stranger in need, Theoclymenus, on board his ship. He even manages to circumvent a tricky dilemma of etiquette—how to avoid having to make a second visit with touchy, long-winded Nestor, without being rude to the old man—although only at the cost of putting his friend, Nestor's son, in a difficult position.

Telemachus' visits to the homes of Nestor and Menelaus provide contrasting examples of elite hospitality. The first is old-fashioned, pious, rich in horses and sons, presided over by moralizing old Nestor. The second is piled high with newly acquired treasure, brought by blustering, self-pitying Menelaus, and the dominant figure is beautiful, magical Helen, who has frightening drugs that can take away all pain and grief. But in both Pylos and Sparta, the visit follows a set pattern. The guest is welcomed, washed by slave women, given an honorable and comfortable place to sit, and offered food and wine. Only after he has eaten and had some wine is he asked to tell his story. The visitor is then given lodging for the night, and when it is time to leave, the host provides gifts and some practical help with the onward journey. As Menelaus pompously declares, "To force a

visitor to stay / is just as bad as pushing him to go." Providing help with the next leg of the trip—*pompe* in Greek, "sending," a common word and essential concept in the *Odyssey*—is thus an important component in hospitality. Nestor, for example, gives Telemachus a horse-drawn chariot to get to Sparta, and sends along his youngest son, Pisistratus, as a companion.

Odysseus is not so lucky in some of his hosts. We first see him suffering the burdens of a hospitality even more insistently lavish than that of Nestor. Calypso gives her human guest more than enough of everything a visitor could ask for, except the final crucial ingredient: *pompe*—the ability to get away. When, thanks to divine intervention, Calypso finally lets Odysseus build a raft and be on his way—an unorthodox "sending" in which the guest has to construct his own means of transportation—his next hosts are challenging in different ways. The shipwrecked, naked stranger finds himself rescued by a young princess of marriageable age, among a nation of sailors, and has to muster all his powers of flattery and politeness. Nausicaa, the Phaeacian princess, warns Odysseus that her people are not welcoming to strangers; yet the court of Arete and Alcinous seems in many ways ideally hospitable. Odysseus is bathed, wined and dined, entertained with poetic song, and given the chance to tell his own story at great length. He watches and then is put to the test in the Phaeacian contests, performing far better than expected—an episode that anticipates the later challenges and contests back home in Ithaca. The Phaeacians then give him the most lavish possible *pompe*—a magical boat that sails itself—at a high personal cost to themselves; Poseidon punishes them by crushing their boat with a mountain hurled into the sea, thus blocking their island from the outside world forever after and curtailing any future Phaeacian generosity.

The limits and antonyms of *xenia* are explored in Odysseus' account to the Phaeacian king of his wanderings to other

fantastical, monstrous places he has visited. Each of these hosts seems to offer a perversion or a frightening exaggeration of the ordinary modes of hospitality. Aeolus, the god of the winds, provides Odysseus with a means of transportation or "sending" that is more powerful than he or his men can handle: the bag of winds, once opened, blasts the ship back in entirely the wrong direction. A normal host may provide his guests with poetic and musical entertainment before he goes to sleep; the Sirens entice their visitors with a song so fascinating that they want to stay forever, and never go home again. Many of these hosts pervert the ordinary way that guests are given food and drink. The Lotus-Eaters share a plant that makes those who eat it forget all thoughts of going home. In order to meet the dead, Odysseus himself has to act like a peculiar kind of host, welcoming them into the world of the living—by allowing them to drink blood from a ditch. The witchlike goddess Circe provides her guests with a magical drink that turns them into pigs.

Several of those whom Odysseus visits—the giant Polyphemus, the gigantic Laestrygonians, the thirsty whirlpool Charybdis, and the six-headed Scylla—are defined as monstrous because they do not feed their guests: instead, they eat them (or, in the case of Charybdis, gulp them down like drink). The majority of Odysseus' men are devoured alive. Some are eaten by the Cyclops; many more are skewered in the water by the Laestrygonians and devoured, like fish. Later, Odysseus watches Scylla eating six of his men and hears them "still screaming, / still reaching out to me in their death throes."

After this climactic moment, the ship—the last left from Odysseus' fleet—sails directly on to Thrinacia, the island of the Sun God (Helius), and is becalmed there. Supplies dwindle and the men grow hungry. While Odysseus is absent, taking a nap in a cave, the men kill and eat the Cattle of the Sun, although they know that it is forbidden. This momentous choice is made for understandable

reasons: the men are hungry and desperate, and they choose to risk the anger of the gods rather than endure the pain and slow humiliation of death by starvation. The ringleader of the insurrection, Eurylochus, speaks bravely, urging the others not to worry about the Sun God's response:

> *"If he is so angry*
> *about these cows that he decides to wreck*
> *our ship, and if the other gods agree—*
> *I would prefer to drink the sea and die*
> *at once, than perish slowly, shriveled up*
> *here on this desert island."* (12.347–52)

The language is inspiring, as if from a rousing battle speech. We may well wonder what exactly is wrong with Eurylochus' suggestion. The episode hints at an important idea in the poem: that the willingness to die for honor, which is valued so highly on the battlefield, is not always useful in these strange new worlds. Military valor, in the world of *The Odyssey,* risks looking too much like impatience. The poem shows us the rewards that come to the "much-enduring" or "long-suffering" protagonist through his willingness to wait for the right moment to act, without ever giving up the goal. Moreover, the determination of this crew member to eat even forbidden foods, and to drink even "the sea," represents a kind of self-assertion that is out of keeping with his place both in society and in the narrative. He is usurping the leadership role of Odysseus.

This act of forbidden consumption is a terrible mistake, which condemns the men to death and deprives them of their chance of getting home. Helius, the Sun God, responds to the eating of his cattle as if the men had taken a bite out of the god himself, and Zeus backs him up by drowning them all. Eating is important in *The Odyssey,* and eating the wrong things or eating in the wrong

way results in violence or death.

Like the Cyclops or the Laestrygonians, the suitors who have taken over Odysseus' palace in Ithaca are defined as abnormal and monstrous eaters. We are repeatedly told that they are "devouring" and "wasting" the household wealth of Odysseus, by consuming his fattest animals and drinking his wine in their constant feasts, and failing to repay the absent owner or take care of the estate. It is, of course, a violation of hospitality to enter a person's home uninvited and remain there day after day, using up his food stores, wine, and wealth. The poem emphasizes that it is also unjust: the norms of behavior require a person to pay back what he or she owes, and a guest is supposed to give presents to a generous host, rather than simply enjoy the benefits of hospitality without giving anything in return.

Greed, ingratitude, and rudeness are annoying but, one might think, rather trivial faults. These boorish, selfish, immature young men are certainly unpleasant to be around, but not necessarily the epitome of evil, and it may be difficult to understand how anybody could think they really deserve death. The poem itself invites us to feel a degree of horror at Odysseus' violence, and sympathy for the murdered boys. On the other hand, the language in which *The Odyssey* presents the suitors' eating and drinking magnifies the enormity of their crime. The standard epithets applied to the suitors often emphasize their excessive desire to be "above" or "beyond" others (*hyper*: above and beyond): they are *hyper-phialos* or *hyper-thymos* ("self-indulgent," "heedless," "overbearing"). These words can be neutral or even positive (suggesting "noble" or "high-minded"—above the norms in a good way), but they acquire a sinister connotation here, since they are also applied to the man-eating Laestrygonians and Cyclops. We are repeatedly told that the suitors are devouring not only the literal "property" of Odysseus, but also, metonymically, his "house" and hence his "livelihood" or "life"—the words *bios* and *biotos* can mean both "way of making a

living" and "life" itself. It is as if in eating Odysseus' animals, the suitors are metaphorically eating the man himself, and his son. Telemachus complains that the suitors are "consuming my whole house, and soon they may / destroy me too." The rage Odysseus musters against his uninvited guests seems to stem from a desperate need to preserve not only his wealth but even his identity from the mouths of those who are eating him alive.

But people who feel oppressed can become more dangerous than the people they fear. Once he reaches Ithaca, Odysseus is in the position of a guest in his own home, disguised as an old beggar. He is given a modest but warm welcome by the slave pig-keeper, Eumaeus, while the suitors act as unfriendly, hostile hosts, mocking and throwing stools at their ragged guest. However, when Odysseus is restored to his own persona, taking charge again of his household, the roles of guest and host make a sudden switch. The poor old visitor is now the householder himself. Odysseus becomes one of the most terrifying hosts of all, defending his property against unwanted visitors as thoroughly and violently as the Laestrygonians or the Sun God himself.

Gods

Xenia is particularly important to the gods in general, and especially to Zeus, the father and king of all the gods. One of the standard titles of Zeus was Xenios ("God of Strangers"). He is the god who presides over visitors, foreigners, and beggars, and who is invoked to defend the rights of guests or of hosts, when people fail to adhere to the norms of *xenia*. Zeus is also the god associated most closely with justice—*dike* in Greek, a notion linked to the idea of balance, and hence to the idea of retribution. Some readers have assumed that the gods in this poem—or at least Zeus—are defenders not only of *xenia* (which is, as we have seen, only partly

an ethical concept), but also of morality in general. Some leap to the further notion that the triumph of Odysseus over the suitors represents an ethical victory, sanctioned by the gods. This certainly goes too far. Odysseus is presented as a morally complex character, as ancient readers recognized. The gods in *The Odyssey*, like those of *The Iliad,* are self-interested beings, whose interventions in human lives are motivated primarily by their own desires, whims, and preferences rather than by a consistent commitment to uphold moral law.

The main difference between gods and humans is that gods are far more powerful and, unlike mortals, immune from old age and death. Humans in the poem, especially Telemachus and Odysseus himself, invoke the gods as guardians of what is "right," but it is less clear that the gods see themselves in quite this way.

At the start of *The Odyssey*, Zeus is contemplating a problem in the human world. Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, had raised troops to help his brother Menelaus reclaim his wife, Helen, who had been taken to Troy by Paris, son of Priam, king of Troy. But in Agamemnon's absence, Aegisthus, who had an alternative claim to the throne of Mycenae, seduced Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, seized control of his kingdom, and murdered Agamemnon when he came back home from Troy. Later, Agamemnon's young son Orestes—who had been sent away for his own protection—returned to Mycenae and killed both Aegisthus and his own mother, Clytemnestra, in revenge for the killing of his father.

Zeus presents the story of Aegisthus as an object lesson in human folly. People are already destined to suffer a certain amount, and yet sometimes they increase their quota of suffering by making bad choices—as Aegisthus did in killing Agamemnon and partnering with Clytemnestra, despite the warnings of the gods. Athena replies by reminding her father that Odysseus is stuck on Calypso's island, thanks to "bad luck," the hostility of Poseidon, and the negligence of Zeus himself—although perhaps

also, we may speculate, thanks to his own decisions.

This first exchange between divine father and divine daughter has sometimes been read to imply that the gods of *The Odyssey* ensure that good people, like Odysseus, are rewarded for their virtue, while bad people, like the suitors, are punished. Aristotle, the philosopher of the fourth century BCE, may hint at this interpretation in a very brief allusion to the poem: he says that *The Odyssey* has a double structure, and ends in opposite ways for the "better" and "worse" characters (*Poetics* 1453a). But "better" is not the same as "good," and the word Aristotle uses can mean simply "more noble" or "higher class." In fact, neither Zeus' words nor the narrative of the poem suggests that morally good behavior guarantees a happy life. Zeus says nothing about virtue as such in this speech. Although one may speculate that the gods warned Aegisthus because they are on the side of ethical behavior (against adultery, murder, and usurpation), this is not what Zeus himself says. Rather, he insists that Aegisthus was imprudent and foolish in pursuing a course of action that he should have known would result in his doom. When Athena urges Zeus to help Odysseus, she does not claim that her favorite human is morally superior to all others—a case that would be hard to make about this lying, self-interested sacker of cities. Instead Athena reminds Zeus that Odysseus "is more sensible than other humans." His intelligence sets him apart from other adulterers and murderers. Gods usually favor people who are exceptionally talented in some way, and the poem makes it clear that it is Odysseus' special form of cleverness that has earned him the attention of Athena.

Moreover, Odysseus has made the prudent habit of regular sacrifice to the gods. The gods in this poem, like the human characters, prefer people who show them respect and provide plenty of lavish gifts. Gods in Homer, like humans, care about eating and drinking, and associate the proper forms of consumption with honor and identity. The consumption of meat

and wine demonstrates the heroes' close relationship to the gods, since these, unlike other foodstuffs, are always offered to the gods: a splash of wine from any drinking occasion is always poured for the gods (as a libation), and animals that are killed are always "sacrificed," never merely butchered. The gods are the most important guests who are always present at human feasts.

Gods have their own particular interests. As father and king of the gods, Zeus takes a special interest in masculine political power. Chieftains in Homer, whether or not they descend from Zeus in terms of lineage, are often given the epithet *diotrephes,* "sprung from Zeus"; in *The Odyssey,* this epithet is applied exclusively to Odysseus himself, whose role as king of Ithaca is apparently important to Zeus. Zeus is associated with the eagle, the king of the birds, and at more than one key moment in the poem (including the omen in Book 3, and the dream in Book 18), eagles represent Odysseus himself as the king whose power as king, and capacity to exact retribution on his enemies, seem to be favored by Zeus. In Book 1, Telemachus' attempt to speak out against the suitors is valorized by Zeus, who sends two eagles to swoop into the assembled crowd:

> *they wheeled and whirred and flapped their mighty wings,*
> *swooping at each man's head with eyes like death.* (2.152–53)

The birds anticipate the moment, twenty-two books later, when Telemachus and Odysseus together will slaughter the suitors. The day before the massacre, in a memorably creepy episode, the prophet Theoclymenus is able to foresee the suitors' deaths, when they lose control of their own faces, and their cooked meat begins to drip with blood; the prophet declares,

"Your faces, heads and bodies are wrapped up
in night; your screams are blazing out like fire.
The ornate palace ceilings and the walls
are spattered with your blood. The porch is full
of ghosts, as is the courtyard—ghosts descending
into the dark of Erebus. The sun
has vanished from the sky, and gloomy mist
is all around." (20.353–60)

Even before their deaths at the human hands of Odysseus and his helpers, the suitors are doomed by a divinely ordained fate.

But there is more than one god in this poem, and more than one point of view from which to look at Odysseus. The god most hostile to the hero is Zeus' brother Poseidon, the god of the sea, storms, and earthquakes. Indeed, the narrative of the poem can be seen as an extended balancing act between Athena's desire to restore Odysseus to a place of honor and stability in his household, and Poseidon's to curse him with eternal wandering. Poseidon is understandably angry that Odysseus tricks and blinds his son, Polyphemus the Cyclops, who in Book 9 calls on his father to curse the homeward journey of the man who maimed him. Poseidon is less prominent as a character in the poem than his rival, Athena; he gets far fewer speeches and far fewer appearances interacting with the human characters. But we can see his work behind every storm and shipwreck, and behind every disaster that befalls Odysseus' unlucky fellow travelers.

Homer presents us with a world where gods mingle with humans, and may touch their lives in ways that are not always visible to the mortals involved. Great charm and magic comes from the notion that the divine and human worlds are less separate than we might otherwise imagine. Telemachus, for example, is guided by Athena on his journey, and the presence of the goddess imparts a special comfort and joy even to the most mundane

moments of the trip.

> *Wind blew the middle sail; the purple wave*
> *was splashing loudly round the moving keel.*
> *The goddess surfed the waves and smoothed the way.*
> *The quick black ship held steady, so they fastened*
> *the tackle down, and filled their cups with wine.*
> *They poured libations to the deathless gods,*
> *especially to the bright-eyed child of Zeus.*
> *All through the night till dawn the ship sailed on.* (2.427–34)

Mortal characters, and their accessories, are very frequently referred to by the standard approbatory epithet, "godlike" (or variations thereof), and one of the most common epithets of all, *dios*—often translated as "noble" or "shining"—literally suggests "associated with Zeus" (the word has the same root as the Latin *deus*, "god"). The sixth-century BCE philosopher Thales said, "The world is full of gods." This is certainly true of the world of Odysseus. On his travels, he meets a number of minor deities, including the "nymph" Calypso. "Nymph" is the normal Greek word for a human young bride, but it is also applied to goddesses who are particularly closely associated with the natural landscape in particular places; there are nymphs of the sea (Nereids), nymphs of the woods (Dryads), and nymphs of caves (like Calypso herself, whose name suggests "hidden," and like the unnamed nymphs whom Odysseus greets as soon as he arrives back in Ithaca). Every place has its own special deity—some welcoming or helpful, like the White Goddess who rescues Odysseus from shipwreck, and some hostile, like Scylla and Charybdis—goddesses who emerge from the dangerous natural world.

A particularly important god in this poem about journeys and interactions between people from different cultures and different households is Hermes, the messenger god, the god of travelers.

Hermes is a son of Zeus who has the ability to fly at supernatural speed, bringing news or passengers from one realm to another, wearing the magical sandals "of everlasting gold with which he flies / on breath of air across the sea and land." Hermes can dive from sky to earth and down to the underworld, and can flash through water to travel across the sea:

> *He touched Pieria, then from the sky*
> *he plunged into the sea and swooped between*
> *the waves, just like a seagull catching fish,*
> *wetting its whirring wings in tireless brine* (5.50–53)

Hermes has a certain elusive quality, appearing and disappearing at will; he is, like Odysseus himself, a trickster. In the (post-Odyssean) "Homeric Hymn to Hermes," this clever, deceitful thief acquires an epithet often used of Odysseus himself—*polytropos*, "much-turning." Hermes plays a key role at three important junctures. He is the one who is sent down unwillingly from Olympus, to the distant island of Calypso, to persuade the goddess to release Odysseus; he saves Odysseus and his men from Circe; and in the final book, he is the one who leads the spirits of the suitors to the underworld.

The most important deity in the poem, however, is Athena, the goddess of technical expertise and strategic thinking. She is a military deity, often represented as dressed in battle armor, and she reminds Odysseus that she is the one who helped him sack the city of Troy, inspiring the construction of the Wooden Horse. Athena also presides over activities associated more with peacetime; Penelope's weaving, no less than Odysseus' fighting, is done under the aegis of Athena. Whereas Poseidon favors the untamed world of the stormy sea, Athena loves fixed settlements and the olive tree—a crop whose oil was used in archaic Greece for cooking and skin care. Poseidon makes the earth shake; Athena

makes even the most rugged, barren landscape available for cultivation.

Athena's most common epithet, *glaucopis,* suggests bright or shimmering eyes. The poem constantly reminds us that Athena is alert to whatever is happening to Odysseus and Telemachus; nothing escapes her intelligent, careful notice. We can detect her presence in the narrative, her sharp eyes, even at moments when she is not visible to the human characters. For instance, when Odysseus and his men put out the eye of the Cyclops, they do so with a staff made of olive wood. When Odysseus meets Athena in person on Ithaca, she tells him that she has always been watching over him and helping him, even during the terrible storms at sea when Odysseus thought that she was giving him no protection: "I am Athena, child of Zeus. I always / stand near you and take care of you, in all / your hardships," she declares.

Athena's ultimate motives are mixed and not always benevolent, as befits a divine being in the Greek imagination. She presents herself as consistently the defender of Odysseus and his male line. However, we are also reminded (in Book 5) that the storms which scattered the Greek fleet after the sack of Troy were caused by Athena herself, working alongside Poseidon, since she was enraged at how the Greeks defiled the Trojan temples—and she wanted to increase the glory of her favorite when, after long delays, he finally returns to slaughter the suitors. When Odysseus is in disguise in Ithaca, Athena goads him to greater and greater rage, and prompts the suitors to mistreat him. Athena loves violence, and knows how to manipulate events so as to maximize her own pleasure in battle. Her skill in weaving clothing for domestic use sits uneasily with her ability to weave deception and military strategy for the tapestry of war.

The major Olympian gods do not usually appear in their own true form to mortals. Athena appears in multiple different guises to Telemachus and Odysseus. She can be a bird of prey, not an

eagle (the bird of her father Zeus) or a hawk (bird of Apollo), but a European vulture (an ossifrage) or an owl. The cult of Athena in Greece may have originated from that of a Minoan owl goddess. When disguised as a human, Athena appears as Odysseus' old guest-friend, Mentor. But she also assumes other guises. In Phaeacia, she is a little girl, carrying water from the well. When she has her most extensive conversation with Odysseus, in Book 13, she appears first as a well-dressed young man; then, as if to make herself recognizable to him, she transforms herself again, this time into a beautiful woman. Athena transforms Odysseus as well as herself. She can change him into a ragged old man, and then into a tall, handsome, strong man in the prime of life. Athena can mask places, too: she casts a magical mist to make Ithaca unrecognizable, even to Odysseus himself.

Athena's powers of transformation and disguise are part of her cunning, the quality she shares with Odysseus. In myth, Athena's mother is Metis, a goddess who is the personification of Odysseus' central quality: *metis*, which means "cunning," "skill," "scheming," or "purpose." It is the kind of cleverness that enables one to prepare for any new challenge and to come out as a winner. Metis was supposedly swallowed up by Zeus, and Athena emerged whole from the head of her father—a myth that hints at how the archaic Greeks imagined this potentially dangerous and unattractive quality as one that could become acceptable, even admirable, in the right contexts. Unlike the English word "wisdom," which tends to suggest a staid, peaceful, possibly moral kind of intelligence acquired by long years of experience, *metis* suggests cunning plots and deception employed in the service of self-interest. It is not necessarily seen as a bad thing; *metis* is a very useful quality for a person who hopes to survive in a dangerous environment.

Odysseus is often described as *polymetis*, a term that suggests an abundance of *metis*. When the man and the goddess meet face-to-face in Book 13, they agree that they share a capacity for

scheming, for deceit, for transformation, and for telling elaborate lies, as well as an ability to wait a surprisingly long time to achieve their ends. Athena tells him,

> *"No man can plan and talk like you,*
> *and I am known among the gods for insight*
> *and craftiness."* (13.298–300)

These shared characteristics explain why the man and the goddess get along so well together. The relationship between Athena and Odysseus has a flirtatious quality that is made all the more interesting by the fact that they come from different worlds—she a goddess, he a mortal—and by the fact that she is a mostly female character who has the absolute upper hand, as well as the power of life, death, and identity, over this dominant Greek male. The relationships of Odysseus with Calypso, Circe, and especially Athena give us glimpses of an alternative to the "normal" mortal world, in which female characters are always less powerful than their male partners.

Goddesses, Wives, Princesses, and Slave Girls

We know frustratingly little about the lives of women in archaic Greece. The Homeric poems themselves are rich sources of information about Mediterranean society in the eighth century BCE, although both are highly artificial literary texts, and both were presumably created primarily by and for men. We see in *The Iliad* a world in which women were often treated by elite warrior men as if they were objects, prizes traded in war for men's honor, along with other possessions, like bronze tripods and piles of treasure. But women also had their own distinctive work (as mothers, wives, weavers, and caretakers), and their own perspective on the male-dominated world of war. They fed,

washed, and clothed the men who left them to fight among themselves for honor, and they washed, wrapped, and wept for the dead bodies that returned. They gave birth and cared for their children, and cried when men hurled them from the city walls. Fathers traded their daughters to other men as wives, and they were passed on to yet more men as trafficked slaves.

But perhaps life for women in archaic Greece was not always as bleak as this. *The Odyssey* allows us to imagine a far more varied array of possible female lives. Its various settings—in multiple different islands, homes, and palaces, in peacetime rather than war—are mostly places where women or goddesses have a defined position and a voice. Some scholars have tried to find buried memories in *The Odyssey* of an ancient, pre-Greek matriarchal society—for example, in the peculiarly high status of Queen Arete in Phaeacia, who sometimes, confusingly, seems more important than her husband, or in Penelope's power in Ithaca over even the male members of her household, most prominently Telemachus. But these elements in the poem probably tell us more about male fears and fantasies, both ancient and modern, than about the historical realities of archaic or pre-archaic women's lives.

Samuel Butler famously suggested in the nineteenth century that the *Odyssey* must have been written by a woman, because it has so many interesting and sympathetically portrayed female characters: "People always write by preference of what they know best, and they know best what they most are, and have most to do with." Few modern scholars would agree: we have, sadly, no evidence for women participating in the archaic Greek epic tradition as composers or rhapsodes. Moreover, Butler's claim relied on the dubious assumptions that only a woman would want to write about female characters in any depth, and that all the elements he regarded as ham-fisted could be explained by positing a young, unmarried girl as the "authoress"—in contrast to *The Iliad,* which was clearly the work of an adult man, a person capable

of writing convincing battle scenes.

It is more plausible to view *The Odyssey* as the product of archaic male imaginations, questioning and defending the inequalities of male dominance within the status quo. The poem meditates on what women might be capable of, and the degree to which their potential can or should be suppressed. We are shown differences in how men and women behave—for instance, women in Homer do not fight, attack, or kill one another, or travel to foreign countries for trade or war. There are also similarities: both men and women speak, sing, cry, steal, think, plan, deceive, celebrate, organize, give orders, and feel a whole range of emotions—grief, surprise, frustration, rage, embarrassment, shame, loneliness, and joy.

The Odyssey is a poem in which certain females have far more power than real women ever did in the society of archaic Greece. Most obviously, the goddess Athena, born from the head of her father, guides Odysseus through all his wanderings and all his plots, schemes, disguises, and battles back in Ithaca. Only through female divine power can his patriarchal dominance over his household be regained. On a human level, it is essential for the plot that Penelope has the power to choose in her husband's absence to marry one of her suitors, and that if she does so, the suitors will either divide the wealth of the house, or the new bridegroom will take control of the whole palace. It never seems to have been a normal Greek custom for power over the household to transfer through the woman to a new husband. But the notion is vitally important in *The Odyssey*: if Penelope remarries, Odysseus will lose not only a person he loves, but also, perhaps more important, all his economic wealth and social status. It is at least hinted as a possibility that the wife in this poem, unlike most wives in real archaic society, has the power to choose the man who will have control over her household.

In many respects, the text reflects social roles that presumably

existed in real life. Girls and women in *The Odyssey* occupy different social spheres from those of men and boys, and their particular types of expertise are different. Female slaves (like Eurycleia) take care of children inside the house and perform domestic labor, like making the beds and lighting the torches, while some male slaves (like the old swineherd Eumaeus) take care of animals and others (like Dolius and his sons) do farmwork and gardening. The task of feeding and clothing the elite is also divided along gender lines. Women slaves grind the grain, bake the bread, and set and clear the tables, while male slaves prepare and serve the meat and pour the wine. Women slaves (like Eurycleia and Eurynome) are the ones who wash, scrub, and anoint the bodies of male guests, and female slaves help elite women make the household clothes and linens, by spinning and weaving cloth, and help them take care of the clothes by doing laundry. Girls make the daily trip to fetch water for the household. Carpenters, shipbuilders, construction workers, ironmongers, priests, fishermen, hunters, pirates, tradesmen, and poets are male.

Among the elite, too, there are clear distinctions between male and female kinds of activity. Powerful men participate in male-only council meetings, and they are the ones who lead troops to war or (what is presented as much the same thing) on raids to kill and rob from neighboring settlements. Elite men are the primary participants in athletic competitions, although we glimpse girls playing ball in their spare time. Men predominate at feasts and banquets, although exceptional noblewomen (such as Helen, and Arete, queen of Phaeacia) are present. Elite women have a separate suite in the house, a set of "upper" or "inmost" rooms, such that Penelope is able to withdraw from the rowdy bustle of the suitors to her own tearstained bed.

The poem circles around the question of whether an elite woman's worth depends entirely on sexual fidelity. Odysseus has affairs with Calypso and Circe in the course of his wanderings, as

well as a carefully calibrated flirtation with young Nausicaa. These episodes are not presented as a sign of disloyalty to his wife or a blot on his character—although it is notable that he is rather selective in his final account of these adventures when he tells Penelope about his journey. By contrast, the poem presents it as a matter of the utmost importance that Penelope must keep her suitors at bay and wait indefinitely for her absent husband. Female fidelity is important for maintaining a husband's sense of honor and control; it is associated with the preservation of a particular wealthy household and the perpetuation of a particular elite family line. The double standard creates a particular kind of vulnerability for both men and women within the system.

But the story of the affair between the god Ares and the goddess Aphrodite, told by the poet Demodocus in Book 8, reminds us that female fidelity may be important only in specific human social environments. Hephaestus, Aphrodite's husband, is furious about the affair, traps the lovers in bed, and wants to punish Ares; but the other male gods (with the important exception of Poseidon) treat the whole thing as an amusing joke. The divine lovers, male and female, skip away unharmed, with apparently no damage done to their reputation or status. Odysseus, whose greatest fear is that Penelope will act like Aphrodite, reacts oddly to this narrative: he is delighted. Perhaps there is a kind of relief in imagining a situation so different from his own—a world in which an adulterous affair does not result in loss of status, loss of wealth, and loss of life.

The most insistent declarations that women's value depends entirely on their loyalty to their husbands comes in the mouth of the murdered Agamemnon, who has good reason to be upset about adulterous wives; his wife's sexual infidelity represents the takeover of his household by Aegisthus. Odysseus meets the ghost of Agamemnon in Book 11 and is given a stern warning to keep a close watch on Penelope—lest she act as Agamemnon's wife,

Clytemnestra, did, murdering him when he comes home and allowing the suitors to take control of Ithaca. Later, in Book 24, the spirit of Agamemnon meets the spirits of the murdered suitors, learns their story, and responds by exclaiming how lucky Odysseus was to have such a faithful, intelligent wife, whose fame should be made the subject of a divine poem—perhaps a poem like *The Odyssey* itself, but one that would allow a more prominent role for "intelligent Penelope."

The story of Aegisthus, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes recurs repeatedly in *The Odyssey* as the shadowy parallel to the story of the suitors, Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus. This parallel homecoming serves as a dark warning of what could have happened to Odysseus if he had arrived home openly, as Agamemnon did, rather than in disguise. The story of Agamemnon's death invites us to read Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors in terms of preemptive self-defense, as if he had to kill them in order to avoid being killed in turn. It is also presented as an important lesson for Telemachus. Without a son mature and determined enough to kill Aegisthus, Agamemnon's murder would have been left unavenged. Telemachus' growth to maturity seems in some ways to threaten Odysseus' position in the household: there would be less need for the father to return and regain control, if the son were already adult enough to manage everything and keep his mother's suitors at bay. Conversely, the example of Orestes presents a case where the son's maturity unambiguously benefits his father, albeit only after the father's death.

In some versions of the Agamemnon story, Clytemnestra actually kills her husband, with Aegisthus merely the accessory to the crime. This is the version used by Aeschylus in his later tragedy, the *Agamemnon*; but it was likely that this version of the myth was already known at the time of the composition of *The Odyssey*. Why, then, is Clytemnestra's role consistently minimized

in the references to the story here? A possible reason is that presenting Clytemnestra as eager to sleep with her suitor and murder her husband would cast a disturbing light on Odysseus' own wife, Penelope. The Agamemnon story is thus not simply contrasted with the Odysseus story, but also made parallel to it: in both cases, the wife is a decent person whose loyalty is tested when her husband is away at war. But the shadowy presence of the Agamemnon story may also underline our awareness that Penelope may not be able to wait forever for her absent husband. Moreover, in other early versions of the myth (as in Aeschylus), Orestes kills not only Aegisthus but also his own mother, Clytemnestra. In *The Odyssey*, we are told only that Orestes killed Aegisthus; the matricide is carefully erased from the story. But the uneasy relationship between Penelope and Telemachus clearly shows us that the interests of mothers and sons need not coincide. This parallel story acts as a reminder of the importance of Penelope's loyalty, and also reminds us that a sensible wife whose husband is long gone might have to move on.

The idea that male power depends on female sexual fidelity is also central to the myth of Clytemnestra's sister, Helen, whose abduction by Paris led to the Trojan War. In *The Odyssey*, we meet the beautiful and frighteningly intelligent Helen back home in Sparta, with her wealthy, blustering, and rather less intelligent husband, Menelaus. The affair between Helen and Paris, like the affair of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, can be seen as another alternative but parallel narrative, showing what might happen if Penelope decided to go off with one of the suitors. But this counternarrative complicates the idea that it would be a disaster if Penelope had an affair, since Helen and Menelaus seem to have suffered no obvious ill effects from her escapade—beyond the fact that so many people decided to engage in the war and died as a result. The marriage seems, if anything, cemented by a shared sense of regret and a shared interest in the wonderful consumer

goods they have acquired through their foreign conquests. At the moment when Penelope and Odysseus are reunited, Penelope speaks of Helen, and draws a complex, confusing comparison between her own situation—vulnerable to any deceitful stranger who may show up—and that of Helen, who left her husband for Paris. Penelope seems to suggest that Helen was forced into adultery (because Aphrodite compelled her and Paris tricked her), and also that, insofar as she made a choice, it was informed, as perhaps most choices are, by limited knowledge of the outcome. She could not know that "the Greeks would march to war / and bring her home again."

Should war, defined in *The Iliad* as "the work of men," be seen as ultimately the fault of a woman—because Helen inspired Paris to abduct her? The question is left largely unanswered in Homer. In *The Iliad,* Helen tells Priam she wishes she had "chosen death" rather than leave her husband for Paris—suggesting that she did have some kind of choice, but also that her only alternative was suicide. The affair is not presented as something that she actually desired. In *The Odyssey,* a much more self-possessed and cheerful Helen declares that the Greeks made war "for the sake of" her face —a formulation that suggests that the woman's appearance is the men's supposed motive, but does not imply that it, let alone its owner, can be blamed for their actions.

Helen describes her face, the face that, in Christopher Marlowe's famous words, "launched a thousand ships," not as beautiful but as "doglike"; it is a face that (in this translation) "hounded" the Greeks to war. The idea that women or goddesses, especially desirable ones who sleep with men outside marriage, are like dogs, or have doglike faces, recurs at several moments in the poem: Hephaestus uses the same term of his unfaithful, divinely beautiful wife, Aphrodite; the dead Agamemnon calls his murderous wife a "she-dog"; and the pretty slave girl Melantho is called a "dog" by both Penelope and Odysseus. As a term of insult,

"dog" is applied not only to women. Odysseus also calls the suitors "dogs" when he inveighs against their greedy, shameless consumption of his food supplies, and he suggests that the human belly is also always like a whining dog: it begs for food, even in circumstances where it is not appropriate or possible to eat. The night before the slaughter of the suitors, Odysseus feels his heart "bark" inside him, like a "mother dog" defending her puppies. Odysseus has to restrain his doglike heart, because it is nudging him to act too soon, rather than follow through carefully on his plan. In our culture, "bitch" is used as an insult term only for women, and it implies a kind of malice that is imagined as specifically feminine. In *The Odyssey*, to be "doglike" does not usually connote this kind of malice or cruelty (which is why "bitch" would be a misleading translation). Instead, it suggests an insistent drive, to be fed or satisfied or noticed, which is impatient and oblivious to social cues and constraints. Dogs are kept not as pets, but as guards of the house and for hunting; they are low on the household hierarchy, but valued for their persistence and quick powers of observation—shown most touchingly by Odysseus' old dog, Argos, who recognizes his old master even after twenty years' absence. Women, more than men, are like dogs, because they are put low on the social hierarchy, and because they might be scarily capable of seeing through social conventions, and might refuse to stay in their place. But the idea that it is not the woman or goddess herself, but her face, that is like a dog suggests that it might be male perceptions of women, rather than female desires themselves, that threaten the social fabric.

Characteristics that are ostensibly presented as particularly "feminine" often turn out to be rather more complicated in their metaphorical gendering. For example, female characters tend to achieve their ends by seduction, deceit, or witchcraft, rather than by open aggression. Helen, who has a particular power to control perceptions and see through appearances, puts a special drug in

her guests' cup which can enable them to forget all that they have suffered and even be numb to the greatest possible grief or loss:

> *Whoever drinks this mixture from the bowl*
> *will shed no tears that day, not even if*
> *her mother or her father die, nor even*
> *if soldiers kill her brother or her darling*
> *son with bronze spears before her very eyes.* (4.223–27)

Helen's drug is a frightening exaggeration of the normal cheering power of wine, and it hints at her witchlike powers of fascination: in Helen's house, all eyes are always on Helen. The goddess Circe and the Sirens also have the power to trap their victims through enchantment. But it remains unclear whether deceit is being presented as a naturally feminine mode of operation, since Odysseus himself is the most prominent liar and trickster in the poem; nor is deceit necessarily seen as a bad thing in the world of *The Odyssey*.

Prudent, clever Penelope shows her capacity for clever deceit and false storytelling, as well as her technical expertise (as a weaver), which in many ways parallels the sharp wits and practical abilities of her husband. The suitors are attracted to her not only for her wealth and her beauty, but also for her mind; even the brashest of them, Antinous, can wax eloquent in describing Penelope's abilities.

> *Athena blessed her with intelligence,*
> *great artistry and skill, a finer mind*
> *than anyone has ever had before,*
> *even the braided girls of ancient Greece.* (2.116–19)

She weaves a great piece of cloth that is supposedly the shroud in which Laertes will be buried and convinces the suitors that she cannot marry any of them until the task is completed. This

delaying tactic shows her capacity for deceptive storytelling—a quality shared by her husband—as well as her technical skill in weaving, which is analogous to her husband's competence as a construction worker. But we should also notice differences. The things Odysseus constructs (such as the Wooden Horse, his raft to get away from Calypso, and his bed) are finished, and are supposed to remain finished. Penelope's weaving is designed to be undone. Moreover, whereas the deceptive plots of Odysseus are geared towards a particular end (to invade a city, to reach his home, or to destroy the suitors), the deceptive plot of Penelope serves in the opposite direction: to hold off an end point, to avoid the end of the story. It is meant to be forever in a state of becoming, not completion.

We get only glimpses of Penelope's state of mind, which is repeatedly described as ambiguous or opaque. What comes across most clearly is her emotional pain. She is in a state of constant apprehension for her young, vulnerable son, constant grief for her lost husband, and constant doubt about how long she can put off the suitors. Penelope knows that marriage to one of them will mean an enormous, wrenching loss; for one thing, remarriage may uproot her from the house to which she feels a deep attachment, the house in which she has lived for her whole adult life: "this beautiful rich house, so full of life / my lovely bridal home. I think I will / remember it forever, even in / my dreams." But she also knows that she may ultimately have little choice; she cannot hold the suitors off forever. In an evocative passage from Book 19, she tells Odysseus—whom she has still not recognized—about her nightly tears:

As when the daughter of Pandareus,
the pale gray nightingale, sings beautifully
when spring has come, and sits among the leaves
that crowd the trees, and warbles up and down
a symphony of sound, in mourning for
her son by Zethus, darling Itylus,
whom she herself had killed in ignorance. (19.520–26)

The simile suggests that Penelope feels a desperate and ambiguous kind of guilt about the husband and son whom she may be forced to "betray," through no fault of her own. Later in the same passage, Penelope tells the story of a dream she had in which there were geese in her house, eating her corn, which were destroyed by an eagle. Odysseus, in his guise as a beggar, immediately interprets the dream to his own advantage: the dream shows, he says, that her husband will return and rout the suitors from the hall. It is, he assumes, unambiguously positive. But Odysseus' interpretation entirely ignores the most striking feature: Penelope says that in the dream, she "wept and wailed" at the death of the geese. This dream response suggests that on some level, Penelope might not want her husband to come home. This would be a perfectly reasonable feeling, since her position in the household is not markedly improved by his return. But when she learns that her suitors really are dead, Penelope is "overjoyed"—although she still refuses to accept that the old beggar might be her husband in disguise. Penelope's feelings are mixed and confusing.

Some readers have argued that this clever woman may well have recognized her husband much earlier than she lets on, or at least half-recognized him. Perhaps she has; the text seems to allow for this possibility, although it gives us little evidence for it. But it is important to see what is at stake in the decision to interpret Penelope as either cognizant or ignorant of her husband's identity. Some critics have been understandably motivated by a desire not

to see female characters as victims—and therefore want to see her as more in control than she may appear. Alternatively, one can emphasize the ways that female characters can be disempowered in a male-dominated environment, through no fault of their own; one can then argue that Athena and Odysseus work together to keep Penelope in the dark about her husband's return. In this view, she is presented as an intelligent woman whose capacity for planning and forethought is comparable to her husband's—but who lacks the apparatus of divine and human help that enable Odysseus to achieve his ends with confidence. Penelope's cognitive disadvantage parallels the sexual double standards by which Odysseus' infidelities are treated as normal, and Penelope's twenty-year sexual loyalty is seen by certain characters within the poem (such as the dead Agamemnon) as the centerpiece of her moral worth.

These radically different interpretations are possible because the text keeps the reader or listener of the poem to a large extent in the dark about Penelope's state of mind. This might be a mark of discomfort with the gender inequalities implicit in the plot or a mark of the text's particular kinds of blindness. There are certain particularly ambiguous moments in the depiction of Penelope that underline this narrative tension. For instance, in Book 18, Penelope suddenly decides to show herself before the suitors, although she has previously shunned them. We are told that the reason is to increase their desire for her and promote her own honor. One can assume that it is Athena, not the mortal woman, who is controlling events at this point and who has decided to make Penelope show herself. Or one can argue that Penelope herself has recognized her husband, and has decided to do this to continue her plot to deceive the suitors about her true intentions. Or one may argue that Penelope has not recognized Odysseus, but simply feels the impulse to gain greater attention from the suitors for herself—a possibility that has been neglected by most critics

only because it is assumed, with obvious sexism, that a "good" woman would not behave in such a way. The most important point to notice here is how ambiguous the text itself is about these various possibilities, a fact reinforced by Penelope's "mysterious" laugh as she makes the proposal. Penelope's desires and motivations are defined as unknown.

Becoming a Man

The Odyssey tells the story not only of Odysseus and Penelope, but also of their son, Telemachus, whose slow and incomplete journey to adulthood is charted in the course of the poem. Telemachus is the most vulnerable member of the family: the suitors plot to murder him, and we see him break down in tears after a failed attempt to speak up and assert himself in the men's assembly. The boy must be at least twenty years old at the time of the poem's action, and he is physically an adult, full grown and handsome. But he struggles to grow to psychological maturity, to become man enough to help his father defeat the suitors. Telemachus' standard epithet, *pepnumenos*, suggests "of sound understanding" or "thoughtful"; the poem traces the boy's developing cognitive maturity, as he begins to learn what adult masculinity might mean.

In the course of Telemachus' journey in search of news about his father, he meets two alternative father-figures: the controlling, long-winded Nestor, and the rich, narcissistic, uxorious Menelaus. Each of these men seem to echo character traits in Telemachus' own father—as does the old Sea God Proteus described by Menelaus, a slippery character who can change his shape at will. Back in Ithaca, the swineherd Eumaeus is an even more devoted alternative father: he greets Telemachus on his return like a long-lost son,

Just as a father, when he sees
his own dear son, his only son, his dear
most precious boy, returned from foreign lands
after ten years of grieving for his loss,
welcomes him; so the swineherd wrapped his arms
around godlike Telemachus and kissed him,
as if he were returning from the dead. (16.17–23)

Eumaeus, Nestor, and Menelaus all show their deep, fatherlike love for Telemachus, and each models for the boy, in significantly different ways, the skill of hospitality, which is an essential aspect of elite masculine adulthood.

But only his real father, Odysseus himself, can help Telemachus achieve what he most wants: a position of greater power in his own household. When father and son are reunited, they weep together, as if for Telemachus' lost, fatherless childhood:

They both felt deep desire for lamentation,
and wailed with cries as shrill as birds, like eagles
or vultures, when the hunters have deprived them
of fledglings who have not yet learned to fly. (16.216–19)

After these tears, Telemachus seems more sure of himself, and he can begin the process of joining the adult, male world, by plotting with his father how to kill the suitors.

Telemachus is an only child; his lack of brothers is emphasized in the poem and was presumably unusual in the context of archaic Greek society. He seems markedly more confident after he has formed a close friendship with Pisistratus, Nestor's son, who becomes like a brother to him. The suitors—boys roughly his own age, who act like bullying older brothers—threaten his life and his position in his own home. Unable to stand up to the suitors by himself, Telemachus instead practices masculine self-assertion by putting down his mother.

The relationship between Penelope and Telemachus is painful, full of conflict and secrecy. She sees his vulnerability too clearly and worries for him, which makes him all the more eager to distance himself from her. Penelope cannot do for her son what a father could do, which is introduce him to the world of male power. Under the instructions of Athena, Telemachus pointedly keeps his journey from Ithaca a secret from his mother. Underlining his emotional distance from his mother by insisting that her feelings matter only insofar as they might affect her looks, he tells Eurycleia, who is in on the secret,

> *"Promise me you will not tell*
> *Mother, until she notices me gone.*
> *Say nothing for twelve days, so she will not*
> *start crying; it would spoil her pretty skin."* (2.373–76)

Eurycleia is an alternative mother-figure for Telemachus, and a preferable one, in that—being a slave—she always does exactly what he tells her to do. Athena is a second and even better mother-figure: she enables him to succeed on his trip away from Ithaca, proving his ability to act independently of his human parents, albeit always under her watchful eyes.

Telemachus makes several attempts to put his real mother in (what he regards as) her place. In Book 1, Penelope tries to stop the singer Phemius from telling of the disastrous homecoming of the Greeks from Troy, because it makes her cry too much; Telemachus roughly intervenes, telling his mother,

> *"Go in and do your work.*
> *Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves*
> *to do their chores as well. It is for men*
> *to talk, especially me. I am the master."* (1.356–59)

The passage is echoed in Book 21, when Odysseus, disguised as an

old homeless beggar, asks to be given a turn at the ongoing contest to string the great bow. The suitors try to prevent it, but Penelope insists that the stranger ought to be treated with dignity and kindness, and should be allowed to try the bow, if he so desires. At that, young Telemachus intervenes, scolding his mother for speaking as if she had the authority to decide who should and who should not have access to the weapons of his father. He sends her back upstairs to the women's quarters, declaring,

> *"Go up and work*
> *with loom and distaff; tell your girls the same.*
> *The bow is work for men, especially me.*
> *I am the one with power in this house."* (21.350–53)

These outbursts are startling, since most of the time Telemachus carefully avoids direct confrontations with his mother—as if nervous that he might not be able to hold his own against her. The lines in Book 21 seem to allude to a moment in *The Iliad* when Hector tells his wife, Andromache, that she should not attempt to prevent him from going back to the battlefront, although he may be killed. It is, he declares, his task, as an elite male warrior, to fight on the front lines and risk his life to gain honor—just as it is the task of women to do the household chores and weaving. "War," says Hector, "is work for men, especially me." Telemachus is trying to assert his masculinity and adult status by assuming the role of the heroic fighter who risks his life for his honor and the defense of his city. But the reference does not entirely suit the situation: Telemachus is not planning to fight with the bow himself, only to have control over who else gets access to it. Moreover, the person who is about to assume "power in the house" is not Telemachus but Odysseus, to whom the boy will give the bow. Telemachus is overjoyed at being taken under his father's wing, but he is also overshadowed by his father's position as the eternal head of the

household. It would be a problem for the poem's narrative if Telemachus grew up all the way, since there must be only one man running the house in Ithaca forever, and that man needs to be Odysseus.

Telemachus is consistent in his notion that masculine maturity means the suppression and exclusion of women and the suppression of female voices. When Odysseus slaughters the suitors, he leaves a final task to his son, Telemachus: the killing of the "doglike" slave women who have been sleeping with the suitors. Odysseus instructs his son to hack at the girls with swords, to eradicate all life from their bodies and all memory of what they did with the murdered men:

> *"They will forget the things*
> *the suitors made them do with them in secret."* (22.444–45)

The episode is one of the most horrible and haunting of the whole poem, the culmination of a pattern in which the homecoming of Odysseus prevents other people—elite boys and slave girls alike—from reaching their homes and their comfortable beds:

> *As doves or thrushes spread their wings to fly*
> *home to their nests, but someone sets a trap—*
> *they crash into a net, a bitter bedtime.* (22.468–70)

These terrible murders are not quite presented as punishments for a nonexistent crime; these women are slaves, who presumably had little choice about their treatment by the suitors. Rather, Odysseus wants the girls dead because their memories threaten his total ownership of his household. As long as they are still alive, the trace of the suitors is still present in their bodies and their minds, and hence in his home. By slashing them with "long swords," Odysseus suggests that his own male line can regain complete control.

But Telemachus takes initiative, to an almost unprecedented

degree, and decides that the women should instead be hanged, saying,

> *"I refuse to grant these girls*
> *a clean death, since they poured down shame on me*
> *and Mother, when they lay beside the suitors."* (22.462–64)

This puzzling, disturbing intervention is a defining moment for Telemachus. Why exactly does he want them hanged, rather than hacked to death with swords? One possible answer has to do with cleanliness and pollution. Despite Odysseus' various attempts to present his killings as revenge for moral outrages committed against him, it is clear that at least some of the murders are primarily motivated by a desire to restore a sense of purity to a house that has been subject to imaginary dirt. The choice of hanging over hacking is beneficial in that it keeps the girls' dirty blood off the clean floors, and maintains the "tainted" bodies in their self-contained state. Hanging also allows young Telemachus to avoid being too close to these girls' abused, sexualized bodies. The boy here demonstrates a newfound maturity in two highly problematic ways: he asserts himself by defying his father's instructions, and he belittles the women he slaughters. But Telemachus is still resisting the adult male role of the warrior, which involves a quasi-sexual act of penetration—using a sharp weapon to pierce and kill human bodies at close quarters.

In the final book of the poem, Telemachus has one more chance to prove himself a man, by fighting, yet again, beside his father. With their little band of supporters, Odysseus, Laertes, and Telemachus prepare together to fight against the family members of those whom they have killed. Odysseus calls on Telemachus not to "shame your father's family," which is "known across the world for courage / and manliness." Telemachus responds eagerly, "Just watch me, Father," and Laertes beams with pride: "A happy day for

me! My son and grandson / are arguing about how tough they are!" The fight is curtailed by Athena's intervention, so Telemachus never gets to prove his full worth as a fighter, although he has demonstrated his eagerness to participate in the military aggression of his male family members. Readers may disagree about the extent to which Telemachus ever fully grows up in *The Odyssey*—as well as about whether growing up to manhood, as this boy imagines it, would really be a good thing.

Slaves

Many of the most prominent characters in *The Odyssey*—such as the father, mother, son, and the suitors—are elite people who live in what is figured as a large, palatial house (although it is clearly modest from the perspective of later forms of kingship). Odysseus is a leader in war, not a mere foot soldier, and in Ithaca, the house of Odysseus is the richest and most powerful of the neighborhood. But the poem also includes a number of characters who are not rich or powerful. In *The Iliad*, the only named non-elite character, Thersites, is presented as ugly and annoying; when he speaks out of turn, Odysseus beats him up. *The Odyssey* includes a far richer array of characters who are not lords or ladies, kings or princesses. Slaves and homeless beggars are presented in this text as human beings who deserve respect and even empathy—at least as long as they remain in their limited social place.

The possibility that people of any rank might be enslaved—through trafficking or war—is assumed as a fact about the world; *The Odyssey* is not an abolitionist text. But we are given glimpses of the hard lives of those who serve and feed the privileged people who are the main focus of the narrative. In Book 20, the prayer of an unnamed, frail slave, grinding the grain, reminds us that the labor of food production is exhausting: it hurts her knees.

Odysseus, who has his own agenda, treats the prayer simply as a good omen for his own plans. But the reader or listener can momentarily see the cost of running the elite household in terms of human labor and human suffering—a cost that may be reduced but will not end, even when the banquets of the suitors cease.

Slave owners favor slaves who ally themselves most closely with their master's interests, rather than taking the risky step of switching to a new set of masters. Only one of the slaves who slept with the suitors is named: Melantho, who is characterized as having a mind of her own and a will to talk back to her mistress. The orifices of female slaves, including their mouths, are a source of particular concern; the rope deprives Melantho of her attempt to have an autonomous voice. Male slaves are imagined not as mouths but limbs of their masters; a "bad" male slave uses his capacity to work or fight or procreate to serve an alternative master. Melantho's brother, Melanthius, who serves as a herdsman for the suitors, is trussed up like an animal, and then, in a particularly brutal scene, his nose, ears, genitals, hands, and feet are slashed off. This "limb" of the wrong masters is robbed of his own bodily appendages. Melantho and Melanthius—whose names both suggest "black flower"—are the children of Dolius, the herdsman who is treated as a trusted favorite, loyal to Odysseus. We are not told how he feels about the slaughter of his children, but it is clear that, in Odysseus' remade household, there will be no possibility of expressing such grief. The name Dolius suggests "crafty" or "deceitful"; the poem shows us why dishonesty is the most essential survival tool for the "good" slave.

The pair of young "bad" slaves are mirrored by a pair of old "good" slaves, who are loyal to Odysseus and his family. Eurycleia, the old slave woman who took care of Telemachus as a baby and now protects the master's domestic stores, provides a counterpart to the threats posed by Melantho. She is old enough to pose no sexual threat, and she controls her voice for the sake of her

masters—by keeping the secrets of Telemachus' journey and Odysseus' identity, and by restraining her impulse to shout in triumph over the slaughter of the suitors. Melantho's physical intimacy with the wrong set of owners is presented as a threat to the household. Eurycleia, by contrast, maintains the household by taking care of the bodies of Odysseus and his family—by helping Telemachus get dressed, and by washing Odysseus' feet.

The most prominent slave character in the poem is the swineherd Eumaeus, the "good" counterpart to the "bad" goatherd, Melanthius. Eumaeus welcomes Odysseus, in his guise as beggar, into his simple cottage. Eumaeus' humble but affectionate offering of *xenia* contrasts with the rudeness of the suitors, and we are clearly supposed to admire this "noble slave" for identifying his own interests with those of his owner; he is the one who "cared most about preserving / the master's property." No other character is addressed directly by the narrator, but Eumaeus is often addressed in the second person ("You, swineherd"), a stylistic detail that creates a particular intimacy between the reader or listener and this odd character. Eumaeus is also described repeatedly in the terms of military heroism, as the "commander" of his pigs—a trope that serves both to elevate this quasi-heroic character and to mock him. Eumaeus is a "noble slave" for two incompatible reasons. On the one hand, paradoxically, he is noble because he is so slavish: he refuses to disentangle his own interests and perspective from that of his master. But he is also genuinely noble, both in birth and in behavior: he performs the aristocratic customs of *xenia* even in his poor, dung-piled shack, and he tells the memorable, grim story of how he was born into an elite foreign household, before he was trafficked and sold as a slave. The "good" slave is one who responds to the trauma of enslavement by identifying with his or her owners, and imagining those in power as loving parents rather than overlords. *The Odyssey* seems to have it both ways in the

depiction of slave characters. We are reminded that a good slave can be more loyal and more hospitable than a rude, overprivileged young man, but we are also invited to imagine that slaves are good only insofar as they subdue their own identities to those of their owners.

The poem suggests a similar contrast between the "good" and the "bad" way to occupy another lowly social position: that of the penniless, homeless migrant. When Odysseus is in disguise as a poor beggar, the ways that people respond to him are presented as the test of their moral worth. It is a black mark against the suitors that they fail to behave politely or warmly to the wrinkled, ragged, hungry old stranger who shows up in the palace where they are living it up on somebody else's meat and wine. But the "real" beggar, Irus—who is not an elite warrior in disguise, but a genuinely poor, dirty homeless person—is depicted in entirely negative terms. Odysseus wrestles with him, wins, and humiliates him, and the text seems to invite us to celebrate his victory. There is thus a certain uneasiness about the proper way to respond to social and economic hierarchies. Elite people are supposed to treat slaves and homeless beggars well; but slaves and homeless beggars are themselves to be despised, unless they are royalty in disguise. Odysseus can become old, poor, weak and homeless; but his "real" identity is (apparently, but perhaps debatably) as the king and warrior who fights to gain massive wealth and assert his own masculine prowess, using deceit and violence to slaughter his enemies—both on the battlefield of Troy and even in his own lovely home.

Odysseus presents himself as someone who has endured exceptional trials and tribulations and has managed, alone, to survive the perils and dangers of his journey back from Troy. After listening to the swineherd Eumaeus tell the story of how he was captured and trafficked as a child, entering a lifelong position as a lowly slave, Odysseus comments that Eumaeus' sufferings can

hardly match his own: "Your life is good. / But as for me, I am still lost." Odysseus suggests that his own inability to reach his homeland, even after twenty years' absence, is the ultimate form of suffering, which trumps all other pain. But it is notable that Odysseus travels in elite fashion, without ever touching the oars himself. That lowly hard labor is performed for him by others, men who are uncompensated for their labor, and who all, eventually, die before reaching their homes.

The Choice of Odysseus

At the start of the poem, we see Odysseus making a momentous and defining choice: to return to Penelope, his mortal wife, rather than stay forever with the goddess Calypso. This goddess is divinely beautiful, and her island is marked by luxuriant, dense complexity; it is a place of secrets and tangled mixtures.

> *The scent of citrus and of brittle pine*
> *suffused the island. Inside, she was singing*
> *and weaving with a shuttle made of gold.*
> *Her voice was beautiful. Around the cave*
> *a luscious forest flourished: alder, poplar,*
> *and scented cypress. It was full of wings.*
> *Birds nested there but hunted out at sea:*
> *the owls, the hawks, the gulls with gaping beaks.*
> *A ripe and luscious vine, hung thick with grapes,*
> *was stretched to coil around her cave. Four springs*
> *spurted with sparkling water as they laced*
> *with crisscross currents intertwined together.*
> *The meadow softly bloomed with celery*
> *and violets.* (5.60–73)

The god Hermes, visiting Calypso's home, is understandably "full

of wonder." But Odysseus, in this magical, mysterious place where he shares the bed of a majestic goddess, is miserable.

> *His eyes were always*
> *tearful; he wept sweet life away, in longing*
> *to go back home, since she no longer pleased him.*
> *He had no choice. He spent his nights with her*
> *inside her hollow cave, not wanting her*
> *though she still wanted him. By day he sat*
> *out on the rocky beach, in tears and grief,*
> *staring in heartbreak at the fruitless sea.* (5.151–58)

The text implies that for some (carefully unspecified) amount of time, Odysseus willingly enjoyed the company of the goddess. Calypso rescued him when he crawled, ragged and half drowned, onto the shore of her island, and he spends a good seven years—the majority of time spent returning from the war—sharing her bed. She has given him shelter from the storm and has provided him with a home that seems in certain very obvious ways superior to his original home on Ithaca. As she herself reminds him with touching defensiveness, the goddess is much more attractive than Penelope. Moreover, Calypso's island is lush and fertile, in contrast to barren Ithaca—and, what ought to be a clinching argument in the case, she has the power to make Odysseus immortal and free from aging forever. She offers him everything, except a way back to his original, human home. Outraged at his rejection of her love, she asks him,

"Do you really want
to go back to that home you love so much?
Well then, good-bye! But if you understood
how glutted you will be with suffering
before you reach your home, you would stay here
with me and be immortal—though you might
still wish to see that wife you always pine for.
And anyway, I know my body is
better than hers is. I am taller too.
Mortals can never rival the immortals
in beauty." (5.204–14)

The depiction of Calypso, a powerful but emotionally open female character, frustrated in her desire for the human she has rescued, is one of the most memorable sequences in the poem. She perhaps does herself a disservice in emphasizing only her superior good looks. She also has a superior mind, and she is particularly well matched with Odysseus, who shares her fondness for secrets. Like Circe and Athena, Calypso appreciates and understands Odysseus' capacity for deceit and scheming, because she has similar qualities herself—albeit at a divine, more than mortal level. She praises him for mistrusting her, saying, "You scalawag! What you have said / shows that you understand how these things work." Penelope, for obvious reasons, shows far less appreciation for Odysseus the liar, Odysseus the trickster, Odysseus the "scalawag." Her looks are ordinary compared with those of the goddess; her love for Odysseus is more careful, more suspicious, and her understanding of him is less complete; and in choosing Penelope, Odysseus is also choosing to become old and, eventually, to die. In reply to the goddess, Odysseus acknowledges the truth of everything she says. But then he adds simply, "But even so, I want to go back home, / and every day I hope that day will come."

Why exactly does Odysseus make this surprising choice? The

poem never gives us an explicit answer—an omission that makes the hero's yearning for home all the more resonant and moving. Calypso, an obviously prejudiced observer, suggests that Odysseus' choice to go home is masochistic: a deliberate embrace of suffering, and a perverse preference for something worse over something better. The tactful hero does not correct her.

Presumably, Odysseus is inspired by a deep loyalty to his wife, son, father, and the place of his birth, and moved by a deep and constant love for those he left behind. But we must avoid projecting the anachronistic ideas of chivalric romantic love onto Odysseus, who is not a medieval knight performing valiant deeds for the sake of a beautiful lady. To explain the meaning of Odysseus' choice in Homeric terms, it is useful to look back to *The Iliad*. In that poem, the central character, Achilles, makes the momentous choice to stay and fight at Troy, to gain honor among his fellow Greek warriors, rather than return home to his young son and dying father, where he might have lived a long life in obscurity. The choice of Odysseus is parallel to the choice of Achilles, in that it is a decision to be mortal in order to gain a particular kind of masculine honor. If Odysseus had stayed with Calypso, he would have been alive forever, and never grown old; but he would have been forever subservient to a being more powerful than himself. He would have lost forever the possibility of being king of Ithaca, owner of the richest and most dominant household on his island—an estate wealthy in pigs, sheep, goats, fruit, grain, wine, and slaves, with an old father, a young son, and a desirable, much-courted, and valuable wife all devoted to him, and all increasing his value in the eyes of his neighbors.

But strangely, Odysseus' choice to be in the mortal world does not seem to imply any willingness to submit to the exigencies of change. The hero wants to maintain his dominant position in his household, not for a moment but for all time. His choice to be subject to age and mortality is presented as if it were itself a

permanent fact, a choice that he might be able to go on making forever. *The Odyssey* thus makes a paradoxical set of claims about the possibility of permanence, either in relationships or in the lives of any individual person. Odysseus' choice to be with Penelope is associated not only with an admission of human mortality, but also with its opposite: an insistence that a man (it has to be a man) might be able to claim or reclaim a permanent position at the head of his particular social ladder. Odysseus seems to be magically able to evade the pressure of time on mortals and rise above all challenges of circumstance.

Athena changes Odysseus into a weak, bent old man, as a disguise. But when needed, she changes him back into the physical appearance that is figured as his "true" self, a man of the utmost vigor, in the prime of youth. In real life, a man who had left home in his twenties, spent ten years fighting a war, and then another ten lost at sea, would be more likely to look wrinkled, bent, and old —especially in an archaic society without modern medicine, when life expectancy was far shorter than in most contemporary Western cultures. But *The Odyssey* insists that Odysseus is fundamentally unchanged by his adventures. Through his determination and smart mind, and with divine help, he can restore his marriage and his household permanently to the state that they were in when he first went away. Leaving Calypso is thus not only a choice to accept mortality and impermanence, but also, incompatibly, a choice to insist on the fantasy of permanent patriarchal dominance over a carefully regulated human household.

Odysseus is an odd figure to represent permanence, since he seems to be constantly changing—in appearance, behavior, and social role. He is able to be, at different times, young or old, strong or weak, a beggar or a home owner, a victim or an aggressor. What makes Odysseus special is that he is, to a far larger extent than most human beings, in control of his various different changes and

manifestations. Gods can disguise themselves and walk unseen through the midst of mortals; Odysseus is able to do the same. He switches roles not only through the magical power of Athena, which transforms his appearance, but also through the magical power of his own words, through which he creates multiple different identities for himself.

Most of the epithets applied to Odysseus begin with the prefix *poly-*, meaning "much" or "many": he is a figure who possesses many attributes, and possesses them intensely. Far more than other mortals, Odysseus is able to change himself to adapt to changing circumstances. A wonderful simile in Book 5, after Odysseus is shipwrecked and clings, just barely, to the rocks of the Phaeacian shore, compares his skinned fingers to the suckers of an octopus:

> *As when an octopus dragged from its den,*
> *has many pebbles sticking to its suckers,*
> *so his strong hands were skinned against the rocks.* (5.432–34)

In archaic Greek lore, the octopus was known as the "boneless one," the creature that (supposedly) survives hunger by eating its own tentacles (or "feet," of which, luckily, it has eight). In the Homeric image, it is a creature defined by its tenacity. It is resistant to change (it has to be dragged from its den), but also changed by its altered environment (the sticking pebbles). Odysseus' fingers are like the pebbles of the den, ripped by the octopus; but he is also himself octopuslike in his stubbornness, his power of survival, his capacity to adapt to new environments, his multiplicity, and his slippery, boneless, self-devouring ability to change. It is this power of self-transformation that gives him the ability to reinvent himself into the most marvelous persona of all: the self he was twenty years ago, before he went to war. The ideal of total autonomy and permanent essence depends on the process

of constant self-reinvention.

An essential aspect of Odysseus' multiplicity is his rhetorical ability and capacity for deceit. He is able to spin tall tales, to take over from the poet Demodocus and tell the fantastic story of his own adventures as an entertainment for the Phaeacians. In Ithaca, he constructs multiple different autobiographies, usually claiming to have come from Crete—the traditional home of liars. Odysseus' grandfather Autolycus prides himself on "telling lies and stealing"; Odysseus has inherited these traits. He is the hero who always has an answer, a solution, a fix, a good line, a quick reply to any challenge. He is the master of finding the right words in any situation.

Odysseus is in disguise in Ithaca and has to be recognized by a series of different characters in turn. The poem is virtuosic in its variations on the otherwise formulaic "recognition scene"—each character recognizes Odysseus by a different means, and each character recognizes a different Odysseus. Athena, who has no trouble recognizing Odysseus, begins the sequence in Book 13 by allowing him to recognize her and, in so doing, to recognize himself, as the man defined by cleverness and an infinite capacity for scheming and deceit. Argos, the old dog, recognizes Odysseus by his smell and remembers him as the vigorous man who took him on hunting trips. Eumaeus knows Odysseus as a benevolent owner, a quasi-family-member, who may perhaps reward his lifelong loyalty with a short period of freedom before he dies. Telemachus knows Odysseus as his role-model father, the man on whom his own honor and status in the world of adult men depends. Eurycleia, the old slave nurse, remembers Odysseus as a boy wonder, who killed a boar single-handedly even in his earliest youth. Old Laertes knows Odysseus as his son and heir; he is the boy who was taught to name all the trees in the orchard, and he is the man on whom the future of the whole estate depends. Antinous and the other suitors recognize, with horror, that the

weak old beggar in their midst is actually a muscular, murderous fighter, the man who will slaughter them all.

The most complex and extensive recognition is that of Penelope. The process by which she comes to acknowledge the old stranger as her difficult, secretive, aggressive husband is extraordinarily long-drawn-out, and the exact moment at which she truly recognizes him remains a mystery—like so much else about Penelope. After the murder of the suitors, she is told by both Eurycleia and Telemachus that the strange old beggar is really Odysseus. To Telemachus' irritation, however, she refuses to acknowledge him as her husband. "Cautious Penelope" displays her central quality by resisting any quick resolution. Perhaps she suspects or half-knows who he is much earlier than she admits; or perhaps she genuinely remains unsure about who the mysterious stranger is.

But if she does recognize him, or half-recognize him, she also manages to gain an upper hand in the relationship, provoking Odysseus into "proving" his identity. She tells the slave to make up the bed for him outside the bedroom, which devastates and enrages him: "Woman!" he asks, "Who moved my bed?" The bed, it turns out, is not supposed to be movable; Odysseus claims to have built it himself, using an olive tree that grew inside the palace as a bedpost. The bed that can be moved only by cutting down the trunk and destroying the structure is a metonymic symbol for the interdependence of the marriage and the house; the destruction of either means ruin for the other. Odysseus asks, in disbelief as well as horror, what "man" has moved his bed: the quasi-immovable bed represents a fantasy that it would be almost impossible for Penelope ever to sleep with another man. No other marriage would involve such deep roots.

The tree-bed is the ultimate answer to the question raised at the start of the poem: What does Odysseus choose when he rejects Calypso's offer? It is something deeply characteristic of Odysseus

himself: like his most famous invention, the Wooden Horse, the bed is a wood structure that contains humans and a secret, and allows close friends to inhabit a hidden place of safety, even surrounded by enemies. Odysseus, the master storyteller, is also the master builder—of horses, ships, beds, plans of attack, and means of escape. As soon as Calypso allows her lover to leave her island, he begins work constructing a raft; his detailed, obsessive account of how he built his marriage bed echoes that earlier moment of construction. In leaving Calypso, Odysseus chooses something that he built with his own mind and hands, rather than something given to him. Whereas Calypso longs to hide, clothe, feed, and possess him, Athena enables Odysseus to construct his own schemes out of the materials she provides.

But the bed is a product of nature, as well as of human labor; it is growing, alive, and divinely blessed. Trees are not, in fact, permanent or immovable objects; Odysseus cuts down trees to make his raft. This bed is thus a rather different kind of symbol from the nailed-down bed to which the frustrated narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is confined (a symbol of the restrictions imposed on women in nineteenth-century New England). Odysseus' bed is difficult to move, but not immovable. Its permanence and its mutability stem from the same cause—the life of the olive tree. In returning to Ithaca and to this bed, Odysseus has chosen a world in which his own work is part of something larger than himself, and where he is woven into relationships that are both rooted and changing.

When Penelope and Odysseus are finally reunited, Odysseus puts his arms around his wife, and a simile invokes the experience of shipwrecked swimmers, suddenly catching sight of land, and crawling to shore, "their skin all caked with brine." We must initially think that this image applies primarily to Odysseus himself—who is the one embracing Penelope when the image begins and who has, in real life, experienced shipwreck. But the

narrator then suggests that it is Penelope, not Odysseus, who is like these survivors: "So glad she was to see her own dear husband, / and her white arms would not let go his neck." A surprising slippage happens through the imagery, from the man's to the woman's point of view. With Calypso, Odysseus would have been frozen into the role of the weak, dependent survivor of shipwreck. The mortal Penelope may not know all of Odysseus' many identities and may not have plumbed his capacity for lies. But she understands his suffering, because she too has lived through twenty years of pain—caused by his own absence, in war and with Calypso.

Hated Odysseus

Odysseus is defined by his mutual loving relationships—with his wife, Penelope; his patron goddess, Athena; his father, Laertes; his dead mother, Anticleia; his son, Telemachus—and by his less-mutual loving relationships with Calypso, Nausicaa, Eurycleia, and Circe. He is also defined, even more explicitly, by his enemies, those who hate him and dislike him. In Book 19, we learn about Odysseus' grandfather Autolycus, whose own name suggests "Real Wolf," and "who was the best / of all mankind at telling lies and stealing." Autolycus gave the baby Odysseus his name, based on the fact that he himself has managed to make so many enemies:

> *"I am*
> *disliked by many, all across the world,*
> *and I dislike them back."* (19.406–8)

The verb *odussomai,* meaning "to be angry at," "to dislike," or "to hate," sounds similar to Odysseus. Athena connects Odysseus with the same verb in Book 1, asking Zeus why he bears a grudge against her favorite: "Why do you dismiss Odysseus?" she asks. The

etymology suggests that Odysseus is himself much disliked, by both gods and other human beings, and also that he takes after his grandfather by acting in hostile fashion to other people: he tricks, steals from, and hates. Poseidon is, of course, his most powerful enemy, but Odysseus arouses dislike, hatred, and anger in many others during the course of the narrative, and displays his own capacity for rage.

Odysseus is the hero of his own story, and the poem to some extent glorifies its protagonist and valorizes his claims to dominance. But it also articulates some important questions about the moral qualities of this liar, pirate, colonizer, deceiver, and thief, who is so often in disguise, absent, or napping, while other people—those he owns, those he leads—suffer and die, and who directly kills so many people.

Odysseus' use of aggression and violence is presented as problematic in certain ways. The poem raises questions about whether Odysseus, as a fighter who has spent ten years at war, sacking and pillaging a foreign city, can adapt himself enough to succeed in an entirely different context—or whether he will bring the battlefield home with him. In some cases, we see Odysseus managing to modify the conventions of the Homeric battlefield to fit a new challenge. For instance, when he first meets the young Phaeacian princess Nausicaa, he supplicates her—an action familiar from warriors on the Trojan battlefield, when one man kneels in abjection and touches the knees and beard of another, to beg for his life. But in this new version of the formulaic supplication scene, Odysseus is kneeling before somebody who has no beard and who poses no kind of military threat. The supplicator, in this version, is rather more physically threatening than the person to whom he prays. Odysseus studiously avoids the traditional touching of the knees, which would only alarm the girl, and shows his own ability to adapt techniques practiced at Troy for entirely different situations.

But the poem also seems to question how fully this epic hero can adapt to a new, nonmilitary world. When Odysseus is about to go through the straits between Scylla and Charybdis, Circe warns him not to put on his armor and try to fight against Scylla, which will be futile and will only make the situation worse. But Odysseus insists on doing so—increasing the danger to his men. Similarly, in leaving the island of Polyphemus the Cyclops, Odysseus is unable to resist shouting back,

> *"Cyclops! If any mortal asks you how*
> *your eye was mutilated and made blind,*
> *say that Odysseus, the city-sacker,*
> *Laertes' son, who lives in Ithaca,*
> *destroyed your sight."* (9.502–6)

Odysseus cannot resist the urge to gain *kleos*—the honor that comes from being the named subject of heroic legend. He is able to become nameless ("No man") only for a little while.

One of the epithets most commonly used of Odysseus is *polytlas*, which means "much-enduring." It may suggest how much Odysseus has endured and suffered, and it may also suggest how much he is capable of enduring: his stubbornness, his tenacity, his courage, his relentless drive to achieve his own ends. In modern terms, we can see Odysseus as a veteran soldier with his own version of PTSD: he is moody, prone to weeping, often withdrawn, and liable to sudden fits of aggression. We can also, rather differently, see Odysseus as a man who keeps on repeating the same behavior patterns that he has displayed in Troy. He succeeded in taking the foreign city by a mixture of aggression with deceitful infiltration, in the Wooden Horse, which the Trojans themselves took into their town; he succeeds in taking back his own household through much the same means, sneaking inside the house in hidden form (not inside a horse, but inside the body of a

beggar), and emerging to slaughter the inhabitants.

Odysseus seems to have complicated feelings about his own past history. The temptation offered by the Sirens is to listen forever, and know everything that the Greeks and Trojans suffered in the war. One might think that Odysseus would want this, above all, as an ego boost: the Sirens address him as the "glory of the Greeks," and their songs promise an endless retelling of Odysseus' own finest hours; they call to him to listen,

> *"since we know everything the Greeks and Trojans*
> *suffered in Troy, by gods' will; and we know*
> *whatever happens anywhere on earth."* (12.189–91)

The temptation is as much knowledge as glory. The Sirens offer Odysseus what no single individual engaged in the conflict can have: a full and complete understanding of what happened in the war and what it meant. In resisting the Sirens, Odysseus acknowledges that he will have to go on acting out the consequences of the war, without ever being able fully to know what it was all about.

Odysseus puts in a special request to Demodocus, the Phaeacian bard, to sing the story of the Wooden Horse—the trick that Odysseus himself devised in order to infiltrate and sack the city. Demodocus complies, and tells how the Greek warriors, including Odysseus, hid inside the manufactured horse; how the Trojans pulled the horse inside, and left it at the summit of their city, as an offering to the gods; and how, during the night, the gang of fighters jumped out of the hollow cavity, scattered across the city, and began slaughtering the people of Troy. One might expect that Odysseus would be happy to hear the story of his own greatest military triumph—a story that, after all, he had just asked to hear. But his response is surprising. Rather than being glad (as he was glad to hear the story of Aphrodite committing adultery), he bursts

into tears, and a striking simile seems to conflate his emotional response with that of his own victims.

> *Odysseus was melting into tears;*
> *his cheeks were wet with weeping, as a woman*
> *weeps, as she falls to wrap her arms around*
> *her husband, fallen fighting for his home*
> *and children.* (8.521–25)

The simile compares the desperate weeping of Odysseus, a military conqueror, to the grief of a woman who is a victim of war, a woman whose husband is dying and who knows that she herself, and her children, will soon be led off into slavery by the victors. Perhaps the comparison suggests that Odysseus himself feels some kind of deep guilt over the suffering that he himself has caused, in his instrumental role in sacking not only Troy but many other towns and settlements. Or perhaps the simile works to downplay Odysseus' responsibility for the suffering he has caused, by inviting us to see him as a suffering victim, even in his role as the sacker of cities.

In the final book of the *Odyssey*, after Odysseus has slaughtered the suitors, Eupeithes, the father of one of the dead men, urges the people of Ithaca to rise up together and kill Odysseus in revenge. He offers a searing indictment of Odysseus.

"This scheming man,
my friends, has done us all most monstrous wrongs.
First, he took many good men off to sail
with him, and lost the ships, and killed the men!
Now he has come and murdered all the best
of Cephallenia. Come on, before
he sneaks away to Pylos or to Elis,
we have to act! We will be shamed forever
unless we take revenge on him for killing
our sons and brothers. I would have no wish
to live; I would prefer to die and join
the boys already dead. We have to stop them
escaping overseas! Come on, right now!" (24.425–37)

The words come from the mouth of a grieving parent whose young son has been shot by Odysseus the day before. It represents a limited, highly personal point of view. Moreover, Eupeithes presumably does not know how unpleasantly his son behaved, when he had the chance to lord it up in the household of the absent Odysseus.

But Eupeithes, whose name means "Persuasive," is making a point that readers of the poem may find surprisingly persuasive—as do the people of Ithaca. Antinous is depicted as an arrogant, supercilious young man, who drinks too much, exploits the resources of an absent home owner, treats Penelope and Telemachus with disrespect, and is cruel and unwelcoming to Odysseus in his guise as a poor migrant. Yet the grief of his father reminds us that the murdered Antinous was very young, probably not much older than Telemachus. Young men often behave oafishly, but they may mature in time—unless they get an arrow through the neck first. Eupeithes' speech reminds us also that the killing of the suitors is not an isolated incident; Odysseus has made an unfortunate habit of leading young men to their deaths. When

Odysseus addresses the men who row his ship, he repeatedly calls them "friends," *philoi*, a word that suggests a close tie of kinship or love. Odysseus is a smart talker, who knows the best words to use for a particular audience. But the narrator instead calls these men *hetairoi*, "companions" or "servants," a term that can suggest a much more hierarchical relationship. Of the troops Odysseus rounded up to take with him to Troy, some fell in battle, and all the rest die in various horrible ways in the course of their leader's journey home.

The first lines of the poem invite us to see these deaths in terms of the dead men's own folly or childish naïveté, because they chose to eat the Cattle of the Sun. They were "poor fools" (*nepioi*), a term that suggests childish thoughtlessness. This foolishness is sharply contrasted with Odysseus' own characteristic qualities of scheming intelligence, quick planning, and forward thinking (*metis*). But this prologue does not hint at the numerous other deaths suffered by the men in Odysseus' crew—including those who are eaten alive by the sea-monster Scylla when Odysseus chooses to sail past her island; those who are devoured by the Cyclops, thanks to Odysseus' insistence on visiting his cave; or those who are skewered from their ships and eaten by the man-eating giants, the Laestrygonians, when Odysseus docks the fleet at their island and moors only his own ship in a safe place outside the harbor. These deaths clearly have nothing to do with the men's cognitive or moral qualities. The prophet Tiresias predicts that, if Odysseus hurts the Cattle of the Sun, he will arrive home only "late and exhausted, in a stranger's boat, / having destroyed [his] men," and a similar prophecy is made by the goddess Circe. The participle here translated as "having destroyed" can also mean "having lost." The ambiguous phrasing matters, because the ultimate responsibility for all these deaths remains an open question.

Endings

The traditional poetic stories of archaic Greece included tales of how the heroes came home from the Trojan War—the *Nostoi*, as they were known. *The Odyssey* is obviously a story of *nostos*, meaning "homecoming" (the word from which we get "nostalgia," the pain of missing home). But the poem suggests that it may not be entirely easy to see what a homecoming is, and when exactly it happens. Coming home means more than simply reaching a particular spatial or geographical location. The hero reaches his home country of Ithaca when the poem is almost exactly halfway through. The remaining books trace a series of journeys across a tiny geographical area: from the port of Ithaca to the loyal swineherd's hut; back and forth between the hut and the palace; from the hallway to the marriage bed, and back again; out from the palace to the orchard, and back again to slaughter his fellow countrymen who are assembled in front of his house. Each of these locations seems to offer a different version of home, and one can wonder when and where Odysseus feels most fully that he has arrived.

Thanks to Athena's magic, Odysseus initially does not recognize Ithaca; it seems like yet another unfamiliar and probably dangerous place. Once the divine mist disperses, Odysseus knows that he is on Ithaca, but we can also see that his initial suspicions were in many ways correct: Ithaca is indeed a dangerous and unfamiliar place, and there are real questions about how and when Odysseus might be able to transform it again into the home that he left behind.

A key part of his strategy for doing so is to test the loyalty and behavior of various members of his household. He appears in disguise to the key players, each in turn, and tests their responses to his own persona as a homeless migrant. Those who pass the test are to be incorporated into Odysseus' plan and restored into the

household; those who fail are killed. Thanks to the long process by which Odysseus gradually infiltrates his way into the community of Ithaca, he is able to assess who will help him, and whom he must destroy in order to reassert his own power over his home.

But it is unclear when Odysseus finally achieves his ends and reaches his home, if indeed this moment ever comes. Odysseus is reunited with Penelope, but the poem continues. We see the ghosts of the suitors travel down to the underworld and meet the spirits of Achilles and Agamemnon, which might have been a kind of ending; but the poem continues. We see Odysseus reunite with his old father, Laertes; but the poem continues. Fighting breaks out on Ithaca between Odysseus and his supporters, and the friends and family members of the dead suitors. The battle grows intense, and Odysseus is wild with martial rage; only thanks to the intervention of Athena does it stop. And there the poem ends.

Scholars since antiquity have been puzzled by the ending of *The Odyssey*. Two Homeric scholars of the Library of Alexandria in the third and second centuries BCE, Aristarchus of Samothrace and Aristophanes of Byzantium (not the comic playwright), argued that the poem really ended at the moment when Odysseus and Penelope go to bed together; on this model, the real ending is in Book 23, when the narrator tells us,

> *Finally, at last,*
> *with joy the husband and the wife arrived*
> *back in the rites of their old marriage bed.* (23.293–95)

We do not know what grounds were given by these ancient scholars for treating the end of Book 23 and the whole of 24 as extraneous. Eustathius, a twelfth-century critic, tried to defend Book 24 on literary and semantic grounds, arguing that the recognition scene between Odysseus and his father is an essential element in the story.

Modern scholars have also argued about the "correct" or "original" place for the poem to end. Linguistic arguments have been made against Book 24, but these are highly debatable; Homer's language, as we have seen, is always a mixture of words and phrases from many different dialects and periods. The episode involving the ghosts of the dead suitors is unusual—but the situation is also unusual. The encounter between Laertes and Odysseus seems cruel to some readers, since Odysseus has no need to "test" his father, now that the suitors are already dead; yet it is arguably not out of character for Odysseus, a person "addicted to deceit," to keep spinning his lies even when they seem to serve no particular purpose.

Perhaps there are two related reasons that many readers have felt unsatisfied with the ending of *The Odyssey*. First, it feels less than definitive as a place to stop the story. More events will clearly happen after this conflict between the Ithacans and Odysseus, which is stopped only thanks to the convenient intervention of the goddess. Moreover, a curtailed battle does not feel like the proper culmination of a story of homecoming—unless Odysseus feels most at home when he is killing his fellow countrymen.

Both of these "problems" are perhaps precisely the point. The poem refuses to offer us a definitive moment at which home and peace are achieved, once and for all. Odysseus never sets aside his desire to fight and kill his fellow men, or his yearning to wander and be absent. According to the prophecy given by the dead spirit of the prophet Tiresias in Book 11, Odysseus will not remain and settle in Ithaca. He has at least one more journey to complete, to a land that is, from the perspective of the Greek islands, the strangest of all: where nobody knows the sea, where people eat food without salt, and nobody has even seen a boat. He will know he has arrived when he meets "someone who calls the object on my back / a winnowing fan" (a tool used in preindustrial agriculture to separate wheat from chaff). Only in this utterly alien

location, Tiresias suggests, can Odysseus finally put to rest the anger of Poseidon, the Lord of the Sea.

But even if he were ever to return from this obviously mythical location, one might wonder whether Odysseus would be able to settle down in peace and comfort in Ithaca—the land that would still be populated by the families of those Odysseus has killed. In antiquity, there were a number of legends about what happened to the protagonist after the poem ends—alternatives that may reflect ancient recognition of how little the last book wraps things up. One story tells that this criminally aggressive hero was sent into exile for killing the suitors. Other ancient stories express discomfort with Odysseus' habit of committing adultery. We are told that he had a son by Circe, named Telegonus, who sailed in search of him and eventually killed him with a poisoned spear. Several stories provide alternative futures for Penelope: either she was killed by Odysseus himself for sleeping with Antinous the suitor; or, creepily, she married Odysseus' son Telegonus; or she was spirited to Arcadia and seduced by the god Hermes, and became the mother of the god Pan. All of these stories seem to suggest dissatisfaction with the state of Odysseus and Penelope's marriage, which is defined in the poem primarily by absence, pain, economic dependence, and mutual mistrust.

The Odyssey is in some ways like a fairy tale. "Bad" people are killed, and the "good" hero triumphs. But the poem is surprisingly clear-sighted about both the problematic tendencies of its own hero and its own dominant fantasy. Everybody likes the idea of a radical reversal of fortune, a surprising and long-delayed final victory, a settled, forever home. This is a text that allows us to explore our desire for power and for permanence, in the world of imagination, while also showing us the darker side of these deep human dreams, hopes, and fears.

Reception

In antiquity, Homer was traditionally said to have been a blind man from the Greek island of Chios. This popular idea is expressed in a poem from the sixth century BCE called the "Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo," which tells how Apollo and his twin sister, Artemis, were born. Their mother, Leto, was pregnant with the twins by Zeus, and had to find a place to give birth: a hard task, since Zeus' jealous wife, Hera, had made all lands on earth reject her. Finally Leto reached Delos, which was supposedly a floating island, unattached to the sea floor. Since this was a space unattached to the earth, the island welcomed the laboring goddess. Delos was rewarded with a special sanctuary to the god Apollo, who felt deep attachment to the island as the place of his birth. The poem ends by instructing the girls who worship Apollo on Delos to remember the poet who composed the present song:

> *Bless me, Apollo, bless me, Artemis;*
> *and greetings, all you girls! Remember me*
> *whenever any poor and homeless stranger*
> *comes here and asks you, "Girls, who is to you*
> *the sweetest of all singers? Which one gives you*
> *most pleasure?" All of you must answer him,*
> *"He is a blind man and he makes his home*
> *in rocky Chios; all his songs will be*
> *the best forever."*

The historian Thucydides, writing in the late fifth century BCE, confidently quotes the passage as evidence that Homer was a blind man from Chios. Often seen as the father of modern or "scientific" historiography, Thucydides prides himself on his skeptical attitude towards implausible traditional myths. But it is extremely unlikely that the person who composed these lines had any hand in

creating the Homeric epics. The hymn was probably composed by a member of a family or professional organization who lived on Chios in the sixth century, calling themselves the Homeridae—the children of Homer. These people gave performances of *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* (or portions from them) and also created their own poetic compositions, which they presented as also "Homeric." This particular hymn may have been composed by an active member of this clan to honor an unusual double festival to Apollo of Delos and Delphi in 522 BCE—far later than the composition of the Homeric poems themselves.

The testimony about the "blind man from Chios," then, does not tell us anything about the composition of *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* themselves—which probably originated a good two hundred years earlier. But the "Homeric Hymn" does bring into sharp relief the fact that already in archaic, preclassical Greece, the Homeric poems had a place at the absolute top of the poetic canon: they were the "sweetest," the "best forever." Moreover, the notion that "Homer" is a poet who celebrates a birth on a floating island may express an awareness that these poems had evolved out of a long oral history, from multiple different local traditions. Homer, like the god of poetry, emerges from an ambiguous or floating origin. Everybody in the Greek-speaking world wanted to claim and remake Homer for themselves—a process that continues to this day.

The Odyssey was, along with *The Iliad*, the foundation of Greek and Roman elite education. Sections from the poems were also performed by rhapsodes to adults, for entertainment. All upper-class men in the Graeco-Roman world knew the Homeric poems well. Aeschylus is said to have called his tragedies "slices from the banquet of Homer." Homer (and the rest of the archaic epic tradition) provided the basis for much of classical literature: tragedy, but also history, later forms of epic, pastoral, and the novel.

But Greek and Roman writers often struggled with the legacy of Homer. Plato's character Socrates in the *Republic* famously insists that Homer, along with the Athenian tragedians, must be excluded from the ideal city, because his work provides a false image of reality, and stirs up emotions that are better repressed and controlled. Plato and others criticized the depiction of the gods in the poems, for their lack of morality. Odysseus himself is often a problematic character in later Greek and Roman literature, characterized by his abuse of cleverness for self-interested goals. In Sophocles' *Ajax,* he is a commonsensical realist, but in the same author's *Philoctetes,* as well as in Euripides' *Hecuba*, he is a scheming sophist, willing to say or do anything (including murder children) in order to achieve his own military ends. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Odysseus becomes "cruel Odysseus," the unscrupulous destroyer of Troy, which was the home of the poem's hero. But Aeneas himself becomes a new kind of Odysseus, in his search for a home that exists only in the future: the city of Rome itself.

The canonical status of Homer, combined with the philosophical and ethical challenges involved in treating these poems as a source of "truth," led to a tradition of allegorizing the various adventures of Odysseus. We have, for example, an extensive Neoplatonic interpretation by Porphyry (third century CE) of the episode in Book 13 when Odysseus reaches Ithaca and comes to the cave of the Nymphs. Porphyry notes the fact that there is apparently no such cave on Ithaca, and that the details of the description are extremely implausible. The passage must therefore, he suggests, be read as an extended metaphor for the soul's place inside the material, terrestrial world.

The Odyssey continued to be read and studied, alongside *The Iliad*, throughout classical antiquity. But knowledge of Greek became extremely rare in the Western world after the fall of the western Roman Empire, in the fifth century CE. Dante had no access to the original *Odyssey,* though he knew the story of

Odysseus. In his *Inferno*, he places Ulysses (the Romanized name for Odysseus) low down in Hell (the eighth circle out of nine, the circle of Fraud), because he leads his people by deceit into destruction. Dante's silver-tongued, self-serving, and falsely inspiring Ulysses gives his men a rousing, deceitful speech urging them to continue their adventures for "virtue and knowledge"; he is urging them on, yet again, to shipwreck, on the Mountain of Purgatory. This rhetorically gifted version of Odysseus is not entirely alien to the character we meet in Homer.

Texts of Homer were preserved in Arabic translation and in the Byzantine (eastern) Empire. We still have hundreds of important Homeric manuscripts from the eastern empire, dating from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries CE. When Byzantium fell in 1453, refugees from Constantinople brought their knowledge of Greek with them to Italy. The Italian humanists of the fifteenth century learned Greek, read Homer, and began to spread their knowledge through Europe, by means of printed editions and translations of the Homeric poems. The poems were translated first into Latin, and then into all the vernacular languages of Europe.

The first complete *Odyssey* in English was that of George Chapman, in 1615. Chapman's *Odyssey*, in rhyming pentameter couplets, presents the hero as a true soldier and gentleman, a proto-Christian and proto-Stoic whose greatest virtue is his ability to endure suffering and control his impulses. But not everybody in seventeenth-century England was so optimistic about the possibility of claiming Odysseus as a Christian hero. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Odysseus' clever, deceptively inspiring rhetoric and tendency to get lost on a long journey to a homeland from which he has been excluded by divine power are now the characteristics of Satan—the epic antihero who shows us what is wrong with classical notions of heroism from Milton's perspective.

In the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope, along with a team

of collaborators, produced translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* that dominated the market and transformed interpretation of the poems for several generations to come. Pope makes *The Odyssey* into a text about those essentially eighteenth-century preoccupations: proper manners and good government. In Pope's version, Odysseus is the ultimate hero of politeness and tact, the man who always has the appropriate response to every social challenge. He is also a just monarch, whose knowledge of suffering informs his exertion of power over the "nations" whom he governs.

John Keats, who knew no Greek, wrote "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" in 1816; the appeal of Chapman, imagined in the sonnet like the discovery of the New World, comes partly from the fact that Chapman offered a glimpse of a Homer that was different from the familiar, normalized Homer of Pope. Dipping into Chapman's Homer makes him feel like an astronomer, "when a new planet swims into his ken." As we have seen, scholars in the nineteenth and then twentieth century discovered "new" versions of Homer by searching for the real places that might lie behind the texts, and also by reconstructing the conditions in which these poems were created. But *The Odyssey* could also be used as a way of thinking about what might be old and worn out in the Western cultural tradition. Tennyson's "Ulysses" imagines the protagonist as a weary but compulsive imperial explorer, whose restless boredom makes it impossible for him ever to settle at home: he insists on pushing onward to the western stars, "made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

The stubborn persistence of interest in *The Odyssey* in modern times makes it impossible to mention more than a tiny fraction of the adaptations that it has inspired. New versions of Odysseus' story were created in the literary world, perhaps most famously by James Joyce in *Ulysses* (1922), which uses the book structure of *The*

Odyssey for a stylistically virtuosic narrative of one ordinary man's day wandering around Dublin before returning to his wife. In *Omeros* (1990), Derek Walcott used some of the characters from *The Odyssey* as the basis for his poetic account of life on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. *The Odyssey* has been adapted numerous times in film, television, comic books, music, and visual art, as well as in poetry and novels.

Children often encounter stories from *The Odyssey* as their first exposure to ancient Greek culture. *The Odyssey* is also often used in college literature classes, as the starting point for studying Western or world literature. It is a poem that has the power to speak to people from many different social backgrounds in the contemporary Anglo-American world. Reading *The Odyssey* with fresh, curious, and critical eyes may help us not only rethink our assumptions about people in the past, but also break down some of our modern distinctions and assumptions. Odysseus is a migrant, but he is also a political and military leader, a strategist, a poet, a loving husband and father, an adulterer, a homeless person, an athlete, a disabled cripple, a soldier with a traumatic past, a pirate, thief and liar, a fugitive, a colonial invader, a home owner, a sailor, a construction worker, a mass murderer, and a war hero. Immersing ourselves in his story, and considering how these categories can exist in the same imaginative space, may help us reconsider both the origins of Western literature, and our infinitely complex contemporary world.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

When I was eight years old, my primary school put on a production of a (much-shortened) *Odyssey,* complete with costumes, song, and dance. The play starred the cute troublemaker in my class as Odysseus, the headmaster of the school as Polyphemus (the one-eyed monster outwitted by his tiny opponents), and me in pigtails as the goddess Athena.

It was a turning point in my life. I was enthralled by the production, not only because we could pretend to gouge out the headmaster's eye (thrilling though that was), or just because I was cast to play a goddess (ditto), but because of the story and the atmosphere it evoked: a world of magic and adventure, of diverse cultures (both human and nonhuman, welcoming and murderous, foreign and familiar), and of an individual's struggle to survive and return home. After this experience, I was inspired to read as many Greek myths as I could find, including versions of *The Odyssey* itself. I went on to learn Latin and Greek, to read classics at Oxford, and to become a professional classicist. Over the decades since my eight-year-old performance, *The Odyssey* has always been with me.

In planning to translate the poem into English, my first thoughts were of style. The original is written in a highly rhythmical form of verse. It reads nothing like prose and nothing

like any spoken or nonpoetic kinds of discourse. Many modern poets in the Anglo-American tradition write free verse, and modern British and American readers are not usually accustomed to reading long narratives with a regular metrical beat, except for earlier literature like Shakespeare. Most contemporary translators of Homer have not attempted to create anything like a regular line beat, though they often lay out their text as if it were verse. But *The Odyssey* is a poem, and it needs to have a predictable and distinctive rhythm that can be easily heard when the text is read out loud. The original is in six-footed lines (dactylic hexameters), the conventional meter for archaic Greek narrative verse. I used iambic pentameter, because it is the conventional meter for regular English narrative verse—the rhythm of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Keats, and plenty of more recent anglophone poets. I have spent many hours reading aloud, both the Greek original and my own work in progress. Homer's music is quite different from mine, but my translation sings to its own regular and distinctive beat.

My version is the same length as the original, with exactly the same number of lines. I chose to write within this difficult constraint because any translation without such limitations will tend to be longer than the original, and I wanted a narrative pace that could match its stride to Homer's nimble gallop. Moreover, in reading the original, one is constantly aware of the rhythms and the units that make up elements of every line, as well as of the ongoing movement of the narrative—like a large, elaborate piece of embroidery made of tiny, still visible stitches. I wanted my translation to mark its own nature as a web of poetic language, with a sentence structure that is, like that of Homer, audibly built up out of smaller units of sense. There is often a notion, especially in the Anglo-American world, that a translation is good insofar as it disguises its own existence as a translation; translations are praised for being "natural." I hope that my translation is readable

and fluent, but that its literary artifice is clearly apparent.

Matthew Arnold famously claimed that translators of Homer must convey four supposedly essential qualities of Homeric style: plainness, simplicity, directness of thought, and nobility. But Homeric style is actually quite often redundant and very often repetitious—not particularly simple or direct. Homer is also very often not "noble": the language is not colloquial, and it avoids obscenity, but it is not bombastic or grandiloquent. The notion that Homeric epic must be rendered in grand, ornate, rhetorically elevated English has been with us since the time of Alexander Pope. It is past time, I believe, to reject this assumption. Homer's language is markedly rhythmical, but it is not difficult or ostentatious. *The Odyssey* relies on coordinated, not subordinated syntax ("and then this, and then this, and then this," rather than "although this, because of that, when this, which was this, on account of that"). I have frequently aimed for a certain level of simplicity, often using fairly ordinary, straightforward, and readable English. In using language that is largely simple, my goal is not to make Homer sound "primitive," but to mark the fact that stylistic pomposity is entirely un-Homeric. I also hope to invite readers to respond more actively with the text. Impressive displays of rhetoric and linguistic force are a good way to seem important and invite a particular kind of admiration, but they tend to silence dissent and discourage deeper modes of engagement. A consistently elevated style can make it harder for readers to keep track of what is at stake in the story. My translation is, I hope, recognizable as an epic poem, but it is one that avoids trumpeting its own status with bright, noisy linguistic fireworks, in order to invite a more thoughtful consideration of what the narrative means, and the ways it matters.

I have also tried to break up the plainness with phrases and passages in quite different registers. Sometimes the metaphors and similes are surprising, as when the women of Phaeacia work

the wool "with fingers quick as rustling poplar leaves." I echo the oddness of Homeric color terms (with terms such as "purple" waves), and the Homeric eye for things that sparkle (like dancing boys, whose legs were "bright with speed"). Sometimes there are slightly strange phrases or metaphors which have their own kind of resonance—as when Odysseus, having survived shipwreck, hides under a pile of leaves, and is compared to a glowing torch, used by a farmer in the outback "to save the seed of fire and keep a source."

The formulaic elements in Homer, especially the repeated epithets, pose a particular challenge. The epithets applied to Dawn, Athena, Hermes, Zeus, Penelope, Telemachus, Odysseus, and the suitors repeat over and over in the original. But in my version, I have chosen deliberately to interpret these epithets in several different ways, depending on the demands of the scene at hand. I do not want to deceive the unsuspecting reader about the nature of the original poem; rather, I hope to be truthful about my own text—its relationships with its readers and with the original. In an oral or semiliterate culture, repeated epithets give a listener an anchor in a quick-moving story. In a highly literate society such as our own, repetitions are likely to feel like moments to skip. They can be a mark of writerly laziness or unwillingness to acknowledge one's own interpretative position, and can send a reader to sleep. I have used the opportunity offered by the repetitions to explore the multiple different connotations of each epithet. The enduring Odysseus can be a "veteran" or "resilient" or "stoical," while the wily Odysseus can be a "trickster" or speak "deceitfully," depending on the needs of a particular passage. I have tried to bring out the beauty in the formulaic scenes that repeat, as normalized cultural practices, actions that will be alien to every modern reader—as when the people of Pylos are sacrificing "black bulls for blue Poseidon, Lord of Earthquakes," or in the many moments when black ships, equipped with oars and sails, travel

across the water from one island to another: "A fair wind whistled and our ships sped on / across the journey-ways of fish."

I hope there is in my translation, as in the original, a wide range of stylistic registers. There are descriptive passages that should combine the simple with the sublime, as in the evocation of Mount Olympus, the home of the gods:

> *The place is never shaken by the wind,*
> *or wet with rain or blanketed by snow.*
> *A cloudless sky is spread above the mountain,*
> *white radiance all round. The blessed gods*
> *live there in happiness forevermore.* (6:42–46)

In Homer, there is something marvelous not only in descriptions of the gods, but even in the most ordinary experiences, like spending a warm summer night outside, "surrounded by the rustling of the porch," or when Queen Arete of Phaeacia is sitting at home working the wool with her women, and we are told that she "sat beside the hearth and spun / sea-purpled yarn." There are moments that are strange and beautiful at the same time, as when Menelaus has to hide among the smelly seals to wait for the old Sea God Proteus:

> *Around him sleep the clustering seals, the daughters*
> *of lovely Lady Brine. Their breath smells sour*
> *from gray seawater, pungent salty depths.* (4.402–4)

Sometimes there is a horrible, paradoxical kind of beauty to be found even in moments of terrible violence—as when Odysseus looks round his hall at the corpses of the boys whom he has slaughtered:

He saw them fallen, all of them, so many,
lying in blood and dust, like fish hauled up
out of the dark-gray sea in fine-mesh nets. . . .
The sun shines down and takes their life away. (22.383–88)

Other moments should arouse a sense of curiosity or excitement or horror or comedy. I wanted to bring out the particular ways in which Homer can be funny—in, for example, Nausicaa's obvious, supposedly concealed desire for Odysseus ("I hope I get a man like this as husband," she innocently remarks), or in Athena's almost convincing role-playing as a little girl:

Divine Athena winked at him and said,
"Here, Mr. Foreigner, this is the house." (7.47–48)

Simple language sometimes helps convey simple but intense, consuming feelings—as when Odysseus says, "I miss my family. I have been gone / so long it hurts." Simplicity of diction can also make clear feelings that are far from simple—as in the scene when Penelope and Odysseus meet for the first time after he kills her suitors, when she has not yet recognized him as her husband:

He sat beside the pillar,
and kept his eyes down, waiting to find out
whether the woman who once shared his bed
would speak to him. She sat in silence, stunned. (23.90–93)

I have tried to make sure that a reader can feel inside the characters in the poem, to convey the ways that each character in the poem has her or his own distinctive point of view—the immaturity and vulnerability of Telemachus, for example, when he tries to speak out against the suitors, but ends up bursting into tears: "He stopped, frustrated, flung the scepter down / and burst out crying." I hope readers can see each character, even the minor

ones, as people with a rounded, complete perspective on their lives. For instance, in my version of the hanging of the slave women, I aim to invite genuine empathy rather than an objectifying thrill; while other translators call their death "piteous" or "pitiful," in my version we glimpse their pain, not the feelings of a spectator: it is "an agony"—"They gasped / feet twitching for a while, but not for long."

It is traditional in statements like this Translator's Note to bewail one's own inadequacy when trying to be faithful to the original. Like many contemporary translation theorists, I believe that we need to rethink the terms in which we talk about translation. My translation is, like all translations, an entirely different text from the original poem. Translation always, necessarily, involves interpretation; there is no such thing as a translation that provides anything like a transparent window through which a reader can see the original. The gendered metaphor of the "faithful" translation, whose worth is always secondary to that of a male-authored original, acquires a particular edge in the context of a translation by a woman of *The Odyssey,* a poem that is deeply invested in female fidelity and male dominance. I have taken very seriously the task of understanding the language of the original text as deeply as I can, and working through what Homer may have meant in archaic and classical Greece. I have also taken seriously the task of creating a new and coherent English text, which conveys something of that understanding but operates within an entirely different cultural context. The Homeric text grows inside my translation, like Athena's olive tree inside the bed made by Odysseus, "with delicate long leaves, full-grown and green, / as sturdy as a pillar."

My translation is written in a style that echoes the rhythms and phrases of contemporary anglophone speech. It may be tempting to imagine that a translation of a very ancient poem would be somehow better if it used the language of an earlier era.

Mild stylistic archaism is often accepted without question in translations of ancient texts and can be presented as if it were a mark of authenticity. But of course, the English of the nineteenth or early twentieth century is no closer to Homeric Greek than the language of today. The use of a noncolloquial or archaizing linguistic register can blind readers to the real, inevitable, and vast gap between the Greek original and any modern translation. My use of contemporary language—rather than the English of a generation or two ago—is meant to remind readers that this text can engage us in a direct way, and also that it is genuinely ancient. My Homer does not speak in your grandparents' English, since that language is no closer to the wine-dark sea than your own. I have tried to keep to a register that is recognizably speakable and readable, while skirting between the Charybdis of artifice and the Scylla of slang.

All modern translations of ancient texts exist in a time, a place, and a language that are entirely alien from those of the original. All modern translations are equally modern. The question facing translators and their readers is whether to try to disguise this fact, through stylistic tricks such as archaism and an elevated, artificially "literary" register, or to underline it, and thereby encourage readers to be aware that the text exists in two different temporal and spatial moments at once. I have tried to make my translation sound markedly poetic and sometimes linguistically distinctive, even odd. But I have also aimed for a fresh and contemporary register. The shock of encountering an ancient author speaking in largely recognizable language can make him seem more strange, and newly strange. I would like to invite readers to experience a sense of connection to this ancient text, while also recognizing its vast distance from our own place and time. Homer is, and is not, our contemporary.

A translator has a responsibility to acknowledge her own agency and to wrestle, in explicit and conscious ways, not only

with the multiple meanings of the original in its own culture but also with what her own text may mean, and the effects it may have on its readers. Because *The Odyssey* has become such a foundational text in our educational system and in our imagination of Western history, I believe it is particularly important for the translator to think through and tease out its values, and to allow the reader to see the cracks and fissures in its constructed fantasy. I see this process not as a denial or abandonment of the original text, but as a way to pay deep attention to the original, most especially in the moments when it may contradict itself.

For example, *The Odyssey* is a poem that may seem to normalize or valorize the treatment of non-Western people as monsters. I have made clear, especially in my version of the Polyphemus episode, that this is not entirely true: the text allows for a certain amount of sympathy and even admiration for this maimed non-Greek person. Unlike many modern translators, I have avoided describing the Cyclops with words such as "savage," which carry with them the legacy of early modern and modern forms of colonialism—a legacy that is, of course, anachronistic in the world of *The Odyssey*.

The elite households represented in *The Odyssey* all include a large staff of domestic slaves to work in the house, preparing and serving food and taking care of their masters' clothes, and field slaves to work the estate and tend the animals. The language used to describe these people poses a particular challenge to the translator. To translate a domestic female slave, called in the original a *dmoe* ("female-house-slave"), as a "maid" or "domestic servant" would imply that she was free. I have often used "slave," although it is less specific than many of the terms for types of slaves in the original. The need to acknowledge the fact and the horror of slavery, and to mark the fact that the idealized society depicted in the poem is one where slavery is shockingly taken for granted, seems to me to outweigh the need to specify, in every

instance, the type of slave. I have also used the terms "house girl" and "house boy." The analogy with a slave-owning plantation in the antebellum American South is certainly not exact, but it is at least a little closer than the alternative analogies—of a Victorian stately home or a modern nightclub.

I try to avoid importing contemporary types of sexism into this ancient poem, instead shining a clear light on the particular forms of sexism and patriarchy that do exist in the text, which are only partly familiar from our world. For instance, in the scene where Telemachus oversees the hanging of the slaves who have been sleeping with the suitors, most translations introduce derogatory language ("sluts" or "whores"), suggesting that these women are being punished for a genuinely objectionable pattern of behavior, as if their sexual history actually justified their deaths. The original Greek does not label these slaves with any derogatory language. Many contemporary translators render Helen's "dog-face" as if it were equivalent to "shameless Helen" (or "Helen the bitch"). I have kept the metaphor ("hounded"), and have also made sure that my Helen, like that of the original, refrains from blaming herself for what men have done in her name.

In the difficult case of Penelope, I have tried to maintain what I see as the most important feature of her characterization, which is opacity. But I have also done my best to bring out her pain, her courage, her intelligence, and her strength. One important tiny detail will illustrate some of the challenges involved in the depiction of Penelope, as well as suggest the kind of linguistic challenges with which I have wrestled throughout the poem. It comes at the start of Book 21, when Penelope goes to the storeroom to fetch the bow and axes and initiate the contest. Whether or not she has recognized her husband at this point, and whatever her motives in setting up the contest, her action of picking up the key in the door of the weaponry is momentous and consequential: it is what enables the whole denouement of the

poem. Milton echoes this episode in *Paradise Lost*, when Sin turns the "fatal key" of Hell, to enable Satan to ascend and invade Earth. Homer describes Penelope's hand at this moment with the epithet *pachus*, which means "thick." It is often used elsewhere in Homer to describe hands, but always, in other contexts, the hands of male warriors; Penelope is the only woman whose hand is "thick." There is a problem here, since in our culture, women are not supposed to have big, thick, or fat hands—and yet Penelope is clearly being presented in a positive light. Translators have tended to normalize the text by skipping the epithet, or by substituting the kind of word one might expect ("steady hand"). But the use of an epithet in an exceptional way signals the uniqueness and importance of this action. To call her hand "clenched," "swollen," or "fumbling" would risk suggesting that she might be incompetent, which is clearly not the point of the passage. A "heavy" hand might suggest that Penelope is reluctant to open the storeroom (as if she might also have a heavy heart); this would be a confusing signal to send, given that she proposed the contest herself. "Strong" seems too neutral, and not thick enough. So I used "muscular":

> *Her muscular, firm hand*
> *picked up the ivory handle of the key.* (21.7–8)

Weaving does in fact make a person's hands more muscular. I wanted to ensure that my translation, like the original, underlines Penelope's physical competence, which marks her as a character who plays a crucial part in the action—whether or not she knows what she is doing.

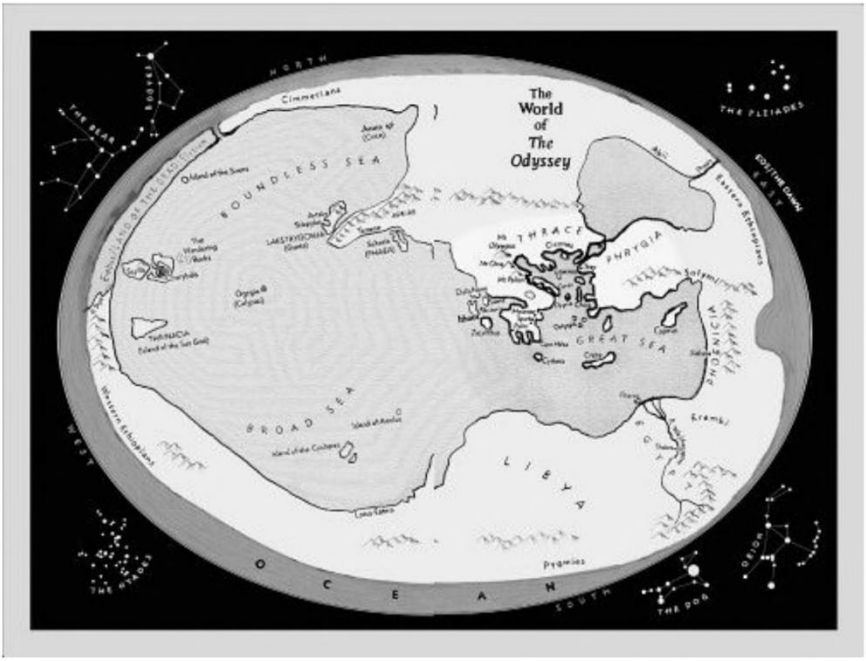
Throughout my work on this translation, I have thought hard about my different responsibilities: to the original text; to my readers; to the need to make sense; to the urge to question everything; to fiction, myth, and truth; to the demands of rhythm and the rumble of sound; to the feet that need to step in five

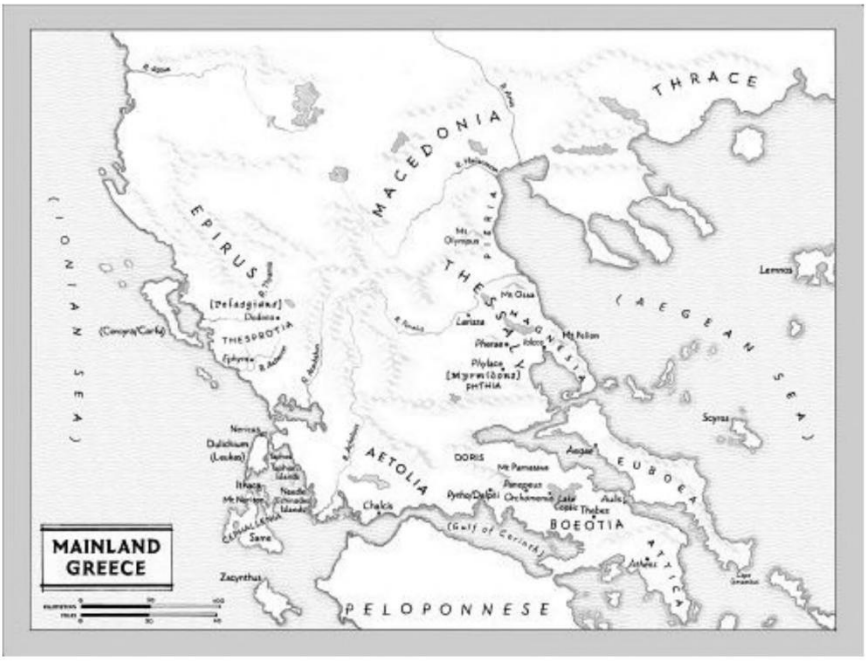
carefully trotting paces, and the story that needs to canter on its way. I have been aware, constantly, of gaps and impossibilities in providing escort to Homer from archaic Greece to the contemporary anglophone world, as I have woven, unwoven, and woven up again the fabric of this complex web.

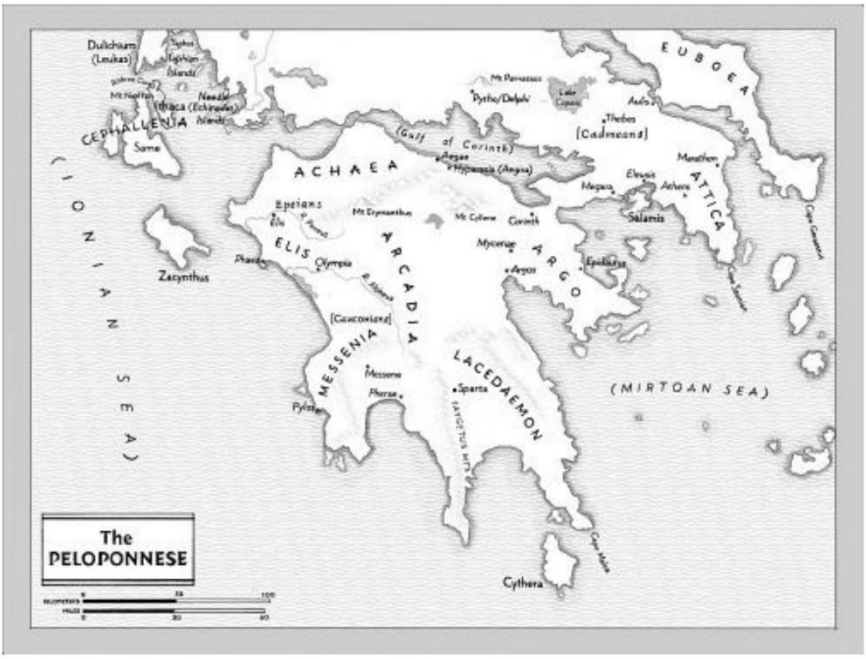
The Odyssey is a very ancient and very foreign text, although its long-standing prominence in Anglo-American and European cultures may mask its strangeness. Homer's concerns—with loyalty, families, migrants, consumerism, violence, war, poverty, identity, rhetoric, and lies—are in many ways deeply familiar, but we see them here in unfamiliar guises. The poem is concerned, above all, with the duties and dangers involved in welcoming foreigners into one's home. I hope my translation will enable contemporary readers to welcome and host this foreign poem, with all the right degrees of warmth, curiosity, openness, and suspicion.

There is a stranger outside your house. He is old, ragged, and dirty. He is tired. He has been wandering, homeless, for a long time, perhaps many years. Invite him inside. You do not know his name. He may be a thief. He may be a murderer. He may be a god. He may remind you of your husband, your father, or yourself. Do not ask questions. Wait. Let him sit on a comfortable chair and warm himself beside your fire. Bring him some food, the best you have, and a cup of wine. Let him eat and drink until he is satisfied. Be patient. When he is finished, he will tell his story. Listen carefully. It may not be as you expect.

MAPS







THE ODYSSEY

BOOK 1

The Boy and the Goddess

Tell me about a complicated man.
Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost
when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy,
and where he went, and who he met, the pain
he suffered in the storms at sea, and how
he worked to save his life and bring his men
back home. He failed to keep them safe; poor fools,
they ate the Sun God's cattle, and the god
kept them from home. Now goddess, child of Zeus,
tell the old story for our modern times.
Find the beginning.

All the other Greeks
who had survived the brutal sack of Troy
sailed safely home to their own wives—except
this man alone. Calypso, a great goddess,
had trapped him in her cave; she wanted him
to be her husband. When the year rolled round
in which the gods decreed he should go home
to Ithaca, his troubles still went on.
The man was friendless. All the gods took pity,
except Poseidon's anger never ended
until Odysseus was back at home.
But now the distant Ethiopians,
who live between the sunset and the dawn,
were worshipping the Sea God with a feast,
a hundred cattle and a hundred rams.
There sat the god, delighting in his banquet.
The other gods were gathered on Olympus,
in Father Zeus' palace. He was thinking
of fine, well-born Aegisthus, who was killed
by Agamemnon's famous son Orestes.
He told the deathless gods,

"This is absurd,
that mortals blame the gods! They say we cause
their suffering, but they themselves increase it
by folly. So Aegisthus overstepped:
he took the legal wife of Agamemnon,
then killed the husband when he came back home,
although he knew that it would doom them all.
We gods had warned Aegisthus; we sent down
perceptive Hermes, who flashed into sight
and told him not to murder Agamemnon
or court his wife; Orestes would grow up
and come back to his home to take revenge.
Aegisthus would not hear that good advice.
But now his death has paid all debts."

looked at him steadily and answered, "Father,
he did deserve to die. Bring death to all
who act like him! But I am agonizing
about Odysseus and his bad luck.
For too long he has suffered, with no friends,
sea all around him, sea on every side,
out on an island where a goddess lives,
daughter of fearful Atlas, who holds up
the pillars of the sea, and knows its depths—
those pillars keep the heaven and earth apart.
His daughter holds that poor unhappy man,
and tries beguiling him with gentle words
to cease all thoughts of Ithaca; but he
longs to see even just the smoke that rises
from his own homeland, and he wants to die.
You do not even care, Olympian!
Remember how he sacrificed to you
on the broad plain of Troy beside his ships?
So why do you dismiss Odysseus?"

"Daughter!" the Cloud God said, "You must be joking,
since how could I forget Odysseus?
He is more sensible than other humans,
and makes more sacrifices to the gods.
But Lord Poseidon rages, unrelenting,
because Odysseus destroyed the eye
of godlike Polyphemus, his own son,
the strongest of the Cyclopes—whose mother,
Thoösa, is a sea-nymph, child of Phorcys,
the sea king; and she lay beside Poseidon
inside a hollow cave. So now Poseidon
prevents Odysseus from reaching home
but does not kill him. Come then, we must plan:
how can he get back home? Poseidon must
give up his anger, since he cannot fight
alone against the will of all the gods."

Athena's eyes lit up and she replied,

"Great Father, if the blessed gods at last
will let Odysseus return back home,
then hurry, we must send our messenger,
Hermes the giant-slayer. He must swoop
down to Ogygia right away and tell
the beautiful Calypso we have formed
a firm decision that Odysseus
has waited long enough. He must go home.
And I will go to Ithaca to rouse
the courage of his son, and make him call
a meeting, and speak out against the suitors
who kill his flocks of sheep and longhorn cattle
unstoppably. Then I will send him off
to Pylos and to Sparta, to seek news
about his father's journey home, and gain
a noble reputation for himself."

With that, she tied her sandals on her feet,
the marvelous golden sandals that she wears
to travel sea and land, as fast as wind.
She took the heavy bronze-tipped spear she uses
to tame the ranks of warriors with whom
she is enraged. Then from the mountain down
she sped to Ithaca, and stopped outside
Odysseus' court, bronze spear in hand.
She looked like Mentes now, the Taphian leader,
a guest-friend. There she found the lordly suitors
sitting on hides—they killed the cows themselves—
and playing checkers. Quick, attentive house slaves
were waiting on them. Some were mixing wine
with water in the bowls, and others brought
the tables out and wiped them off with sponges,
and others carved up heaping plates of meat.
Telemachus was sitting with them, feeling
dejected. In his mind he saw his father
coming from somewhere, scattering the suitors,
and gaining back his honor, and control
of all his property. With this in mind,
he was the first to see Athena there.
He disapproved of leaving strangers stranded,
so he went straight to meet her at the gate,
and shook her hand, and took her spear of bronze,
and let his words fly out to her.

"Good evening,
stranger, and welcome. Be our guest, come share
our dinner, and then tell us what you need."

He led her in, and Pallas followed him.
Inside the high-roofed hall, he set her spear
beside a pillar in a polished stand,
in which Odysseus kept stores of weapons.
And then he led her to a chair and spread
a smooth embroidered cloth across the seat,
and pulled a footstool up to it. He sat
beside her on a chair of inlaid wood,
a distance from the suitors, so their shouting
would not upset the stranger during dinner;
also to ask about his absent father.
A girl brought washing water in a jug
of gold, and poured it on their hands and into
a silver bowl, and set a table by them.
A deferential slave brought bread and laid
a wide array of food, a generous spread.
The carver set beside them plates of meat
of every kind, and gave them golden cups.
The cup boy kept on topping up the wine.
The suitors sauntered in and sat on chairs,
observing proper order, and the slaves
poured water on their hands. The house girls brought
baskets of bread and heaped it up beside them,
and house boys filled their wine-bowls up with drink.
They reached to take the good things set before them.
Once they were satisfied with food and drink,
the suitors turned their minds to other things—
singing and dancing, glories of the feast.
A slave brought out a well-tuned lyre and gave it
to Phemius, the man the suitors forced
to sing for them. He struck the chords to start
his lovely song.

Telemachus leaned in
close to Athena, so they would not hear,
and said,

"Dear guest—excuse my saying this—
these men are only interested in music,
a life of ease. They make no contribution.
This food belongs to someone else, a man
whose white bones may be lying in the rain
or sunk beneath the waves. If they saw him
return to Ithaca, they would all pray
for faster feet, instead of wealth and gold
and fancy clothes. In fact, he must have died.
We have no hope. He will not come back home.
If someone says so, we do not believe it.
But come now, tell me this and tell the truth.
Who are you? From what city, and what parents?
What kind of ship did you arrive here on?
What sailors brought you here, and by what route?
You surely did not travel here on foot!
Here is the thing I really want to know:
have you been here before? Are you a friend
who visited my father? Many men
came to his house. He traveled many places."

Athena's clear bright eyes met his. She said,
"Yes, I will tell you everything. I am
Mentes, the son of wise Anchialus,
lord of the Taphians, who love the oar.
I traveled with my ship and my companions
over the wine-dark sea to foreign lands,
with iron that I hope to trade for copper
in Temese. My ship is in the harbor

far from the town, beneath the woody hill.
And you and I are guest-friends through our fathers,
from long ago—Laertes can confirm it.
I hear that fine old man no longer comes
to town, but lives out in the countryside,
stricken by grief, with only one old slave,
who gives him food and drink when he trails back
leg-weary from his orchard, rich in vines.
I came because they told me that your father
was here—but now it seems that gods have blocked
his path back home. But I am sure that he
is not yet dead. The wide sea keeps him trapped
upon some island, captured by fierce men
who will not let him go. Now I will make
a prophecy the gods have given me,
and I think it will all come true, although
I am no prophet. He will not be gone
much longer from his own dear native land,
even if chains of iron hold him fast.
He will devise a means of getting home.
He is resourceful. Tell me now—are you
Odysseus' son? You are so tall!
Your handsome face and eyes resemble his.
We often met and knew each other well,
before he went to Troy, where all the best
leaders of Argos sailed in hollow ships.
From that time on, we have not seen each other."

Telemachus was careful as he answered.
"Dear guest, I will be frank with you. My mother
says that I am his son, but I cannot
be sure, since no one knows his own begetting.
I wish I were the son of someone lucky,
who could grow old at home with all his wealth.
Instead, the most unlucky man alive
is said to be my father—since you ask."

Athena looked at him with sparkling eyes.
"Son of Penelope, you and your sons
will make a name in history, since you are
so clever. But now tell me this. Who are
these banqueters? And what is the occasion?
A drinking party, or a wedding feast?
They look so arrogant and self-indulgent,
making themselves at home. A wise observer
would surely disapprove of how they act."

Telemachus said moodily, "My friend,
since you have raised the subject, there was once
a time when this house here was doing well,
our future bright, when he was still at home.
But now the gods have changed their plans and cursed us,
and cast my father into utter darkness.
If he had died it would not be this bad—
if he had fallen with his friends at Troy,
or in his loved ones' arms, when he had wound
the threads of war to end. The Greeks would then
have built a tomb for him; he would have won
fame for his son. But now, the winds have seized him,
and he is nameless and unknown. He left
nothing but tears for me. I do not weep
only for him. The gods have given me
so many other troubles. All the chiefs
of Same, Zacynthus, Dulichium,
and local lords from rocky Ithaca,
are courting Mother, wasting our whole house.
She does not turn these awful suitors down,
nor can she end the courting. They keep eating,
spoiling my house—and soon, they will kill me!"

Athena said in outrage, "This is monstrous!
You need Odysseus to come back home
and lay his hands on all those shameless suitors!
If only he would come here now and stand
right at the gates, with two spears in his hands,
in shield and helmet, as when I first saw him!
Odysseus was visiting our house,
drinking and having fun on his way back
from sailing in swift ships to Ephyra
to visit Ilus. He had gone there looking

for deadly poison to anoint his arrows.
Ilus refused, because he feared the gods.
My father gave Odysseus the poison,
loving him blindly. May Odysseus
come meet the suitors with that urge to kill!
A bitter courtship and short life for them!
But whether he comes home to take revenge,
or not, is with the gods. You must consider
how best to drive these suitors from your house.
Come, listen carefully to what I say.
Tomorrow call the Achaean chiefs to meeting,
and tell the suitors—let the gods be witness—
'All of you, go away! To your own homes!'
As for your mother, if she wants to marry,
let her return to her great father's home.
They will make her a wedding and prepare
abundant gifts to show her father's love.
Now here is some advice from me for you.
Fit out a ship with twenty oars, the best,
and go find out about your long-lost father.
Someone may tell you news, or you may hear
a voice from Zeus, best source of information.
First go to Pylos, question godlike Nestor;
from there, to Sparta; visit Menelaus.
He came home last of all the Achaean heroes.
If you should hear that he is still alive
and coming home, put up with this abuse
for one more year. But if you hear that he
is dead, go home, and build a tomb for him,
and hold a lavish funeral to show
the honor he deserves, and give your mother
in marriage to a man. When this is done,
consider deeply how you might be able

to kill the suitors in your halls—by tricks
or openly. You must not stick to childhood;
you are no longer just a little boy.
You surely heard how everybody praised
Orestes when he killed the man who killed
his famous father—devious Aegisthus?
Dear boy, I see how big and tall you are.
Be brave, and win yourself a lasting name.
But I must go now, on my speedy ship;
my friends are getting tired of waiting for me.
Remember what I said and heed my words."

Telemachus was brooding on her words,
and said, "Dear guest, you were so kind to give me
this fatherly advice. I will remember.
I know that you are eager to be off,
but please enjoy a bath before you go,
and take a gift with you. I want to give you
a precious, pretty treasure as a keepsake
to mark our special friendship."

But the goddess
Athena met his gaze and said, "Do not
hold me back now. I must be on my way.
As for the gift you feel inspired to give me,
save it for when I come on my way home
and let me give you presents then as well
in fair exchange."

With that, the owl-eyed goddess
flew away like a bird, up through the smoke.
She left him feeling braver, more determined,
and with his father even more in mind.
Watching her go, he was amazed and saw
she was a god. Then godlike, he went off
to meet the suitors.

They were sitting calmly,
listening to the poet, who sang how
Athena cursed the journey of the Greeks
as they were sailing home from Troy. Upstairs,
Penelope had heard the marvelous song.
She clambered down the steep steps of her house,
not by herself—two slave girls came with her.
She reached the suitors looking like a goddess,
then stopped and stood beside a sturdy pillar,
holding a gauzy veil before her face.
Her slave girls stood, one on each side of her.
In tears, she told the holy singer,

"Stop,
please, Phemius! You know so many songs,
enchanting tales of things that gods and men
have done, the deeds that singers publicize.
Sing something else, and let them drink in peace.
Stop this upsetting song that always breaks
my heart, so I can hardly bear my grief.
I miss him all the time—that man, my husband,
whose story is so famous throughout Greece."

Sullen Telemachus said, "Mother, no,
you must not criticize the loyal bard
for singing as it pleases him to sing.
Poets are not to blame for how things are;
Zeus is; he gives to each as is his will.
Do not blame Phemius because he told
about the Greek disasters. You must know
the newest song is always praised the most.
So steel your heart and listen to the song.
Odysseus was not the only one
who did not come back home again from Troy.
Many were lost. Go in and do your work.
Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves
to do their chores as well. It is for men
to talk, especially me. I am the master."

That startled her. She went back to her room,
and took her son's uneasy words to heart.
She went upstairs, along with both her slaves,
and wept there for her dear Odysseus,
until Athena gave her eyes sweet sleep.

Throughout the shadowy hall the suitors clamored,
praying to lie beside her in her bed.
Telemachus inhaled, then started speaking.

"You suitors, you are taking this too far.
Let us enjoy the feast in peace. It is
a lovely thing to listen to a bard,
especially one with such a godlike voice.
At dawn, let us assemble in the square.
I have to tell you this—it is an order.
You have to leave my halls. Go dine elsewhere!
Eat your own food, or share between your houses.
Or if you think it easier and better
to ruin one man's wealth, and if you think
that you can get away with it—go on!
I call upon the gods; Zeus will grant vengeance.
You will be punished and destroyed, right here!"

He spoke, and they began to bite their lips,
shocked that Telemachus would dare to speak
so boldly. But Antinous replied,

"Telemachus, the gods themselves have taught you
such pride, to talk so big and brash in public!
May Zeus the son of Cronus never grant you
your true inheritance, which is the throne
of Ithaca."

His mind alert and focused,
Telemachus replied, "Antinous,
you will not like this, but I have to say,
I hope Zeus does give me the throne. Do you
deny it is an honorable thing
to be a king? It brings the household wealth,
and honor to the man. But there are many
other great chiefs in sea-girt Ithaca,
both old and young. I know that. One of them
may seize the throne, now that Odysseus
has died. But I shall be at least the lord
of my own house and of the slaves that he
seized for my benefit."

Eurymachus
replied, "Telemachus, the gods must choose
which of us will be king of Ithaca.
But still, I hope you keep your own possessions,
and rule your house. May no man drive you out,
and seize your wealth, while Ithaca survives.
Now, friend, I want to ask about the stranger.
Where was he from, what country? Did he say?
Where is his place of birth, his native soil?
Does he bring news your father will come home?
Or did he come here for some other purpose?
How suddenly he darted off, not waiting
for us to meet him. Yet he looked important."

The boy said soberly, “Eurymachus,
my father is not ever coming home.
I do not listen now to any gossip,
or forecasts from the psychics whom my mother
invites to visit us. The stranger was
my father’s guest-friend Mentes, son of wise
Anchialus, who rules the Taphians,
the people of the oar.”

Those were his words,
but in his mind he knew she was a god.
They danced to music and enjoyed themselves
till evening, then they went back home to sleep.
Telemachus' bedroom had been built
above the courtyard, so it had a view.
He went upstairs, preoccupied by thought.
A loyal slave went with him, Eurycleia,
daughter of Ops; she brought the burning torches.
Laertes bought her many years before
when she was very young, for twenty oxen.
He gave her status in the household, equal
to his own wife, but never slept with her,
avoiding bitter feelings in his marriage.
She brought the torches now; she was the slave
who loved him most, since she had cared for him
when he was tiny. Entering the room,
he sat down on the bed, took off his tunic,
and gave it to the vigilant old woman.
She smoothed it out and folded it, then hung it
up on a hook beside his wooden bed,
and left the room. She used the silver latch
to close the door; the strap pulled tight the bolt.
He slept the night there, wrapped in woolen blankets,
planning the journey told him by Athena.

BOOK 2

A Dangerous Journey

The early Dawn was born; her fingers bloomed.
Odysseus' well-beloved son
jumped up, put on his clothes, and strapped his sword
across his back, and tied his handsome sandals
onto his well-oiled feet. He left the room
looking just like a god.

He quickly told
the clear-voiced heralds they must call the Greeks
to council. Soon the men, their long hair flowing,
were gathered all together in the square.
Telemachus arrived, bronze sword in hand,
not by himself—two swift dogs came with him.
Athena poured a heavenly grace upon him.
The elders let him join them, and he sat
upon his father's throne. The first to speak
was wise Aegyptius, a bent old soldier.
His darling son, the spear-man Antiphus,
had sailed with Lord Odysseus to Troy;
the Cyclops killed him in his cave and made him
his final course at dinner. This old father
had three sons left. One teamed up with the suitors—
Eurynomus. The others spent their time
working the farm. But still the father mourned
the son whom he had lost. He spoke in tears.

"People of Ithaca, now hear my words.
We have not met in council since the day
Odysseus departed with his ships.
Who called us? Someone old or young? And why?
Has he found out an army is approaching?
Or does he have some other piece of news
which he would like to share with all of us?
I think he is a helpful, decent man.
I hope that Zeus rewards his good intentions!"

Odysseus' loving son felt glad,
and eagerly got up to speak and stood
among them, in the center of the group.
The competent official, named Pisenor,
passed him the speaking-stick; he held it up,
and first addressed Aegyptius.

"Here, sir!
Now look no further for the man you seek.
I called the meeting. I am in deep trouble.
I have no information of an army
that might attack us, nor do I have news
of any other danger to our people.
I need help for myself. My family
has suffered two disasters. First I lost
my father, who was kind to you as if
you also were his sons. Now, even worse,
my house is being ripped apart; my wealth
will soon be gone! The sons of all the nobles
have shoved inside my house to court my mother,
against her wishes. They should go and ask
Icarius her father to provide
a dowry, and choose who should be her husband.
They are too scared. Instead, they haunt our house
day after day, and kill our cows and pigs
and good fat goats. They feast and drink red wine,
not caring if they waste it all. There is
no man to save the house—no man like him,
Odysseus. I cannot fight against them;
I would be useless. I have had no training.
But if I had the power, I would do it!
It is unbearable, what they have done!
They ruined my whole house! It is not fair!

You suitors all should feel ashamed! Consider
what others in the neighborhood will think!
And also be afraid! The angry gods
will turn on you in rage; they will be shocked
at all this criminal behavior!
I beg you, by Olympian Zeus, and by
the goddess who presides in human meetings:
Justice! But never mind. Friends, leave me be,
and let me cry and suffer by myself.
Or did Odysseus, my warlike father,
deliberately do harm to our own side?
Is that why you seem set on hurting me,
encouraging these suitors? Oh, if only
you Ithacans would eat my stock yourselves!
If you did that, I soon would get revenge;
I would come through the town and keep demanding,
until it all got given back. But now,
you make me so unhappy! This is pointless!"

He stopped, frustrated, flung the scepter down,
and burst out crying. Everyone was seized
by pity. No one spoke; they hesitated
to answer him unkindly. Then at last
Antinous began.

"Telemachus,
you stuck-up, wilful little boy! How dare you
try to embarrass us and put the blame
on us? We suitors have not done you wrong.
Go blame your precious mother! She is cunning.
It is the third year, soon it will be four,
that she has cheated us of what we want.
She offers hope to all, sends notes to each,

but all the while her mind moves somewhere else.
She came up with a special trick: she fixed
a mighty loom inside the palace hall.
Weaving her fine long cloth, she said to us,
'Young men, you are my suitors. Since my husband,
the brave Odysseus, is dead, I know
you want to marry me. You must be patient;
I have worked hard to weave this winding-sheet
to bury good Laertes when he dies.
He gained such wealth, the women would reproach me
if he were buried with no shroud. Please let me
finish it!' And her words made sense to us.
So every day she wove the mighty cloth,
and then at night by torchlight, she unwove it.
For three long years her trick beguiled the Greeks.
But when the fourth year's seasons rolled around,
a woman slave who knew the truth told us.
We caught her there, unraveling the cloth,
and made her finish it. This is our answer,
so you and all the Greeks may understand.
Dismiss your mother, let her father tell her
to marry anyone his heart desires.
Athena blessed her with intelligence,
great artistry and skill, a finer mind
than anyone has ever had before,
even the braided girls of ancient Greece,
Tyro, Alcmene, garlanded Mycene—
none of them had Penelope's understanding.
But if she wants to go on hurting us,
her plans are contrary to destiny.
We suitors will keep eating up your wealth,
and livelihood, as long as she pursues
this plan the gods have put inside her heart.

For her it may be glory, but for you,
pure loss. We will not go back to our farms
or anywhere, until she picks a husband."

Telemachus insisted, breathing hard,
"Antinous, I cannot force my mother
out of the house. She gave me birth and raised me.
My father is elsewhere—alive or dead.
If I insist my mother has to leave,
Icarius will make me pay the price,
and gods will send more trouble; if she goes,
Mother will rouse up Furies full of hate
to take revenge, and everyone will curse me.
I will not. If you feel upset, you go!
Out of my house! Stop eating all my food!
Devour each other's property, not mine!
Or do you really think it right to waste
one person's means of life, and go scot-free?
Then try it! I will call the deathless gods!
May Zeus give recompense some day for this!
You will die here, and nobody will care!"

Then Zeus, whose voice resounds around the world,
sent down two eagles from the mountain peak.
At first they hovered on the breath of wind,
close by each other, balanced on their wings.
Reaching the noisy middle of the crowd,
they wheeled and whirred and flapped their mighty wings,
swooping at each man's head with eyes like death,
and with their talons ripped each face and neck.
Then to the right they flew, across the town.
Everyone was astonished at the sight;
they wondered in their hearts what this could mean.
Old Halitherses, son of Mastor, spoke.
More than the other elders, this old leader
excelled at prophecy and knew the birds.
He gave them good advice.

"Now Ithacans,
listen! I speak especially for the suitors.
Disaster rolls their way! Odysseus
will not be absent from his friends for long;
already he is near and sows the seeds
of death for all of them, and more disaster
for many others in bright Ithaca.
We have to form a plan to make them stop.
That would be best for them as well by far.
I am experienced at prophecy;
my words came true for him, that mastermind,
Odysseus. I told him when he left
for Troy with all the Argives, he would suffer
most terribly, and all his men would die,
but in the twentieth year he would come home,
unrecognized. Now it is coming true."

Eurymachus, the son of Polybus,
replied, "Old man, be off! Go home and spout
your portents to your children, or it will
be worse for them. But I can read these omens
better than you can. Many birds go flying
in sunlight, and not all are meaningful.
Odysseus is dead, away from home.
I wish that you had died with him, to stop
your forecasts! You are making this boy angry,
hoping that he will give your household gifts.
But let me tell you this, which will come true.
You may know many ancient forms of wisdom,
but if you tease this boy and make him angry,
he will be hurt, and never get to act
on any of these prophecies of yours.
And, old man, we will make you pay so much
your heart will break, your pain will cut so deep.
I will advise Telemachus myself,
in front of everyone, to send his mother
back to her father's family, to fix
her wedding, and the gifts a well-loved daughter
should have. Unless he does that, we will never
cease from this torturous courtship. We are not
afraid of anyone, much less this boy
with his long speeches, nor your pointless portents.
They will not come to pass and they will make you
hated. His house will be devoured, and payback
will never come, as long as she frustrates
our hopes of marriage. Meanwhile, we will wait
in daily hope, competing for the prize,
not seeking other women as our wives."

Telemachus, his mind made up, replied,
"All right, Eurymachus, and all of you.
I will not talk about this anymore.
The gods and all of you already know.
Just let me have a ship and twenty men
to make a journey with me, out and back,
to Sparta and to sandy Pylos, seeking
news about when my father may come home.
I may hear it from somebody, or from
a voice from Zeus—it often happens so.
If I find out my father is alive
and coming home, I will endure this pain
for one more year. But if I hear that he
is dead, I will come home to my own land,
and build a tomb and hold the funeral rites
as he deserves, and I will give my mother
to a new husband."

He sat down, and up
stood Mentor. When Odysseus sailed off,
this was the friend he asked to guard his house
and told the slaves to look to him as master.
Mentor addressed the crowd.

"Now Ithacans!
Listen! This changes everything! Now kings
should never try to judge with righteousness
or rule their people gently. Kings should always
be cruel, since the people whom he ruled
as kindly as a father, have forgotten
their King Odysseus. I do not blame
the suitors' overconfidence, rough ways
and violence, in eating up his household;
they risk their lives, supposing that the master
will never come back home. But I do blame
you others, sitting passive, never speaking
against them, though you far outnumber them."

Leocritus, Euenor's son, replied,

"Mentor, for shame! You must have lost your mind!
Fool, telling us to stop our banqueting!
You could not fight us; we outnumber you.
Even if Ithacan Odysseus
came back and found us feasting in his house,
and tried to drive us out, his wife would get
no joy of his return, no matter how
she misses him. If he tried fighting solo
against us, he would die a cruel death.
So what you said was nonsense. Anyway,
we must disperse, and everyone get busy.
Mentor and Halitherses, since you are
old comrades of his father, you can guide
Telemachus' journey. I suspect
he will not manage to go anywhere;
he will just wait in Ithaca for news."

The crowd broke up; the Ithacans went home;
the suitors, to Odysseus' house.

Telemachus slipped out and at the beach
he dipped his hands in salty gray seawater,
and asked Athena,

"Goddess, hear my prayer!
Just yesterday you came and ordered me
to sail the hazy sea and find out news
of my long-absent father's journey home.
The Greeks are wasting everything, especially
these bullying, mean suitors."

Then Athena
came near him with the voice and guise of Mentor,
and spoke to him with words that flew like birds.

"Telemachus, you will be brave and thoughtful,
if your own father's forcefulness runs through you.
How capable he was, in word and deed!
Your journey will succeed, if you are his.
If you're not his son by Penelope,
I doubt you can achieve what you desire.
And it is rare for sons to be like fathers;
only a few are better, most are worse.
But you will be no coward and no fool.
You do possess your father's cunning mind,
so there is hope you will do all these things.
Forget about those foolish suitors' plans.
They have no brains and no morality.
They do not know black doom will kill them all,
and some day soon: their death is near at hand.
You will achieve the journey that you seek,
since I will go with you, just like a father.
I will equip a good swift ship for you.
Now go back home to where those suitors are,
and get provisions. Pack them in containers:
some wine in jars, and grain, the strength of men,
in sturdy skins. And I will go through town,
calling for volunteers to come with us.
There are a lot of ships in Ithaca,
both new and old. I will select the best one;
we will equip her quickly and sail fast,
far off across the sea."

So spoke the goddess,
daughter of Zeus. Telemachus obeyed.
His heart was troubled as he went back home.
He found the arrogant suitors in the hall,
skinning some goats and charring hogs for dinner.
Antinous began to laugh. He called him,
and seized his hand and spoke these words to him.

"Telemachus, you are being so pigheaded!
Why not put all your troubles from your heart?
Come eat and drink with me, just as before.
You know the Greeks will fix it all for you.
They will select a ship and crew, and soon
you will reach Pylos, where you hope to hear
word of your father."

But the boy was wary,
and said, "Antinous, I cannot eat;
I have no peace or joy when I am with
you selfish suitors. Is it not enough
that you destroyed my rich inheritance
when I was just a little boy? But now
I have grown bigger, and I got advice
from other people, and my heart wells up
with courage. I will try to bring down doom
on your heads here at home or when I go
to Pylos. Yes, I really will go there,
as passenger, although I do not own
a ship or have a crew—because of you!"

He snatched his hand away. But as they feasted,
the suitors started mocking him and jeering.
With sneers they said,

"Oh no! Telemachus
is going to kill us! He will bring supporters
from Pylos or from Sparta—he is quite
determined! Or indeed he may be fetching
some lethal poisons from the fertile fields
of Ephyra, to mix up in our wine-bowl
and kill us all!"

Another proud young man
said, "Well, who knows, perhaps he will get lost
in that curved ship, and die, so far away
from all his family—just like his father.
And what a pity that would be for us!
Then we would have to share out all his wealth,
and give away the house itself to her—
his mother, and the man who marries her."

The boy went downstairs, to his father's storeroom,
wide and high-roofed, piled high with gold and bronze
and clothes in chests and fragrant olive oil.
Down there the jars of vintage wine were stored,
which held the sweet, unmixed and godlike drink,
lined in a row against the wall, in case
weary Odysseus came home at last.
The double doors were locked and closely fitted.
A woman checked the contents, night and day,
guarding it all with great intelligence,
and that was Eurycleia, child of Ops.
He called her to the chamber and addressed her.

"Nanny, please pour sweet wine in jugs for me,
the second best one, not the one you keep
for when the poor unlucky king escapes
from evil fate and death, and comes back home.
Fill up twelve jugs with wine for me, and pour me
some twenty pounds of fine-milled barley-groats,
all packed in sturdy leather bags. Load up
all these provisions secretly. At nightfall,
I will come here and get them, when my mother
has gone upstairs to go to sleep. I am
leaving for Sparta and for sandy Pylos,
to learn about my father's journey home."

At that his loving nurse began to wail,
and sobbed,

"Sweet child! What gave you this idea?
Why do you want to go so far? You are
an only child, and dearly loved! The king,
Odysseus, is gone, lost, far from home,
and they will plot against you when you leave,
scheming to murder you and share this wealth.
Stay with us, we who love you! Do not go
searching for danger out on restless seas!"

Telemachus decisively replied,
"Nanny, you need not worry. Gods have blessed
this plan. But promise me you will not tell
Mother, until she notices me gone.
Say nothing for twelve days, so she will not
start crying; it would spoil her pretty skin."

At that the old nurse swore a mighty oath
by all the gods that she would keep the secret,
and then she drew the wine for him in jars,
and poured the barley-groats in well-stitched bags.
Telemachus returned to see the suitors.

Meanwhile, bright-eyed Athena had a plan.
Resembling Telemachus, she went
all through the city, standing by each man,
and urged them to assemble by the ship
at night, and asked the son of Phronius,
Noëmon, for his speedy ship; he promised
to give it gladly. Then the sun went down
and all the streets grew dark. The goddess dragged
the ship into the water, and she loaded
the necessary tackle for a journey.
Right at the beach's farthest end the goddess
stood and assembled good strong men as crew;
she coached each one. Then, eyes ablaze with plans,
she went back to Odysseus' house,
and poured sweet sleep upon the drunken suitors.
She struck them and their cups fell from their hands.
Disguised as Mentor both in looks and voice,
she called the boy out from the mighty hall,
and looked intently in his face, and said,

"Telemachus, your crew of armored men
is ready at the oar for your departure.
Come on! No time to waste! We must be gone!"

So speaking, Pallas quickly led the boy;
he followed in the footsteps of the goddess.
They went down to the seashore and the ship,
and found the long-haired sailors on the beach.
Inspired and confident, Telemachus
called out,

"My friends! Come on, let us go fetch
the rations; they are ready in the hall.
But quietly—my mother does not know,
nor do the other women, except one."

And so he led them, and they followed him.
They loaded everything upon the decks;
Odysseus' son instructed them,
and then embarked—Athena led the way.
She sat down in the stern, and next to her
Telemachus was sitting. Then the crew
released the ropes and boarded, each at oar.
Athena called a favorable wind,
pure Zephyr whistling on wine-dark sea.
Telemachus commanded his companions
to seize the rigging; so they did, and raised
the pine-wood mast inside the rounded block,
and bound it down with forestays round about,
and raised the bright white sails with leather ropes.
Wind blew the middle sail; the purple wave
was splashing loudly round the moving keel.
The goddess rode the waves and smoothed the way.
The quick black ship held steady, so they fastened
the tackle down, and filled their cups with wine.
They poured libations to the deathless gods,
especially to the bright-eyed child of Zeus.
All through the night till dawn the ship sailed on.

BOOK 3

An Old King Remembers

Leaving the Ocean's streams, the Sun leapt up
into the sky of bronze, to shine his light
for gods and mortals on the fertile earth.
Telemachus arrived in Pylos, where
the Pylians were bringing to the beach
black bulls for blue Poseidon, Lord of Earthquakes.
There were nine pews, five hundred men on each,
and each group had nine bulls to sacrifice.
They burned the thigh-bones for the god, and ate
the innards. Then the Ithacans arrived,
took down their sails, dropped anchor and alighted.
The goddess with the flashing eyes, Athena,
first led Telemachus onshore, then spoke.

"Do not be shy, Telemachus. You sailed
over the sea to ask about your father,
where the earth hides him, what his fate might be.
So hurry now to Nestor, lord of horses.
Learn what advice he has in mind for you.
Supplicate him yourself, and he will tell you
the truth; he is not one to tell a lie."

Telemachus replied, "But Mentor, how
can I approach and talk to him? I am
quite inexperienced at making speeches,
and as a young man, I feel awkward talking
to elders."

She looked straight into his eyes,
and answered, "You will work out what to do,
through your own wits and with divine assistance.
The gods have blessed you in your life so far."

So Pallas spoke and quickly led him on;
he followed in the footsteps of the goddess.

They reached the center of the town, where Nestor
was sitting with his sons and his companions,
putting the meat on spits and roasting it
for dinner. When they saw the strangers coming,
they all stood up with open arms to greet them,
inviting them to join them. Nestor's son,
Pisistratus, shook hands and sat them down,
spreading soft fleeces on the sand beside
his father and his brother, Thrasymedes.
He served them giblets and he poured some wine
into a golden cup, and raised a toast
to Pallas, child of Zeus the Aegis-Lord.

"Now guest, give prayers of thanks to Lord Poseidon,
and pour libations for the god. This feast
is in his honor; pay him proper dues.
Then give the boy the cup of honeyed wine,
so he can offer to the deathless gods
libations. Everybody needs the gods.
I give the golden chalice to you first,
because the boy is younger, more my age."

He put the cup of sweet wine in her hand.
Athena was impressed with his good manners,
because he rightly gave it first to her.
At once she made a heartfelt prayer.

"Poseidon!
O Shaker of the Earth, do not refuse
to grant our prayer; may all these things come true.
Bring fame to Nestor and his sons, and grant
gifts to the Pylians, as recompense
for this fine sacrifice. And may the quest
for which we sailed here in our swift black ship
succeed, and may we come home safe again."

She made her prayer come true all by herself.
She gave Telemachus the splendid cup
with double handle, and his prayer matched hers.
And then they cooked the outer parts of meat,
and helped themselves to pieces, sharing round
the glorious feast, till they could eat no more.
Then first Gerenian Nestor, horse-lord, spoke.

"Now that our guests are satisfied with food,
time now to talk to them and ask them questions.
Strangers, who are you? Where did you sail from?
Are you on business, or just scouting round
like pirates on the sea, who risk their lives
to ravage foreign homes?"

Telemachus
was thoughtful but not shy. Athena gave him
the confidence deep in his heart to ask
about his absent father, and to gain
a noble reputation for himself.

"Great Nestor, son of Neleus," he said,
"You ask where I am from. I will be frank.
I come from Ithaca, beneath Mount Neion,
and I am here on private, family business.
I came to gather news about my father,
long-suffering Odysseus. They say
he fought with you to sack the town of Troy.
We know the place where all the other men
who battled with the Trojans lost their lives.
But Zeus still keeps Odysseus' fate
in darkness; no one knows where he was lost.
Maybe some hostile men killed him on land,
or he was drowned in Amphitrite's waves.
I beg you, tell me, did you see him die
with your own eyes? Or have you any news
about where he may be? He must be lost.
His mother surely bore him for misfortune.
You need not sweeten what you say, in pity
or from embarrassment. Just tell me straight
what your eyes saw of him, my noble father.
If ever he made promises to you
and kept his word at Troy, in times of trouble,
remember those times now. Tell me the truth!"

Gerenian Nestor, horse-lord, answered him,
"Dear boy, you call to mind how much we suffered,
with strong, unyielding hearts, in distant lands
when we were sailing over misty seas,
led by Achilles on a hunt for spoils,
and when we fought around the mighty city
of Priam. Our best warriors were killed.
Ajax lies dead there, and there lies Achilles;
there lies his godlike friend and guide, Patroclus;

my own strong, matchless son lies dead there too,
Antilochus, who fought and ran so well.
More pain, more grief—our sufferings increased.
Who could recount so many, many losses?
If you stayed here five years and kept on asking
how many things the fighters suffered there,
you would get bored and go back home again
before the story ended. Nine long years
we schemed to bring them down, and finally
Zeus made our plots succeed. Odysseus,
your father, if you really are his son—
well, no one dared to try to equal him
in cleverness. That man was always best
at every kind of trick. And seeing you,
I am amazed at how you talk like him.
One would not think so young a man could do it.
Well, back in Troy, Odysseus and I
always agreed in councils, with one mind.
We gave the Argives all the best advice.
After we conquered Priam's lofty town,
a god dispersed the ships of the Achaeans.
Zeus planned a bitter journey home for us,
since some of us had neither sense nor morals.
Gray-eyed Athena, daughter of the Thunder,
became enraged and brought about disaster.
She set the sons of Atreus to fight
each other. Hastily, they called the people
at sunset, not observing proper norms.
The men arrived already drunk on wine;
the brothers told them why they called the meeting.
Then Menelaus said that it was time
to sail back home across the open sea.
But Agamemnon disagreed entirely.

He wanted them to stay and sacrifice
to heal the sickness of Athena's wrath—
pointless! He did not know she would not yield.
The minds of the immortals rarely change.
So those two stood and argued angrily,
and with a dreadful clash of arms the Greeks
leapt up on two opposing sides. We slept
that eerie night with hearts intent on hatred
against each other—since Zeus meant us harm.
At dawn one group of us dragged down our ships
into the sea piled high with loot and women,
while half the army still remained there, stationed
with Agamemnon, shepherd of the people.
My friends and I set sail with all good speed—
a god had made the choppy sea lie calm.
We came to Tenedos and sacrificed,
praying to get back home—but Zeus refused;
the cruel god roused yet more strife among us.
Your father's plans were always flexible:
his men turned round their prows and sailed right back
to make their peace again with Agamemnon.
But I assembled all my fleet, and fled—
I understood some god must mean us harm.
Then Diomedes roused his men to come,
and ruddy Menelaus quickly sailed
to meet with us on Lesbos, and we pondered
our long sea journey. Should we travel north,
go past the rocks of Chios to our left,
to Psyria, or under Chios, passing
blustery Mimas? So we prayed for signs.
The god told us to cross the open sea
towards Euboea, to escape disaster.
A fair wind whistled and our ships sped on

across the journey-ways of fish, and landed
at nightfall in Geraestus. To Poseidon
we offered many bulls, since we had crossed
safely across wide waters. The fourth day
the men of Diomedes moored their ships
at Argos; I kept going on, to Pylos.
The wind the god had sent kept holding strong
the whole way home. So, my dear boy, I have
no news about what happened next. I do not
know which of them has died and who is safe.
But I can tell you what I heard while sitting
here in my halls. You ought to know. They say
Achilles' son led home the Myrmidons,
and Philoctetes came back home with glory.
And Idomeneus led back his crew
to Crete; no man of his who had survived
the war was lost at sea. And Agamemnon?
You must have heard, though you live far away.
Aegisthus murdered him! But he has paid
a bitter price. How fortunate the dead man
had left a son to take revenge upon
the wicked, scheming killer, that Aegisthus,
who killed Orestes' father. My dear boy,
I see that you are tall and strong. Be brave,
so you will be remembered."

Thoughtfully
Telemachus replied, "Your Majesty,
King Nestor, yes. Orestes took revenge.
The Greeks will make him famous through the world
and into future times. I wish the gods
would grant me that much power against those men
who threaten and insult me—those cruel suitors!
The gods have not yet granted us this blessing,
my father and myself. We must endure."

Gerenian Nestor, lord of horses, answered,
"Dear boy, since you have brought the subject up,
I have been told about your mother's suitors,
how badly they are treating you at home.
But do you willingly submit to it?
Or has a god's voice led the townspeople
to hate you? Well, who knows, perhaps one day
he will come home and take revenge, alone,
or with an army of the Greeks. If only
Athena loved you, as she used to care
for glorious Odysseus at Troy
when we were doing badly. I have never
seen gods display such favor as she gave
when she stood by your father. If she helped you
with that much love, the suitors would forget
their hopes for marriage."

Then Telemachus
replied, "My lord, I doubt that this will happen.
I am surprised you have such confidence.
I would not be so hopeful, even if
the gods were willing."

Then the goddess spoke.
"Telemachus, what do you mean? A god
can easily save anyone, at will,
no matter what the distance. I would rather
suffer immensely, but then get home safe,
than die on my return like Agamemnon,
murdered by his own wife, and by Aegisthus.
But death is universal. Even gods
cannot protect the people that they love,
when fate and cruel death catch up with them."

Telemachus said apprehensively,
"Mentor, this is upsetting. Change the subject.
He has no real chance now of getting home.
The gods have fenced him round with death and darkness.
Let me ask Nestor something else—he is
wiser and more informed than anyone.
They say he ruled for three whole generations.
He looks to me like some immortal god.
So Nestor, son of Neleus, tell me truly,
how did the great King Agamemnon die?
And where was Menelaus? Was he lost,
away from Greece, when that Aegisthus dared
to kill a king, a better man than him?
How did that wicked trickster's plot succeed?"

Gerenian Nestor, lord of horses, answered,
"I will tell everything—though you can guess
what would have happened if fair Menelaus
had found Aegisthus living in his halls
on his return. And even when he died,
no one would bury him; he lay upon
the open plain without a tomb and far
from town for birds and dogs to eat. No Greek
would mourn that monster. While we fought and labored
at Troy, this layabout sat safe in Argos,
seducing Clytemnestra, noble wife
of Agamemnon. For a while, she scorned
his foul suggestions, since her heart was good.
Moreover, when her husband went to Troy,
he left a poet, ordered to protect her.
But finally Fate forced the queen to yield.
Aegisthus left the poet to be eaten
by birds, abandoned on a desert island.
He led the woman back to his own house
by mutual desire, and then he made
numerous offerings on holy altars
of animals and lovely gold and cloth:
he had succeeded far beyond his hopes.

And meanwhile, I left Troy with Menelaus;
we sailed together, best of friends. We reached
the holy cape of Athens, Sounion.
There Phoebus with his gentle arrows shot
and killed the pilot, Phrontis, as he held
the ship's helm as she sped along. No man
knew better how to steer through any storm,
so Menelaus stopped to bury him
with proper rites. At last he sailed again
across the wine-dark sea; but as his ships
rushed round the craggy heights of Malea,
far-seeing Zeus sent curses on his journey,
pouring out screaming winds and giant waves
the size of mountains—splitting up the fleet.
Some ships were hurled to Crete, to River Jardan,
where the Cydonian people have their homes.
There steep rock rises sheer above the sea
near Gortyn in the misty deep; south winds
drive mighty waves towards the left-hand crag,
and push them west to Phaestus; one small rock
restrains the massive currents. All the ships
were smashed by waves against those rocks. The men
were almost drowned. Five other dark-prowed ships
were blown by wind and sea away to Egypt.
There Menelaus gathered wealth and gold
and drifted with his ships through foreign lands.

Meanwhile at home, Aegisthus had been plotting.
He killed the son of Atreus and seized
control of rich Mycenae, where he reigned
for seven years. But in the eighth, Orestes
came to destroy him. He returned from Athens,
and killed his father's murderer, then called
the Argives to a funeral, a feast
for clever, scheming, cowardly Aegisthus
whom he had killed, and his own hated mother.
That very day, rambunctious Menelaus
arrived with all his ships crammed full of treasure.
The moral is, you must not stay away
too long, dear boy, when those proud suitors lurk
inside your house. They may divide your wealth
among themselves and make your journey useless.
But I suggest you go to Menelaus.
He recently returned from lands so distant
no one would even hope to get home safe
once driven by the winds so far off course,
over such dangerous, enormous seas.
Birds migrate there and take a year or more
to travel back. Go visit him by ship
with your own crew. Or if you would prefer,
you can go there by land—here is a carriage.
My sons can guide you all the way to Sparta,
to Menelaus. Ask him for the truth.
He will not lie; he is an honest man."

The sun went down and darkness fell. The goddess,
bright-eyed Athena, spoke to them.

"King
Nestor,
your speech was good and your advice was sound.
But now slice up the tongues and pour the wine
for Lord Poseidon and the other gods
before we rest—time now to go to bed.
The light is fading and it is not right
to linger at a banquet in the dark."

The people listened to Athena's words.
The house slaves poured fresh water on their hands,
and boys filled up the mixing bowls with wine,
and poured it into cups, and first prepared
the sacrifice. They threw tongues on the fire,
then sprinkled wine, then each man drank his fill.
Then Zeus' daughter and the godlike boy
both rose to go together to their ship.
But Nestor called to stop them.

"Zeus forbids it!
And all the other gods who live forever!
You cannot leave my house for your swift ship
as if I were a poor and ragged man
with so few beds and blankets in his home
that neither he nor guests can sleep in comfort.
I have soft quilts and blankets in abundance.
The darling son of great Odysseus
must not sleep on the ship's deck, while I live!
Not while my sons remain here in my house,
ready to welcome anyone who visits."

The bright-eyed goddess answered him, "Old friend,
you are quite right. Telemachus should do
just as you say. That is a better plan.
He will stay here tonight and go to sleep
in your fine palace. But I must go back
to tell the crew the news and keep them strong.
You see, I am the oldest in our party.
The rest are younger men, close friends together,
the same age as our brave Telemachus.
I will sleep there beside the hollow ship.
At dawn I have important obligations:
to visit with the great Cauconians.
The boy can be your guest. Then send him off
escorted by your son. Give him a carriage,
drawn by your strongest and most nimble horses."

Bright-eyed Athena flew away, transformed
into an ossifrage. Astonishment
seized all the people watching, even Nestor.
He seized Telemachus' hand and said,

"Dear boy, I am now sure that you will be
a hero, since the gods are on your side
at your young age. This was a god, none other
than great Athena, true-born child of Zeus,
who also glorified your noble father.
Goddess, be kind to us as well, and grant
honor to me, my good wife, and our sons.
Now I will sacrifice a yearling heifer,
broad-browed and still unyoked, and gild her horns
with gold to bless your journey."

So he spoke,
and Pallas heard his prayer. Gerenian Nestor
led them and led his sons and sons-in-law
inside his own magnificent great hall.
When they were all inside, he seated them
on benches and on chairs arranged in order,
and he himself mixed up the bowl for them
of sweet delicious wine. He had preserved it
eleven years. The slave girl opened it,
pulling the lid off. As the old man mixed,
he prayed and poured libations for Athena.

They all poured also, then they drank their fill,
then each went home to sleep in his own chamber.
Nestor the horseman made a special bed
right there for his dear friend, the warrior's son:
a camp bed on the echoing portico,
beside Pisistratus, the only son
not living with a wife but still at home.
Nestor himself slept by his wife, the queen,
in a secluded corner of the palace.

When newborn Dawn appeared with rosy fingers,
the horse-lord Nestor jumped up out of bed,
and hurried down towards the polished stones
that stood outside his palace, bright with oil.
There Neleus used to give godlike advice,
until Fate took him and he went to Hades,
and Nestor, guardian of the Greeks, took over
the scepter. From their rooms his sons arrived
to throng around him: Echephron and Stratius,
Aretus, Perseus, great Thrasymedes,
and strong Pisistratus the sixth. They brought
godlike Telemachus to sit with them.
Nestor spoke first.

"Dear sons, now hurry up,
fulfill my wishes. First we must appease
Athena, who revealed herself to me
during the holy feast. Now one of you
must run down to the fields to choose a cow;
let herdsmen drive her back here. And another,
go to Telemachus' ship and bring
the men—leave only two behind. Another
must bring Laerces here, who pours the gold,
so he can gild the heifer's horns. You others,
stay here together. Tell the girls inside
to cook a royal feast, and set out seats,
put wood around the altar, and clear water."

At that, the sons all got to work. The cow
was brought up from the field. The crew arrived
from the swift, solid ship. The goldsmith came
with all the bronze tools useful for his trade—
hammer and anvil and well-crafted tongs—

and worked the gold. Athena came to take
the sacrifice. King Nestor gave the gold;
the craftsman poured it on the horns, to make
a lovely offering to please the goddess.
Stratius and Echephron together led
the heifer by the horns. Aretes came
and brought a water bowl adorned with flowers,
and in his other hand, a box of grain.
Strong Thrasymedes stood nearby and held
a sharpened axe, prepared to strike the cow.
Perseus held the blood-bowl. Nestor started
to sprinkle barley-groats and ritual water,
and as he threw the hairs into the fire
he said prayers to Athena. When the rites
were finished, mighty Thrasymedes struck.
The axe sliced through the sinews of the neck.
The cow was paralyzed. Then Nestor's daughters
and his sons' wives, and his own loyal queen,
Eurydice, began to chant. The men
hoisted the body, and Pisistratus
sliced through her throat. Black blood poured out. The life
was gone. They butchered her, cut out the thighs,
all in the proper place, and covered them
with double fat and placed raw flesh upon them.
The old king burned the pieces on the logs,
and poured the bright red wine. The young men came
to stand beside him holding five-pronged forks.
They burned the thigh-bones thoroughly and tasted
the entrails, then carved up the rest and skewered
the meat on pointed spits, and roasted it.

Meanwhile, Telemachus was being washed
by Nestor's eldest daughter, Polycaste.
When she had washed and rubbed his skin with oil
she dressed him in a tunic and fine cloak
and he emerged; his looks were like a god's.
He sat by Nestor, shepherd of the people.

The meat was roasted and drawn off the spits. 470
They sat to eat, while trained slaves served the food,
pouring the wine for them in golden cups.
After their hunger and their thirst were gone,
Gerenian Nestor, horse-lord, started talking.

"My sons, now bring two horses with fine manes
and yoke them to the carriage, so our guest
can start his journey."

They obeyed at once,
and quickly latched swift horses to the carriage.
One of the house girls brought out food and wine
and delicacies fit to feed a king.
Telemachus got in the lovely carriage;
Pisistratus, the son of Nestor, followed,
and sat beside him, taking up the reins,
and whipped the horses. Eagerly they flew
off for the open plain, and left the town.
All day they ran and made the harness rattle.
At sunset when the streets grew dark, they came
to Pherae, to the home of Diocles,
son of Ortilochus; Alpheus was
his grandfather. They spent the night as guests.
When rosy-fingered Dawn came bright and early,
they yoked the horses to the painted carriage,
and drove out from the gate and echoing porch.
At a light touch of whip, the horses flew.
Swiftly they drew towards their journey's end,
on through the fields of wheat, until the sun
began to set and shadows filled the streets.

BOOK 4

What the Sea God Said

They came to Sparta, land of caves and valleys,
and drove to Menelaus' house. They found him
hosting a wedding feast for many guests
to celebrate his children's marriages.
In Troy he had declared that he would give
his daughter to Achilles' son, who ruled
the Myrmidons. Now he was sending her,
with dowry gifts of horse-drawn chariots;
the gods had made the marriage come to pass.
And he was welcoming a Spartan bride,
Alector's daughter, for his well-loved son,
strong Megapenthes, mothered by a slave.
The gods had given Helen no more children
after the beautiful Hermione,
image of Aphrodite all in gold.
Neighbors and family were feasting gladly
under the king's high roof. The bard was singing
and strumming, and two acrobats were spinning
and leading them in dance. Telemachus
and Nestor's son stopped by the palace doors
and held their horses. Menelaus' guard,
Eteoneus, ran out and saw them there,
and then hurried back inside to tell his master.

"Your Majesty, there are two men outside,
strangers who seem like sons of Zeus. Please tell me,
should we take off the harness from their horses?
Or send them off to find another host?"

Flushed Menelaus shouted angrily,
"You used to have some brains!
Now you are talking like a silly child.
We two were fed by many different hosts
before returning home. As we may hope
for Zeus to keep us safe in future times,
untack their horses! Lead them in to dine!"

So Eteoneus rushed out from the palace,
and ordered other slaves to follow him.
They freed the sweating horses from their yoke
and tied them by the manger, which they filled
with emmer that they mixed with bright white barley.
They leaned the carriage up against the wall
and led their guests inside the godlike house.
The boys looked round the palace in amazement:
the lofty halls of famous Menelaus
shone like the dazzling light of sun or moon.
When they had satisfied their eyes with staring,
they went to take a bath in polished tubs.
The slave girls helped them wash and rubbed them down
in olive oil, then dressed them in wool cloaks
and tunics, and then seated them beside
the son of Atreus, King Menelaus.
A house girl brought a basin made of silver,
and water in a golden jug. She poured it
over their hands to wash, then set a table
of polished wood beside them, and a humble
slave girl brought bread and many canapés,
a lavish spread. The carver carried platters
with every kind of meat, and set before them
cups made of gold. Then ruddy Menelaus
welcomed them both and told them,

"Help yourselves!
Enjoy the food! When you have shared our meal,
we will begin to ask you who you are.
Your fathers must be scepter-bearing kings;
the sons of peasants do not look like you."

With that, he took the dish of rich roast meat,
cut from the back, which was his special meal,
and offered it to them. They reached their hands
to take the food set out in front of them.
After their thirst and hunger had been sated,
Telemachus turned round to Nestor's son,
ducking his head so no one else could hear.

"Pisistratus! Dear friend, do you see how
these echoing halls are shining bright with bronze,
and silver, gold and ivory and amber?
It is as full of riches as the palace
of Zeus on Mount Olympus! I am struck
with awe." When Menelaus heard his words,
he spoke to them in turn—his words flew out.

"No mortal, my dear boys, can rival Zeus.
His halls and home and property are deathless.
Some man may match my wealth; or maybe not.
I suffered for it. I was lost, adrift
at sea for eight long years. I traipsed through Cyprus,
Phoenicia, Egypt, Ethiopia,
Sidon and Araby, and Libya,
where lambs are born with horns—their ewes give birth
three times a year. The master and his slave
have milk and cheese and meat; the flock provides
sweet milk year round. But while I wandered there
accumulating wealth, someone crept in

and killed my brother; his own scheming wife
betrayed him. I can take no joy in all
my wealth. Whoever they may be, your fathers
have surely told you how much I have suffered!
I lost my lovely home, and I was parted
for many years from all my splendid riches.
I wish I had stayed here, with just a third
of all the treasure I have now acquired,
if those who died at Troy, so far away
from Argive pastures, were alive and well.
I sit here in my palace, mourning all
who died, and often weeping. Sometimes tears
bring comfort to my heart, but not for long;
cold grief grows sickening. I miss them all,
but one man most. When I remember him,
I cannot eat or sleep, since no one labored
like him—Odysseus. His destiny
was suffering, and mine the endless pain
of missing him. We do not even know
if he is still alive—he has been gone
so long. His faithful wife and old Laertes
must grieve for him, and young Telemachus,
who was a newborn when he went away."

These words roused in the boy a desperate need
to mourn his father. Tears rolled down his face
and splashed down on the ground. He lifted up
his cloak to hide his eyes. But Menelaus
noticed and wondered whether he should wait
until the boy first spoke about his father,
or ask. As he was hesitating, Helen
emerged from her high-ceilinged, fragrant
bedroom,
like Artemis, who carries golden arrows.
Adraste set a special chair for her,
Alcippe spread upon it soft wool blankets,
and Phylo brought a silver sewing basket,
given to her by Alcandre, the wife
of Polybus, who lived in Thebes, in Egypt,
where people have extraordinary wealth.
He gave two silver tubs to Menelaus,
a pair of tripods and ten pounds of gold.
His wife gave other lovely gifts for Helen:
a golden spindle and this silver basket
on wheels; the rims were finished off with gold.
Phylo, her girl, brought out that basket now,
packed full of yarn she had already spun.
A spindle wound around with purple wool
was laid across it. She sat down and put
her feet upon a stool, and asked her husband,

"Do we know who these men are, Menelaus,
who have arrived here in our house? Shall I
conceal my thoughts or speak? I feel compelled
to say, the sight of them amazes me.
I never saw two people so alike
as this boy and Telemachus, the son
of spirited Odysseus, the child
he left behind, a little newborn baby,
the day the Greeks marched off to Troy, their minds
fixated on the war and violence.
They made my face the cause that hounded them."

High-colored Menelaus answered, "Wife,
I saw the likeness too. Odysseus
had hands like those, those legs, that hair, that head,
that glancing gaze. And when I spoke just now
about Odysseus and all the things
he suffered for my sake, the boy grimaced,
and floods of tears were rolling down his cheeks;
he raised his purple cloak to hide his eyes."

Pisistratus, the son of Nestor, spoke.
"King Menelaus, you are right. This is
that warrior's true-born son, just as you said.
But he is shy and feels he should not speak
too boldly in your presence right away.
Your voice is like a god's to us. Lord Nestor
sent me to guide him here. He longed to see you
to get some news from you or some advice.
A son whose father is away will suffer
intensely, if he has no man at home
to help him. In the absence of his father,
Telemachus has no one to protect him."

Then Menelaus answered, "So the son
of my dear friend, who worked so hard for me,
has come here to my house! I always thought
that I would greet that friend with warmth beyond
all other Argives, if Zeus let us sail
home with all speed across the sea. I would have
brought him from Ithaca, with all his wealth,
his son and people, and bestowed on him
a town in Argos, driving out the natives
from somewhere hereabouts under my rule.
We would have constantly spent time together.
Nothing would have divided us in love
and joy, till death's dark cloud surrounded us.
But I suppose the god begrudged our friendship,
and kept that poor, unlucky man from home."

His words made everybody want to cry.
Helen was weeping, as was Menelaus.
Pisistratus' eyes were full of tears
for irreplaceable Antilochus,
killed by the noble son of shining Dawn.
Mindful of him, he spoke with words like wings.

"King Menelaus, when we spoke of you
back home in our own halls, my father Nestor
always declared you are exceptional
for common sense. So listen now to me.
I disapprove of crying during dinner.
Dawn will soon come; weep then. There is no harm
in mourning when a person dies; it is
the only honor we can pay the dead—
to cut our hair and drench our cheeks with tears.
I had a brother named Antilochus,
one of the bravest fighters in the army,
a sprinter and a warrior. He died.
I never got to meet him or to see him.
Perhaps you did?"

King Menelaus answered,
"My friend, you speak just as a wise man should,
like somebody much older than yourself.
You show your father's wisdom in your speech.
A lineage is easy to discern
when Zeus spins out a life of happiness,
in marriage and in offspring. So he gave
good luck to Nestor all his life; he aged
at home in comfort, and his sons are wise
and skillful spear-men. Yes, we will stop crying
and turn our minds to dinner once again.
Let them pour water on our hands. At dawn,
Telemachus and I can talk at length."

At that Asphalion, the nimble house slave
of mighty Menelaus, poured the water
over their hands. They helped themselves to food
from laden tables. Then the child of Zeus,
Helen, decided she would mix the wine
with drugs to take all pain and rage away,
to bring forgetfulness of every evil.
Whoever drinks this mixture from the bowl
will shed no tears that day, not even if
her mother or her father die, nor even
if soldiers kill her brother or her darling
son with bronze spears before her very eyes.
Helen had these powerful magic drugs
from Polydamna, wife of Thon, from Egypt,
where fertile fields produce the most narcotics:
some good, some dangerous. The people there
are skillful doctors. They are the Healer's people.
She mixed the wine and told the slave to pour it,
and then she spoke again.

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