

Introduction Part 3

The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Odyssey*

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The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Odyssey*

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The Best of Homer's Odyssey.

THE BIG THEMES AND IDEAS OF THE ODYSSEY¹

THE JOURNEY (*THE ODYSSEY*). Whether by land or by sea, journeys—or odysseys²—were common in Homer's world. Since much of Greece consists of shorelines and islands, many of these expeditions were by ship. As we observe them in the *Odyssey*, there were at least four reasons to launch these voyages. One was to profit by means of trade. Another was to collect wealth by engaging in piracy. Waging war for the sake of sustenance or glory—yet another reason—was related in some ways to piracy. There was also the need to obtain news in other lands, from men who were friends or other men. The news might

be specific, as with Telemachus, who wished to learn his father's fate, or general, as was the case with Odysseus, who "wandered much," Homer reports, after the Trojan War, and "visited many cities and knew the mind and thoughts of many men."³

As Homer presents it, the initial purpose for Odysseus' journey—the archetypal odyssey—was straightforward: he joined the Achaeans, the army of men gathered from many cities and led by Agamemnon, in order to conquer the Trojans. After this was accomplished, his motivation for travelling was equally straightforward: he wanted to get home.

So it is that we glimpse the whole arc of Odysseus' journey in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* together.⁴ He leaves home, voyages to Troy, plays a significant role in vanquishing the Trojans, and returns home, learning much and suffering a great deal along the way.

We may well wonder about the significance of the journey. On one level, the point is clear: it is an entertaining, even thrilling, storytelling device, where the hero leaves behind everything of significance to accomplish a challenging task, all the while leaving the one experiencing the story to wonder, *Will he succeed?* And, *Will he ever make it back home?* On another level, though, there is something much deeper going on. This, anyway, is how later Greek philosophers came to understand the *Odyssey*. Before we get to that, however, let's look at getting back home—the corollary of the departure. To do that, we must first grasp the significance of the Homeric home or household.

The Homeric home or household (oikos) and homeland. The first thing to know is that in Homer's world, households were typically multi-generational affairs consisting of and based on the abilities, efforts, and commitments of many household individuals. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, Odysseus' household is made up of Odysseus himself; his wife, Penelope; his father, Laertes; his son, Telemachus; and many serving men and women.

The second point is that the household was essential to one's identity. This is why Homer's Greeks are so eager to present their lineage to others—*who* they are in terms of fathers, grandfathers, gods, and so on. To a large extent, they *are* their household identity. Consequently, the last thing a man or woman wants to be is "unconnected to a household."⁵ Odysseus puts it this way: "Nothing is worse for mortals than roaming without a home."⁶ But this is precisely his position through much of the poem.

Odysseus often affirms the enormous value of a man's household and homeland. For example, while speaking to Antinous, the king of the Phaeacians, he says, "There is nothing sweeter to a man than his own homeland and his parents. However rich a home he may have in a faraway land, if it is distant from his mother or father, he does not want it."⁷

The sweetness itself had to do with what the homeland and household offered the Homeric hero. In short, it was his defensive and offensive team according to which he either had or did not have what was required to live and be satisfied. As one author notes, it was "the household that procured the basic goods of life that allowed you to flourish in terms of not only mere survival but also enjoyment, wealth, rule, status, and glory. . . . The household got you what you wanted and therefore assured for you some measure of happiness."⁸ This was true for everyone attached to the household, whether the head of the household—say, Odysseus—or his wife and children, as well as household guest-friends and servants.

Because of the great value of the household for securing everything desired in life, it was dangerous for a Homeric hero to forget his home—something that occurs quite a few times in the *Odyssey*. It first happens in the land of the Lotus-eaters, when a handful of Odysseus' men eat the lotus, "a food that is like flowers." The problem is that "whatever man ate the sweet fruit of the lotus, he no longer wished to bring back a report to the ship, nor did he wish to return home. No—his only desire was to stay among the Lotus-eating men, feeding on lotus and forgetting his return." Later, the sorceress Circe gives half of Odysseus' men a potion that includes "mournful drugs to make them wholly forget the land of their fathers." Odysseus himself nearly forgets his desire to return home during his year-long stay with Circe. It is his men who have to remind him to go. "My faithful comrades called me out and said to me, 'God-possessioned man, it is now time to remember your fatherland.'" Finally, Athena tells the assembly of gods that the goddess Calypso "detains Odysseus, wretched and weeping, and makes him forget [his home in] Ithaca by means of soft attractions, wheedling flattery, and beguiling enchantments. Regardless, he's tired of life with her and wants to die. He can think of nothing more than how to return [home]—even if only to see the smoke rising up from his own land."⁹

To conclude, then, the home or household was all-important to Homeric Greeks. Though a man jour-

neyed away from home, the outward venture was always to enrich himself—which is to say his household. Accordingly, his focus was always on his home and homeland.

The return home (nostos). Since the Homeric Greek was always thinking about home, how he could profit his household with riches or glory, he was always—on some level—contemplating his return home. As we’ve noted, anything done, anything suffered while away from home, was valuable or had a deeper significance thanks to his home and thus his return, if he was able to achieve it. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men are not merely wandering aimlessly; rather, they are attempting to “win . . . their return home.” Homer explains that, of the leading Achaeans who fought at Troy, Odysseus alone is “longing to return home,” while the other heroes—Nestor and Menelaus, for instance—are already “at home having fled both the dangers of the [Trojan] war and the sea.”¹⁰

The notion of the “return” or “return home” (*nostos*) played a significant role in the wider ancient Greek epic cycle. Therein, *Nostoi* or *Returns Home* relate the homeward journeys of different Greek heroes. The *Odyssey* is Odysseus’ *nostos*. Homer lets us know this early on when he reveals that “all the gods” have finally “agreed it was his time to return home to Ithaca.”¹¹

*The deeper significance of the outward and homeward journey.*¹² To return to the deeper significance of the journey and the return home mentioned a moment ago, later philosophers such as the Neoplatonist Plotinus (c. 205-270 AD) gave this cycle—the journey out and the return home—spiritual significance. We see this in one of his philosophical treatises, where he urges each one of us on in our own return home:

“Let us flee then to the beloved homeland.” This is unerring counsel. But what is this flight? And how do we flee? It seems to me that Odysseus is a hint or parable for us when he talks about his flight from the sorceress Circe or from Calypso. He is not satisfied to remain even given all the pleasure presented to his eyes and all the sensual beauty he experienced. The “homeland” for us is where we have come from. And there in that place is the father.

What, then, is our journey? And what is the nature of the flight? We should not go by means of our feet . . . or by a horse or by some ship belonging to the sea. We should let go of these and not think of them. Rather, we should close our eyes, exchanging this way of seeing for another, waking up. Everyone possesses this way, but few use it.¹³

The journey or pattern or cycle of going out from the ideal reality of the One, existing in the material, mundane reality of the many, and returning to the ideal reality was later summed up in the Latin phrase *exitus et reditus*, exit and return—or leaving and returning home, we might say. It was a pattern recognized by other Neoplatonists—Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, to mention a few—and by later philosophers, such as the Medieval Christian theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, who patterned his *Summa Theologica* on the same general idea—that, in some manner, all things come from and return to God.¹⁴

Of course, life in this—*our*—realm of “the many” involves a great deal of struggle and suffering. We see this clearly with Odysseus and many other Homeric Greeks.

Suffering. The *Odyssey* is full of suffering. We need only think of the anguish of Telemachus and Penelope, who desperately miss Odysseus in so many ways—as father and teacher, husband and defender, to name a few. Then there is the quiet suffering of the swineherd Eumaeus, stolen from home when young and now under the thumb of cruel masters, the suitors, rather than the caring direction of a gentle master, as Odysseus was. We may also mention the suitors themselves, whose very desire for Penelope and power is a form of suffering that leads them to shameful behavior and a bloody death, and results in further misery for their fathers and other relatives, who not only suffer the loss of their sons but ultimately the anger and violent action demanded by revenge, including death—for one, at least. Most of all, though, the poem is about Odysseus’ suffering. As Telemachus observes, “Beyond all men did his mother bear [Odysseus] to sorrow.”¹⁵ According to Robert Fagles’ translation, his name may be given as “Son of pain.”

Odysseus' twenty-year-long journey involves much suffering, both physical and emotional. This is true relative to the ten years he spends fighting before the walls of Troy—about which Nestor reports there was so much misery that no “mortal man could possibly describe all the harm we suffered”—and to the ten years he takes returning home. “Come,” Odysseus says to the Phaeacians, “I will tell you of my grievous homecoming, full of many troubles that Zeus permitted while I was venturing home from Troy.” Homer himself begins the epic by asking the Muse to tell him about the man who, “when he was out to sea . . . suffered much pain in his spirit in the attempt to save his own life and win his comrades their return home.” As it happens, Odysseus suffers so much that he more than once contemplates suicide.¹⁶

The need to endure and the endurance rule. When Odysseus encounters the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa, he beseeches her from afar first by praising her beauty and then by cataloging much of the suffering he has undergone and what he further expects to experience:

Sorrow that is hard to bear has come upon me. Yesterday, on the twentieth day, I escaped from the wine-faced sea. During all that time, waves and rushing wind carried me away from the island of Ogygia. And now some god has tossed me ashore here so that I may yet surely suffer even more evil. My guess is that the misfortune will not stop yet—not until the gods give me more.

Nausicaa responds with what we might call *the endurance rule*, that one *must* endure whatever suffering one experiences:

Stranger, since you do not seem to be a base or senseless man, and since Olympian Zeus himself dispenses fortune and happiness to men, to both the good and the bad as he wills, whether he be a brave man or a coward, noble or base—so I believe that surely he has given misfortune to you. Regardless, *you must endure* it either way.¹⁷

The endurance rule is simple: to continue on, to go where you hope to go, *you must endure*.

We see the observance of the rule in action throughout the *Odyssey*. Odysseus endures many monstrous creatures on the way home, including the Cyclops, the Laestrygonians, and Scylla and Charybdis. They all attack him and his men, most slaughtering and devouring at least a few of his comrades. When home, he bears the outrageous behavior of the suitors and his disloyal servants before fighting them in a battle he must, yes, endure.

But by what method does Odysseus endure? We see it in action when he chooses to maintain his cover by putting up with “the evil deeds” of his disloyal maidservants. He endures, first, by means of self-talk, by admonishing himself to go on: “Endure, my heart!” Second, he recalls a time in the past he has had to bear up with something horrible. This gives him the strength to undergo what he must now endure. “You once endured an even worse thing than this when the irresistible Cyclops devoured your mighty comrades.” Third, he relies on the wisdom he has to leave the terrible situation behind. “But you endured until your cunning wisdom led you out from the cave where you imagined you would die.” Finally, he finishes by simply obeying the endurance rule. “In complete obedience [Odysseus'] heart continued to endure even though he himself tossed from side to side.”¹⁸

Of course, Odysseus would not have had to endure the maidservants' wicked conduct and that of their lovers, the suitors, if the latter had behaved nobly and received him as a guest-friend in the house—such as was usually expected.

*Hospitality (the guest-host relationship)*¹⁹. Fortunately, not all was so horrible in Homer's world. In contrast to the reception of the suitors, men often supported one another in friendship and in the warm reception of hospitality resulting in the guest-host relationship.

Such hospitality and guest-friendship (a man received with hospitality was a guest-friend or *xenos*²⁰) was the command of Zeus *Xenios*—the god of strangers or hospitality, who was concerned with defending the welfare of strangers in a strange land, those without the present security and benefit of a

household. Upon Odysseus' sudden and rather shocking arrival at Scheria, the island of the Phaeacians, Nausicaa explains Zeus Xenios' command to her maiden friends, who are cowering in the distance: "This man who has come here is some unhappy wanderer. And now we must take care of him since all strangers and beggars come from Zeus."²¹

In both Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the hosting of a *xenos*, whether a stranger or an already established guest-friend, involves formulaic steps both in his reception and his departure. Upon arrival, the host welcomes the *xenos*, offering *xenia*,²² guest-gifts or gifts of hospitality, including food and wine, and regularly a bath or some other means of refreshment. After the *xenos* is satisfied and comfortable, the host asks questions about his identity, business, and needs. Following these formulaic steps, Telemachus acts as a perfect host when he welcomes Mentès (Athena in disguise). "Rejoice, *xenos*! Here you will be regarded with affection, welcomed as a friend. And then, when you have eaten, you will tell us about what you need." Later, after Mentès has washed up and has satisfied himself with bread, roasted meat, and wine, Telemachus asks the customary questions: "Who are you among men and where do you come from? Tell me about your city and parents." The point is to ascertain his identity in terms of his homeland and household. He finishes by getting to the most important point of all: "Declare to me the truth of this so that I may know it well: is this your first visit to our house, or are you my father's *xenos*?"²³ We see the same steps of reception time and again in Homer's poems: arrival, welcome, refreshment, and questions.²⁴

The departure of a *xenos* also follows formulaic steps. First is the recognition, whether spoken or unspoken, of an ongoing duty of friendship and mutual hospitality. Such is implied in the ongoing friendship Mentès claims with Odysseus, and in the way Nestor and Menelaus respond to Telemachus once they realize that he is the son of their friend Odysseus. Such is also behind Odysseus' refusal to fight or engage in strife with his host Laodamas when he is hosted by the Phaeacians.²⁵ The other step is the exchange of gifts.

When Athena-Mentès departs, Telemachus promises to send him away glad in spirit: "I will . . . give you a present so that you may go to your ship rejoicing. I will give you one of great beauty and value—a treasure such as only dear guest-friends give to guest-friends."²⁶ Likewise, the Phaeacians give guest-gifts to Odysseus upon his departure.

In Homeric Greece, the purpose of such gift giving and gifts was twofold. One, it was a means of exchange among the nobility, who tended to look down on mere trading—a form of exchange, they judged, that was about profit alone instead of friendship. Two, gift giving was a means of achieving glory and honor, in that the friend would report the host's great wealth and generosity upon returning home.

From all these points, we see how important the custom of hospitality was in Homer's world. Thanks to Zeus *Xenios*, the *xenos* could hope for safety and care in a strange land. Moreover, the establishment of the guest-host relationship conferred immediate and ongoing benefits in the form of hospitality and entertainment, an expanded network of friendships and alliances, and an amplified reputation among other men.

Given the significance of this custom and these relationships, we understand why there was such a feeling of revulsion, even horror, among Homer's Greeks and those later Greeks who would have been listening to his poems when the demands of hospitality and guest-friendship were not met or were blatantly rejected. We see this failure or rejection with the Laestrygonians, the sorceress Circe (at first), and the Cyclops Polyphemus. The last reverses the typical formulaic steps by asking questions first, eating his guests, and proposing a terrifying guest-gift in the form of eating Odysseus last.

We also see this with the suitors, who, as though they were sackers, act to take Odysseus' wealth and position rather than fulfilling their obligations as friends—as they and their families had been—to his household.²⁷ Such a reversal, one expressing a sacker-defender relationship, demanded a response—revenge.

Revenge. When Odysseus first encounters Nausicaa, he wishes her well by blessing her with the most

important goods a young Homeric woman could ask for—a husband and a household. In doing so, he highlights the significance of household unity and friendship, on the one hand, and household revenge against enemies, on the other.

May the gods grant you as much as your heart eagerly desires—a man for a husband, and a house. And may a noble unity of mind and feeling accompany these. For nothing is greater and nothing better than when a man and woman dwell in their household with the same thoughts, feelings, and mind—a huge pain to their enemies and joy to their friends.²⁸

In the *Odyssey*, revenge is the successful and ongoing defense of oneself and one's household. So it is that Eurycleia rejoices when Odysseus slaughters the suitors, who have behaved as enemies to her master's, and so her own, household. The slaughter of the suitors is the great and necessary act of revenge in the poem. Even so, the slaughter itself demands retaliation since the suitors' fathers and relatives must exact revenge for their deaths. With this, we see that revenge is not a matter of some abstract right or wrong—after all, the suitors were acting contrary to the custom of hospitality, and so they were actually in the wrong. Rather, as said, it is simply the defense of oneself and one's household. Beyond defense, revenge is also the way to avoid shame—which, in itself, is a kind of defense. As Eupheithes, the father of the suitor Antinous, declares: "Let's go or our eyes will forever be downcast in the future. Forever we'll be shamed in future times if we do not take revenge on those who murdered our sons and brothers!"²⁹

Loyalty or faithfulness. In the example of the suitors' fathers and of individuals such as Eurycleia, we see how important loyalty was in Homer's world. We have already observed that one friend had an ongoing duty of friendship to another. Within the household, a similar duty existed in terms of loyalty. For the household system to work well, that is, for the survival and prosperity of the household and its members, everyone had to fulfill his or her own role, carrying out his or her own proper function.

Fortunately, Odysseus' household had many faithful members. The swineherd Eumaeus stands as the perfect example of a loyal servant. When Odysseus is away, Eumaeus continues to care for his master's property even though no one directs him in what he should do. Further, when Odysseus, still disguised, returns home, Eumaeus properly welcomes him in a way that is fitting for one who is representing his master. Later, Eumaeus wholeheartedly agrees to fight on behalf of Odysseus when his master reveals himself. Telemachus equally shows himself to be loyal as a devoted son who searches for his father and battles alongside him when he returns. Finally, there is faithful Penelope. When speaking to the dead suitors in Hades, Agamemnon praises her commitment and virtue:

Happy son of Laertes, much-able Odysseus! You acquired for yourself an excellent wife, one of great worth. How good was the heart in blameless Penelope, the daughter of Icarius. How faithful in mind to Odysseus, her wedded husband. The glory of her excellence will never fade, but the immortals will make among men on earth a graceful song for thoughtful Penelope.

By contrast, Agamemnon lambasts his own wife for treachery:

[Penelope] didn't plot evil works like the daughter of Tyndareus [Clytemnestra], who killed her wedded husband. Her song will be hated among men—and harsh will be the judgment that follows womankind, bringing a bad reputation even to those women who are upright.³⁰

For those who betray the household, there can be grave consequences. For example, Clytemnestra is butchered by her own son, Orestes, in revenge for her betrayal of his father. We witness this as well when Odysseus ruthlessly hangs all the disloyal serving women soon after he slaughters all their lovers, the suitors.

Seen in the context of Homer's do-or-die world, where survival was no guarantee, such harsh punishments were perhaps necessary, as everyone had to do

his or her part so the whole, the household, could survive and thrive. Acting well together meant survival. Acting poorly and against one another meant the opposite.

A similar rule—that consequences follow upon behavior—held for the Homeric world at large.

Human behavior has consequences. Early on in the *Odyssey*, Zeus expresses the general idea or rule that human behavior has consequences—particularly bad behavior. Speaking to the gods in assembly, he declares, “How shameful it is that the mortals even now blame the gods! From us, they say, come all sorts of bad things.” Then he gives the general rule: “But it is through their own recklessness that they have sorrows beyond those that are fated.”³¹

There are many examples of how this (bad) human-behavior-has-consequences rule works in the *Odyssey*. One example, offered by Zeus himself, is the reported demise of Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. They had engaged in a love affair, which Zeus through Hermes had advised against. And they had murdered Agamemnon upon his return home. Of Aegisthus, Zeus states, “He did this even though he knew it would mean his own utter destruction!”³² Another instance is the death that Odysseus’ comrades undergo after they eat the cattle of the sun god Helios. As with Aegisthus, they had been warned. Zeus ends up blasting their ship with thunder and lightning, and they all perish. A last example is the death of the suitors that follows upon their outrageous behavior. Here’s what Odysseus says to them after he shoots their leader Antinous through the throat:

You dogs! You thought that I would never come home again from the land of the Trojans, and so you squandered my household goods, and you forced yourself on my servants to sleep with them! And while I was still alive, you unlawfully wooed my wife, having no fear of the gods, who possess the wide sky above, nor do you fear the indignation of men that will come in due time. But now the ropes of destruction have been tied around all of you!³³

After slaughtering the suitors, and as if to justify his own action, Odysseus proclaims to Eurycleia:

The fate of the gods and their own cruel deeds have conquered these men. They honored no one on earth, whoever came among them, whether a noble or a base man. Therefore, they brought on themselves a shameful death because of their foolish recklessness.³⁴

The gods, fate, and human perception of the gods. With Odysseus’ last remark, we see that, even though men experience consequences resulting from their own behavior (“their own cruel deeds”), they are nevertheless also fated or directed by the gods. “The fate of the gods and their own cruel deeds have conquered these men.”

The role of the gods—led and managed by Zeus—in human life may be witnessed most clearly early on in the *Odyssey* when the gods sit in council discussing various human matters, including the fate of Aegisthus and what should happen to Odysseus. “Come,” Zeus prods, “let us all consider his return home, how he will go.” Later, Zeus declares the outcome of their deliberations: “It is [Odysseus’] fate to see those who are dear to him, to come to his high-roofed house in his own fatherland.”³⁵ At the end of the *Odyssey*, it is also Zeus who, from deep within his mind, subtly directs Athena to bring Odysseus and his enemies together in peace. In response to Athena’s question regarding what she should do and what will happen (she asks, “Will you stir them on to destructive war again, . . . or will you establish them in friendship?”), Zeus replies, “Did you yourself not propose the plan to have Odysseus come and punish these men? So do as you wish. Still, I will tell you what is fitting.”³⁶ Athena follows Zeus. As always, it is *his* suggestion, *his* plan, that directs human fate by means of the other gods—Hermes and Iris, for example, or Athena.

Regarding human perception of the gods, though not impossible, it is a challenge for humans to recognize the activity and direction of the gods. Speaking to Athena, Odysseus declares, “It is difficult, goddess, for a mortal to know you when he encounters

you face to face.”³⁷ The reason it is difficult is because Athena takes on so many ordinary disguises, whether man, child, or bird, rather than making an extraordinary appearance as one might expect, a divine manifestation in all its glory. In other words, who is to say the man, child, or bird is not simply *that* rather than a god or goddess? The same may be said for the other gods who appear in one way or another to human beings. So it is that it is difficult to recognize the gods when encountered.

Human intelligence and skill (versus strength alone). Aside from an occasional conversation with a god or goddess—as when Athena speaks with and helps Telemachus, or Calypso gives Odysseus the background story of the gods’ response to his comrades’ slaughtering and eating of the cattle of Helios, the Sun, or various signs and omens that are sent by the gods, such as bird omens sent on the right signifying a positive outcome—Homeric Greeks have to rely on their own intelligence to navigate life. Survival and happiness require wits in Homer’s world. Frequently, such wit and intelligence involve wisdom and cunning—clever assessment, shrewd calculation, guile.

Odysseus possesses these forms of intelligence in abundance in both Homer’s epics. He is “much-able,” an epithet that particularly refers to his intelligence in devising plans that will accomplish the unthinkable.³⁸ When, for instance, Odysseus appears alive in Hades, Achilles marvels at his ability. “God-born son of Laertes, much-able Odysseus, you never stop! Tell me—what exploit will you plan that is greater than this? How did you dare to come down to Hades?”³⁹ Otherwise, Odysseus is always ready with a story, a clever response, or a disguise that will help him survive a situation—so much so that Athena is exasperated with him for his ever-readiness after he tells yet another story, doubtlessly in the name of caution for survival. She says:

There’s no getting by you! Whoever wants to outdo you in guile must truly be cunning and full of wiles—even if it is a god facing you! You cruel man of many counsels, you cannot get enough of deception! It appears that even

in your own land you cannot stop all the trickery and all the made-up stories that you adore from the bottom of your heart!⁴⁰

As for clever responses, we may cite the ingenious name Odysseus offers to the Cyclops Polyphemus when the latter asks him to identify himself. “My name is Nobody,” he announces. The name eventually leads the Cyclops to declare, “Out of all his friends, I will eat Nobody last.” And when the other Cyclopes come to see what is wrong with Polyphemus, when he is shouting and crying after Odysseus has violently blinded him, he reports, “Friends, Nobody is killing me by guile or by strength!”⁴¹

So it is that intelligence and skill in the form of wisdom and craft outperform physical strength alone in the *Odyssey*. We see this not only when Odysseus devises his plan to blind Polyphemus to escape his cave (“you endured until your cunning wisdom led you out of the cave”⁴²) but also in the story told by the bard Demodocus about Ares’ adulterous love affair with Aphrodite, the wife of Hephaestus. The smith god Hephaestus is himself physically disabled. Relative to the war god Ares, who is strong and quick, Hephaestus is weak and slow (at least in his lower body). Nevertheless, when Hephaestus brilliantly traps Ares and Aphrodite in an adulterous act, Demodocus, in the voice of the gods, makes clear the moral lesson: “Bad deeds do not thrive. The slow overtakes the swift—just as now Hephaestus, slow as he is, has seized Ares, even though he is the swiftest of the gods who hold Olympus. Lame, he has seized him by craft. Ares must pay the fine for adultery.”⁴³

Truth and falsehood (reality versus appearance). Reality—or truth, what actually is—is not always readily apparent in the *Odyssey*. When gods appear as humans and humans seem divine; when the old turn out to be strong and the young weak; when the best behave in shameful ways and the apparently shameful are actually the best; when all of reality is a shape-shifting thing like the sea god Proteus, who appears as one thing and then another and only reveals himself if one holds on to him long enough;—when the world is such, the question is, How can one *know*?

How can one assess the truth when what appears to be may not be after all?

The problem of reality versus appearance is particularly striking in the case of the identity of persons. When one asks another, “Who are you?” it is possible, of course, to offer the truth or to tell a lie. This is why Odysseus is able to pass himself off as someone else so many times throughout the poem. Several times he is a man from Crete. Another, he is from Alybas. Homer expresses the problem this way: “As Odysseus spoke [to Penelope], he made the many falsehoods of his tale [regarding his false identity] seem like the truth”⁴⁴—which is to say Odysseus passed off appearance (what actually is not, what is falsehood) as truth (what actually is, what is reality).

Telemachus recognizes the binary possibility of speaking the truth or telling a lie when he asks for the truth upon the introduction of a visitor (Athena-Mentes). “Tell me this, and recount it accurately. Who are you among men and where do you come from? . . . Declare to me the truth of this so that I may know it well: is this your first visit to our house or are you my father’s guest-friend?” These expressions demanding truth—“recount it accurately,” “declare to me the truth so that I may know it well”—appear time and again in the *Odyssey*.⁴⁵

Given the possibility of truth or falsehood, people are sometimes skeptical when another introduces himself and offers information. Both Eumaeus and Penelope, for example, remain unconvinced when Odysseus, who claims he is from Crete, testifies that the *real* Odysseus is nearby and near to returning home. Eumaeus declares, “Ah, wretched stranger, you’ve truly moved my spirit in telling me about how you have suffered and where you have wandered. But in this one thing I suppose you have not spoken appropriately. No, you won’t convince me with this story about Odysseus [and his return].”⁴⁶

Sometimes, it is only a physical sign that can demonstrate the truth of a person’s information or the identity of an individual. For instance, there is the revelation of a sign that only a few would recognize, as with the olive tree bedframe that Odysseus and Penelope alone know; or there is the detection of a unique

physical feature, such as the scar just above Odysseus’ knee; or there is the accurate description of an article of clothing, as when Penelope questions the “Cretan” Odysseus:

Now, stranger, I believe I will question you to see whether, as you say, you truly hosted my husband and his godlike comrades there in your halls. Tell me what sort of clothes he wore upon his body. And describe the kind of man he was, and the comrades who followed him.⁴⁷

In some cases, there is no possible way to identify with certainty the identity of a person. Such is the case with male ancestors, and, more specifically, with Telemachus’ own father. Telemachus knows what he’s been told, that Odysseus is his father. But how can he really know the truth? When Athena-Mentes asks him, “Are you, so tall as you are, truly the son of Odysseus?” Telemachus skeptically responds, “My mother tells me that I am Odysseus’ son. But me—I don’t know. For what man has ever known his male ancestors with certainty?”⁴⁸

Spiritual growth (Telemachus and Odysseus). Fortunately, Telemachus’ uncertainty morphs into certainty when Odysseus returns. This is not the only change he undergoes. From the beginning of the *Odyssey* to its conclusion, Telemachus experiences significant change or growth—from boyhood to manhood, inexperience to experience, timidity to boldness, helplessness and inhibition to power and authority. Facilitated by the gods, particularly by the strong influence Athena has on him, the shift comes about, as most changes do, thanks to circumstances: his absent father, the presence of the adversarial suitors, his journey to the Peloponnese to learn news of his father’s fate, the demand to get revenge and slaughter the suitors, and the final need to defend his family and allies against the suitors’ relatives. To some extent, the change is merely the same as or coincidental with “growing up.” Whatever we term it, though, it involves a profound transformation on a spiritual or psychological level. If at the beginning Athena descends to Ithaca to “put courage into [Telemachus’] heart,”—which is to say

battle might and prowess,—by the end, he has become a man of courage, vying “with [his father] over excellence” in battle.⁴⁹

Along the way, Telemachus himself and other people recognize the alteration. For example, when Athena “instill[s] strength and courage into Telemachus’ spirit,” he “feels the change and [is] astonished.” “Thus emboldened,” we are told, Telemachus goes “straight to where the suitors [are] sitting, a god-like man.” Moments later, when he orders the suitors to disperse and gather together in the morning, they are “amazed at Telemachus because he spoke boldly.”⁵⁰ Much later, after he returns home from journeying abroad, “all the people” of the town are equally overcome at his transformation. Homer reports that as he walks through the place of assembly, they stare at him as one who is so full of “wondrous grace.”⁵¹ Penelope similarly notices a change in her son. From a boy who earlier complains about a lack of power and control in his own house, Telemachus shifts to the opposite: “No man here will thwart my will,” he forcefully declares to his mother, late in the *Odyssey*, “even if I wished to give this bow to the stranger as a gift for him to take away.” He turns and orders her to “go to your chamber and busy yourself with your own tasks.” In the end, he claims the status of a man for himself and exercises the authority appropriate to this status. “As for the bow, the men will worry about it, but I most of all since I have the authority in the house.” His mother is correspondingly impressed—at her son and his alteration. “Seized with amazement,” Homer relates, “Penelope went back to her chamber, storing the wise saying of her son in her heart.”⁵²

As for Odysseus, he also transforms, though his growth is far more subtle, a shift that is, in the end and in its fullness, only hinted at or prophesied (about which, more in a moment under “*Happiness*”). For now, we may note an apparent shift that is hinted at just after the slaughter of the suitors. When the nurse Eurycleia witnesses them sprawled out in bloody destruction in the great hall, she cries out for joy, celebrating her master’s mighty deed. Odysseus’ response is revealing. He “stopped [Eurycleia] and

checked her in her eagerness, speaking to her with winged words, ‘Rejoice in your own spirit, old woman, but hold yourself back and do not cry aloud. It is an unholy thing to glory-boast over slain men.’” The command is surprising given the fact that it was the norm in Odysseus’ world to glory-boast over the dead—something that repeatedly occurs in the *Iliad*. Moreover, it comes from the man who, at the very beginning of his battle for revenge, prays to Apollo for the “glory-boast,” the very thing he now forbids to Eurycleia. But now something has changed—something that leaves us to speculate as we do not have much else to go on aside from the peace and friendship rather than conflict and enmity that eventually come to Odysseus and the suitors’ relatives in the final lines of the poem.

Happiness or happy prosperity. That admitted, we know that a profound change is in store for Odysseus, one that will ultimately result in a settled happiness or “happy prosperity” for him and his people.⁵³ We know this thanks to the prophecy the blind seer Tiresias gives to Odysseus when he visits him in Hades:

But when you have slaughtered the suiters in your halls,
 . . . then go abroad, taking a shapely oar with you. Go
 until you come to men who know nothing of the sea and
 do not eat food mixed with salt. Indeed, they know nothing
 of ships with purple cheeks or of shapely oars that
 serve as wings for ships. And I will give you a sign that
 will be readily apparent to you, one that will not escape
 your notice. When you meet up with another traveler,
 and he says that you have a winnowing-fan on your
 shining shoulder, then plant your shapely oar in the
 earth and make fine offerings to lord Poseidon . . . Then,
 go home and offer sacred hecatombs to the immortal
 gods, who possess the wide sky—offer them to each one
 in due order. And death will come to you away from the
 sea, a gentle death that will lay you low when you have
 grown old. And your people will exist in happy prosperity
 around you.⁵⁴

Most significantly, Odysseus’s life, his focus, will shift away from the sea and everything the sea repre-

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sents—being away from home, instability, suffering—to a prosperous existence among his people in his homeland at home. Interestingly, this shift will occur for Odysseus thanks to, or in some unexpressed connection with, a people who do not even know the sea, so much so that they do not use salt to enhance their food.

How do we know the hero of the *Odyssey* will actually experience this transformation? How do we know he will end happy? The short answer is we don't. But if we take Tiresias at his word, which is a reasonable thing to do given Homer's world, it *will* happen. "With these words," Tiresias declares to Odysseus, "I speak unerring truth to you." With his people, Odysseus will be happy. And rather than a violent death in battle or an agonizing end at sea, he'll experience a gentle passing in his old age.⁵⁵

So it is we understand that the *Odyssey*—and more so the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together—is about happiness. It is about that shift, that transformation, that leads to a better, more peaceful life.

Perhaps ancient philosophers such as the Neoplatonist Plotinus were right to see in it something deeper than an exciting story with battles, warrior-heroes, and monsters. We'll end, then, with Plotinus:

"Let us flee then to the beloved homeland." This is unerring counsel. But what is this flight? And how do we flee? It seems to me that Odysseus is a hint or parable for us when he talks about his flight. . . . What, then, is our journey? . . . We should not go by means of our feet . . . or by a horse or by some ship belonging to the sea. We should let go of these and not think of them. Rather, we should close our eyes, exchanging this way of seeing for another, waking up. Everyone possesses this way, but few use it.

Of course, what this means for the one who encounters Odysseus and his odyssey, his going out and return home, will depend on the one listening to or reading the poem, and perhaps a good deal of creative imagination.

So ends "Introduction Part 3: The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Odyssey*." **See you in the next item, "The Cast of Gods and Men—A Quick Reference."**

NOTES

¹ Before launching into the themes and ideas of the *Odyssey*, we may briefly note that, thanks to the profundity of Homer's poem, such an endeavor could be a nearly endless process. Consequently, the themes and ideas covered in this section are the ones the Cave believes are the most significant or interesting. That said, we could have added others or highlighted aspects of certain themes and ideas we have not. Some examples include: the function of "testing" (whether of loyalty or identity); the nature and significance of omens and other signs (such as bird signs, dreams, and even sneezes); geography and the journey (the meaning of the sea, dry land, and human geography, whether "wild" or "civilized"); proper shame and boldness (relative to Telemachus); the device of storytelling and the role of the storyteller (whether that of Homer, various bards, or Odysseus himself); the notion of hiddenness (as we see with Calypso, whose name means "the one who hides" or "concealer," and the various guises we encounter throughout the poem); various "recognitions," particularly when Telemachus and Penelope and others come to know Odysseus' real, as opposed to apparent or claimed, identity; the dangers of falling asleep (for Odysseus) and temptation (for both Odysseus and his men); the importance of family and relatives (whether Agamemnon's, Odysseus', Nestor's, Menelaus', the suitors'); and, finally, a more allegorical reading of the poem, such as was commonly done in the ancient world, particularly among the Neoplatonists (though we include this briefly). On the latter note, see, for instance, Porphyry, *Porphyry on the Cave of the Nymphs*, trans. by Robert Lamberton (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1983). See also Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *Christianizing Homer: The Odyssey, Plato, and The Acts of Andrew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a nineteenth century allegorical reading, see Thomas Taylor's 1823 essay, "On the Wandering of Ulysses."

² The word "odyssey" means "a long, adventurous journey." It is derived from the name of the hero of the poem you have in hand—though you should understand that Odysseus' name does not mean "journey"; rather, it means something like "son of pain."

³ For evidence illustrating the reasons to journey, see the following:

For "profit by means of trade": When, for instance, Odysseus comes to the land of the Phaeacians, Euryalus, one of his hosts,

queries whether he and his men are merchants or traders out for a return. “You look like a man occupied with many-benched ships,” he says, “the leader of sailing men, who are traders, ever mindful of your cargo, keeping watch over your freights and grasping for gain” (*Odyssey* 8.161-164). See also 3.72, where Nestor asks Telemachus and Athena (disguised as Mentor) if they are on “some trading voyage.” Earlier (1.182-184), Athena gives hint of the nature of such trade when she (disguised as Mentes) reveals, “I have come here with my ship and crew on a voyage over the wine-faced sea to men of a strange tongue. We are bound for Temese with a cargo of iron, and we hope to bring back copper.”

For “to collect wealth by engaging in piracy”: When Nestor asks Telemachus and Athena (disguised as Mentor) if they are out “on some business” or on “some trading voyage,” he adds a seemingly common alternative: “Or,” he asks, “do you aimlessly wander, as pirates roam the seas, risking their lives and bringing misfortune to people in another land?” (3.72-74). The Cyclops Polyphemus puts the same questions to Odysseus and his men in 9.252-255. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides confirms the reality and extent of early Greek piracy and raiding in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.2-12.

For “waging war for the sake of sustenance or glory”: When Odysseus explains how men generally go about satisfying hunger, which is to say their desire for survival and everything else that contributes to a good life, including glory, he offers what may be considered the *why* or origin of raiding and warfare: “But there is no hiding a hungry belly. It is an accursed, destructive thing, which introduces many evils to all men. It is because of hunger that well-benched ships are made ready to sail the barren sea and carry misery and sorrow to hostile men” (*Odyssey* 17.285-289). In other words, alongside farming and other peaceful means of production, raiding others by sea was a legitimate way to satisfy desire—or hunger. Broadly speaking, this sort of raiding is what was behind the Trojan war, the great event that was waged as much for securing profit and winning glory as it was for retrieving Helen, Menelaus’ wife, and getting revenge.

For “the need to obtain news”: When Telemachus journeys to Pylos to speak with Nestor and to Sparta to speak with Menelaus, both men friends of his father, Athena (disguised as Mentor) explains that he should not feel any shame in speaking up since he “sailed across the sea for this reason—to discover news about your father” (3.15-16). For general news and Odysseus, see 1.1-3.

⁴ It is a journey summarized in the first few lines of the *Odyssey*: “Man—tell me, Muse, of the versatile man of many adventures, who wandered much after he had sacked the holy town of Troy. He visited many cities and knew the mind and thoughts of many men. When he was out to sea, he suffered much pain in his spirit in the attempt to save his own life and win his comrades their return home” (1.1-5).

⁵ See Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish: What Homer Believed about Happiness and the Good Life* (Sugar Land: EuZōn Media, 2015), 129.

⁶ See *Odyssey* 15.343. To the point, in the *Iliad* (9.63), Nestor explains that a man would never wish to be without a family or home. It would be on par, he claims, with having an outlaw status. Much later, when the goatherd Philoetius first encounters the hero, he is right to observe that such a homeless, “much-wandering” man—as Odysseus appears to be—is a miserable man, “plunged . . . into misfortune and wretched pains” (*Odyssey* 20.195).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.34-36.

⁸ Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish*, 130.

⁹ See *Odyssey* 9.84, 94-97; 10.236; 10.471-472; 1.55-59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.11-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.5, 12-13, 17-18.

¹² Admittedly, the “deeper significance of the outward and homeward journey” is not directly a “Big Theme and Idea” of the *Odyssey*. Still, we at the Cave believe it is important to know how others have creatively read the epic poem, and consequently how you—if you wish—can read it with imagination and deeper application.

¹³ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.8. The “father” may be understood as the intelligible world—that is, the spiritual world of Forms or Ideas, which is itself an emanation of the One, the Absolute or God.

¹⁴ For the pattern or cycle observed relative to its broader ancient context, see Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002).

¹⁵ *Odyssey* 3.95.

¹⁶ For Odysseus’ suffering, see *ibid.*, 9.37-38 and 1.4-5. For Nestor’s declaration, see 3.113-114. For the contemplation of suicide, see 10.49-52, where the options are to die or endure.

Regarding suffering, part of Odysseus’ suffering has to do with human nature—the general nature of human beings. As he describes it: “Of all things that breathe and move along the earth, there’s nothing weaker than a human being—I tell you, the earth nurtures no frailer thing. For as long as the gods give him excellence, and as long as his knees stand strong, he thinks he’ll never suffer misfortune in the days to come. But when the blessed gods send him misery, he must bear it with an enduring spirit

even though it is against his will” (18.130-135).

Otherwise, we see that Odysseus suffers on both the sea and dry land. As the enchantress Circe puts it, “I know about all the pain and distress you have suffered on the fish-filled sea. I know as well all the damage hostile men have done to you on dry land” (10.456-459). Part of Odysseus’ suffering has to do with the sea itself, over which he must travel to make it home. The sea is unpredictable, even as the winds are that a sailor relies on to sail. It is the ever-shifting stage upon which Poseidon stirs up his dark storms that give rise to towering waves. The latter sport with the ships of men—ships that mimic the stability of dry land but only as long as the sea and its god cooperate. Then again, dry land is also unpredictable and thus a problem (or those things are that happen on dry land). It is not so much a problem in a natural sense—though Odysseus struggles with cold and a fear of wild animals when he first lands on Scheria, and some lands do not provide enough food. Rather, it is a problem in the sense that a traveler encounters other human beings while ashore. Odysseus expresses the fear this way: “Ah me! To what land of mortals have I come? Are they violent and insolent men? Are they uncivilized and wild, without justice or the proper observance of custom? Or are they hospitable men, loving strangers?” (6.119-121). If a man encounters “uncivilized and wild” creatures such as the Cyclopes, then he can expect to face danger and possible suffering. If, by contrast, he meets up with someone such as the princess Nausicaa, as Odysseus does on the Phaeacian island of Scheria, then he can expect to be treated humanely as a guest-friend.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.187-190. Athena similarly explains that Odysseus must endure the trouble that he is destined to suffer in his house upon his return: “Nevertheless, *you must endure* the trouble and pain—you have no choice. . . . But in silence suffer all the pain and distress, and patiently bear the violent abuse of men” (13.307-310). Odysseus himself recognizes the rule in what was already cited under *suffering*: “But when the blessed gods send him misery, *he must bear it* with an enduring spirit even though it is against his will.”

But are humans strong enough to endure? In Homer’s *Iliad*, we learn that we humans fortunately “come well-equipped to handle suffering,” as the “Introduction” to the Cave’s *The Best of Homer’s Iliad* explains. See *Iliad* 24.49, where the god Apollo reveals that “the Fates put an enduring spirit into men.”

¹⁸ To observe Odysseus’ method of endurance in action, see *Odyssey* 20.18-21, 23-24. It may also be seen in Odysseus’ words to his frightened men found in 12.206-212: “I went through the ship and I encouraged my comrades with soothing words, standing by each man saying, ‘Dear friends, up to now we have not been ignorant of suffering and misfortune. Surely this misfortune that is upon us now is no greater than when the Cyclops shut us in his hollow cave by his mighty bodily strength. Yet even then we escaped thanks to my excellence, both my counsel and understanding. I believe someday we will remember these terrors, too.’” We can guess that Odysseus’ speech to his men in the cave of Polyphemus included similar encouraging words—words intended to help his men endure, when he “spoke to [his] comrades to give them courage so that under the influence of fear no man would hesitate or draw back” (9.376-377). Finally, we may detect the method of endurance beneath Odysseus’ speech to Calypso revealing his readiness to endure (see 5.220-224).

¹⁹ In Homer’s dangerous zero-sum world, the guest-host relationship itself is the opposite of what we may call the sacker-defender relationship, a relationship of hostility where one (whether an individual, a household, or a larger alliance) violently attacks another (of the same) for the sake of gain. We see the latter, for instance, when Odysseus and his men attack the Cicones on the way home from Troy (Ilium): “The wind took me from Ilium and carried me to the land of the Cicones, to Ismarus. There I sacked the city, bringing destruction to all the men. As for the women, we seized them and took them from the city along with much property and wealth that we later divided equally so that no man was cheated” (9.39-42). For the terms as well as a discussion of the “sacker-defender relationship” and the “guest-host relationship,” see Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish*, 209 ff.

²⁰ Our word “xenophobia,” fear (*phobos*) of foreigners (*xenoi*), is based on *xenos*. *Xenos* is a word that ranges in meaning from “foreigner” and “stranger” to “guest” and “friend”—thus, “guest-friend.” *Xenos* is also the friend that hosts a guest-friend, that is, the “host.”

²¹ *Odyssey* 6.206-208. The swineherd Eumaeus later makes the same point to Odysseus, who, at the moment, is disguised as an old, wandering beggar. When Odysseus blesses him for taking him in, Eumaeus declares, “Stranger, it is not right for me to dishonor someone like you—not even if one more unfortunate and of lesser account than you came to my shelter. I say this because all strangers and beggars come from Zeus” (14.56-58).

²² In the United States, there are at least two towns called *Xenia*—Xenia, Ohio and Xenia, Illinois, both founded in the first half of the nineteenth century. Each presumably wished to be known as welcoming towns, offering “guest-gifts.”

²³ Ibid., 1.123-124, 170, 175-176.

²⁴ For other examples, see Menelaus’ reception of Telemachus and Peisistratus (4.22-62); Nausicaa’s reception of Odysseus (6.206-216) (though she leaves the questioning to her parents, Alcinous and Arete, who welcome Odysseus in a similar manner

[7.146-239]); and even reception among the gods, when Calypso hosts Hermes (5.77-97).

²⁵ We see this ongoing duty of friendship most clearly, though, in the *Iliad*, when the heroes Diomedes and Glaucus recognize longtime friendship between their households (“then you are an old guest-friend [*xenos*] in my father’s house”) and so vow abiding friendship (“I must be your dear host [*xenos*] when you are in middle Argos, and you must be mine if I should ever go to Lycia”). The abiding friendship is even more striking when we realize they are actually enemies fighting on opposite sides—that is, before they recognize each other, acknowledge the deeper bonds of friendship, and plant their spears in the ground, agreeing to “avoid each other’s spears when men come together.” See 6.215, 224-226.

²⁶ *Odyssey* 1.311-313. The same also happens with Diomedes and Glaucus (mentioned in the previous note). When the two separate, they exchange gifts as is usual upon the departure of a friend. In their case, they exchange armor just as modern athletes sometimes swap jerseys. See *Iliad* 6.234 ff.

²⁷ The same is true in the *Iliad*, when Paris, even though he had been received as a guest-friend, behaves as an enemy by taking Menelaus’ wife, Helen. When Menelaus prays to Zeus for revenge, that Paris might pay the penalty for his wrongdoing, he declares that the god should fulfill his prayer “so that among men to come a man may shrink from doing harm to his host, to the man who shows a guest affection and offers him friendship” (see *Iliad* 3.353-354).

²⁸ *Odyssey* 6.180-185.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.432-435. Since glory is the converse of shame in Homer’s world, revenge is also a way of getting glory.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.192-198.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.32-34. Generally speaking, destruction (*olethros*) or sorrow, pain, distress, or trouble (*algos*) follow upon reckless behavior (*atasthalia*) or insolence, arrogance, or wantonness (*hubris*). Note that Zeus is fully admitting that the gods *do* cause some bad things, “those that are fated.” Humans are fated and therefore receive some good things and some bad things (see, for instance, Achilles’ explanation in the *Iliad* 24.525 ff.). Yet in a way that is not explained by Homer, but simply presented as fact, humans are able somehow to act *beyond* fate and so experience results—whether success or failure, joy or suffering, pleasure or pain—that are “beyond those that are fated.” For a discussion of fate in Homer, see Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish*, 155-158. For a general discussion of Fate or *Moirai* in the Greek world, see William Chase Greene, *Moirai: Fate, Good, & Evil in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).

³² *Odyssey* 1.37. For the whole incident, see 1.32-43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 22.35-41.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.413-416. Observe how Odysseus cites both “the fate of the gods” and the suitors’ “own cruel deeds,” which are, presumably, “beyond those that are fated”—to use Zeus’ expression.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.76-77 and 5.41-42.

³⁶ For Athena’s discussion with Zeus, see *ibid.*, 24.472-486.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.312.

³⁸ The Greek for “much-able,” *polumēchanos*, may also be given as “ever-ready, resourceful, full of resources, inventive” or “much-contriving.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.473-475.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.291-295.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.366, 369, 408. Their response? “If you’re alone and nobody is harming you, then it must be some sickness from almighty Zeus that you cannot avoid” (9.410-411).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.20-21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.329-332.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.203.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.169-170, 174-176. They recur 15 and 7 times respectively.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.361-364. For Penelope, see *ibid.*, 19.268 ff.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.215-219. After Odysseus describes the clothing, Homer reveals that Penelope “recognized the certain signs that Odysseus pointed out” (19.250).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.207, 215-216.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.89, 24.515. The word *aretē* may be given as “excellence,” as we do in the text. But translators often give “valor” for *aretē*. The reason is that the particular excellence of a man *as man* is valor or courage. In fact, a later Greek word for courage (*andreia*) is related to the Greek word for man (*anēr*).

⁵⁰ *Odyssey* 1.321-324, 382. See also 19.268-269 for a similar astonishment at Telemachus’ boldness.

⁵¹ See *ibid.*, 17.63-64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.348-355.

⁵³ The Greek term *olbios*, given here as “happy prosperity,” is an adjective that primarily means “happy” or “blessed”; it is a state of happiness that results from abundance. For an extended discussion, see Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish*, 63-65.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.119-137.

⁵⁵ It is a passing that contrasts with Achilles’ own in battle before Troy — Achilles who chooses death and glory in battle instead of returning home to a long life without glory, and, presumably, a peaceful death. See *Iliad* 9.412-416.

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