The Odyssey

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HOMER

Little is known about Homer's life. Many people believe no such person ever existed, and that "Homer" is a pseudonym uniting the works of many authors from various time periods. Others believe that he was a blind court singer in the 8th century BC.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most ancient Greeks believed that the Trojan War took place in the 11th or 12th century BC, but on a slightly smaller scale than what was depicted in stories and legends. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance scholars believed that the Trojan War was pure invention, but in the past century archeologists and geologists have excavated sites that correspond topographically to the geography of Troy and surrounding sites, as they were described in *The Iliad*. Today, most scholars agree that the Mycenean Greeks did storm a city called Troy in the 11th century BC, but that the details of the battle described in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are fictitious.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Odyssey is the sequel to *The Iliad*, which describes the events of the Trojan War. The epics are considered the first known works of Western literature, and exerted vast influence on most of the authors and philosophers in ancient Greece as well as epic poems written in Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance times, such as *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Paradise Lost*. Some scholars have pointed out resemblances between *The Odyssey* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Mesopotamian poem that dates back to the 18th century BC.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Odyssey*
- **When Written:** 8th or 7th century BC.
- **Where Written:** Ancient Greece
- **When Published:** The poem was passed down orally for many generations, but the Athenian tyrant Peisistratos established a committee to compile and revise Homer's manuscripts in the 6th century BC. The oldest complete manuscript of the poem dates back to the 10th or 11th century AD. Dozens of English translations have been published since the 17th century.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Greece (pre-Classical)
- **Genre:** Epic Poem
- **Setting:** The Pelopponese and the Ionian islands in Mycenaean Greece, in the 10 years after the fall of Troy, *circa* 12th century BC.
- **Climax:** The slaughter of the suitors
- **Antagonist:** The suitors, Poseidon
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

The Limits of Papyrus. The Odyssey was initially recorded on fragile papyrus scrolls; some people believe that the length of each of the twenty-four books was determined by the length of a single scroll, which would break if it exceeded a certain size.

Son of Telemachus. The Oracle at Delphi claimed that Homer was Telemachus's son.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins twenty years after Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War, and ten years after he began his journey home to Ithaca. We enter the story *in medias res* – in the middle of things: Odysseus is trapped on an island with the lovesick goddess Calypso, while his wife and son suffer the transgressions of the suitors, noble young men who vie for queen Penelope's hand. The loyal queen has rebuffed their advances for many years, because she holds out hope that Odysseus may one day return. In the meantime the suitors have run free in the household, holding noisy parties and draining the resources of the estate.

The goddess Athena decides to intervene on Odysseus's behalf. She convinces Zeus to send the messenger god Hermes to disentangle Odysseus from Calypso's grasp, and she herself flies to Ithaca to give courage and guidance to the helpless young prince Telemachus. She inspires Telemachus to set sail to Pylos and Sparta in search of news about Odysseus; his newfound confidence and familial feeling alarms the suitors, who plot to murder him on his way home. King Nestor of Pylos can't give Telemachus any information about Odysseus, but King Menelaus of Sparta reports that he learned from the sea god Proteus that Odysseus is alive on the island Ogygia.

Meanwhile, Hermes flies to Ogygia and tells Calypso to let Odysseus go. Odysseus departs, and sails for seventeen days until he sees the Phaeacian shore; after some difficulties, he reaches land and falls asleep. The next morning, the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa finds him on the beach in a pitiable state. She gives him food and clothes and offers to introduce him to her

parents, the king and queen – but she asks that he enter the city at a distance from her, to ward off uncharitable gossip.

After he spends some time at court, he tells Alcinous and Arete the full story of his travels. He describes the Cicones, who punished Odysseus's men for recklessness and greed, and the Lotus Eaters, whose flowers sent his men into a happy stupor. He tells the king and queen how he blinded the Cyclops Polyphemus, who called on his father Poseidon to avenge him. He tells them about Aeolus's bag of winds and about the cannibal Laestrygonians, the witch Circe that turned his men into pigs, the journey to the kingdom of the dead, the alluring Sirens and the monsters Scylla and Charybdis. With each trial, the crew's death toll rose, and Odysseus's ingenuity grew more desperate. Finally, the men anchored on the Island of the Sun. The prophet Tiresias warned Odysseus to keep his crew from harming the Sun God's cattle, but the men killed a few animals when Odysseus was asleep. When they were once again at sea, Zeus sent down a punitive bolt of lightning that killed every man except Odysseus, who floated on a makeshift raft to Calypso's island, where he lived in captivity for seven years.

Here Odysseus finishes his story. The next day, Alcinous sends him home in a Phaeacian ship loaded with treasure. Athena apprises him of the dire situation in his household, warns him of the suffering still to come, and disguises him as a ragged beggar. She sends him to the farm of the loyal swineherd Eumaeus; she also advises Telemachus to hurry home from Sparta. Father and son reunite and plot their revenge against the suitors.

The next day, Eumaeus and Odysseus come to court. The king's old dog Argos recognizes him despite his changed appearance, and the nurse Eurycleia recognizes him by the familiar hunting scar on his knee. Penelope is friendly to him but does not yet guess his real identity. Some of the suitors mock and abuse Odysseus in his disguise, but the king exercises great self-restraint and does not respond in kind. Finally, the despairing queen announces that she will hold an archery contest: she will marry the man that can use Odysseus's bow to shoot an arrow through a row of axes. But none of the suitors can even string Odysseus's bow, let alone shoot it.

Odysseus, of course, shoots the arrow with grace and ease. Just then the slaughter begins. With the help of Athena, the swineherd, and the cowherd, Odysseus and Telemachus murder the suitors one by one; they also kill the disloyal maids and servants. Soon enough, Odysseus reunites with Penelope. The suitors' families gather to avenge the murders, but Zeus orders them to stand down. Odysseus must leave for a brief journey to appease Poseidon, who still holds a grudge. Nevertheless, Ithaca is once again at peace.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Odysseus – King of Ithaca, husband of Penelope, and father of Telemachus, former commander in the Trojan War, Odysseus is the flawed, beloved hero of this tale of homecoming and revenge. His character is deeply contradictory: he is both a cunning champion and a plaything of the gods, a wise commander and a vainglorious braggart. After the Trojan War, which left him swollen with pride and fame, Odysseus seeks adventure on his way home; but the journey brings much defeat and humiliation, and the Odysseus that lands on the shores of Ithaca is a humbler, wiser man, more pious and reserved. As longing for adventure wanes, homesickness grows; the strictures of honor replace the demands of glory. Only when Odysseus learns to yield some control of his fate to the gods can he take charge of his life and bring peace to his household.

Telemachus – Odysseus's young son. Telemachus spends his youth helplessly watching the suitors corrupt his household and harass his mother Penelope, but Athena's forceful guidance helps him mature from a nervous youth to a confident, eloquent man – much like his father. Although Athena's hovering, controlling presence might seem oppressive and restrictive, it helps the prince to acquire a great deal of freedom in speech and action. His final passage into manhood is the fight against the suitors, where he proves his courage and skill.

Penelope – Odysseus's wife and Telemachus's mother. In the beginning of the story, Penelope's most prominent qualities are passivity, loyalty, and patience (along with beauty and skill at the loom) – the age-old feminine virtues. She does very little but lie in bed and weep. But from the start we are given to understand that she possesses other hidden qualities. The trick of the loom, which she weaves and unweaves in order to hold the suitors at bay, matches the cunning of any of Odysseus's plans. Her final scene, in which she mentions the bridal bed built around the olive tree, shows her cleverness as well: she tests Odysseus just as he has tested her. Theirs is a marriage of wits.

Athena – The goddess of wisdom, justice, and courage. She takes a particular liking to Odysseus, and by extension Telemachus – perhaps because Odysseus's suffering is greater than his crimes, perhaps because he embodies the values she champions. Secretively and light-handedly, she guides Telemachus and helps Odysseus when she can. She usually appears to mortals disguised as another mortal or as a bird; it might be that she is naturally reticent (as Zeus is naturally dramatic and ostentatious), or it might be that she takes pains to allow her heroes freedom of choice. Her partiality to Odysseus sometimes conflicts with Zeus and Poseidon's resentments, so she must act indirectly.

Zeus – King of all the gods, and the god of sky and lightning. He holds assembly on Mount Olympus and negotiates the desires and grievances of the gods. He punishes Odysseus when his

crew eats the Cattle of the sun god Helios. He allows Athena to help Odysseus, and he allows Poseidon to hurt him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mentes –One of Athena's disguises.

Poseidon – A sea god who holds a longstanding grudge against Odysseus for blinding his son, the Cyclops Polyphemus. He makes Odysseus's journey home very long and difficult.

Laertes –Odysseus'sfather, who lives in poverty on a farm.

Anticleia –Odysseus's mother, who died of longing for her son.

Eurycleia – Odysseus's kindly nurse, and the first person to recognize Odysseus in his beggar disguise.

Calypso – A beautiful goddess who falls in love with Odysseus and holds him captive for seven years on the island Ogygia.

Circe – A beautiful witch from the island Aeaea who turns Odysseus's crew into pigs; when Odysseus (with the aid of the drug moly) proves immune to her spell, she falls in love with him and hosts him and his crew on the island.

Antinous – The most insolent and impious suitor. Antinous riles the other suitors to conceive violent schemes against Odysseus and Telemachus, ignores rules of basic decency, and mouths off every chance he gets. He is the first to die in the battle.

Eurymachus –A rude and deceitful suitor.

Eumaeus – The loyal swineherd who helps Odysseus defeat the suitors.

Nestor –King of Pylos, commander in the Trojan War.

Pisistratus –Nestor's son.

Polycaste –Nestor's daughter.

Menelaus – King of Sparta, commander in the Trojan War, Agamemnon's brother.

Helen – Menelaus's wife, famous for her beauty and pivotal role in the Trojan War.

Agamemnon – Menelaus's brother, murdered by his wife's lover when he came home from the Trojan War.

Aegisthus –Clytemnestra's lover, Agamemnon's murderer.

Clytemnestra – Agamemnon's unfaithful wife.

Orestes – Agamemnon's son.

Proteus – A shape-shifting sea god.

Eidothea – Proteus's daughter.

Medon – Herald in Odysseus's court.

Hermes –The messenger god.

Achaeans – A general word that encompasses the Greek civilizations.

Phaeacians – A hospitable people who deliver Odysseus to Ithaca.

Trojans – The people of Troy, the site of the Trojan War.

Ino – A goddess who helps Odysseus reach the Phaeacianshore.

Alcinous – The Phaeacian king who hosts Odysseus very hospitably and helps him return to Ithaca.

Arete – The Phaeacian queen.

Nausicaa – A Phaeacian Princess, daughter of Alcinous.

Demodocus – A bard in Alcinous's court.

Laodamas – A man in Alcinous's court.

Broadsea – A man in Alcinous's court who provokes Odysseus to take part in the athletic contests.

Achilles – A warrior who gained great fame and died in the Trojan War.

Ajax – A warrior in the Trojan War.

Ares – The god of war, Aphrodite's lover.

Aphrodite – The goddess of love, wife of Hephaestus.

Hephaestus – The crippled goldsmith god, jilted husband of Aphrodite.

Helios – The sun god, owner of the Cattle of the Sun.

Cicones – A people that take revenge on Odysseus's crew .

Lotus Eaters – A people who grow and eat the somnolent lotus flower.

Cyclops – Cannibalistic giants who live in caves.

Polyphemus – A Cyclops son of Poseidon whom Odysseus blinds.

Aeolus – The god of wind.

Laestrygonians – Giant cannibals.

Antiphates – King of the Laestrygonians.

Eurylochus – A member of Odysseus's crew who often disobeys Odysseus.

Tiresias – A prophet with whom Odysseus speaks in the underworld.

Elpenor – A member of Odysseus's crew who died by falling off Circe's roof after getting drunk.

Sirens – Creatures disguised as beautiful women whose beautiful singing lures sailors to jump into the sea and drown.

Scylla – A man-eating monster with six heads.

Charybdis – A monster that creates a whirlpool three times a day.

Theoclymenus – A prophet who sails to Ithaca from Sparta with Telemachus.

Amphinomus – A kindly and well-intentioned suitor.

Melanthius – The rude goatherd.

Argos – Odysseus's old dog.

Arnaeus (Irus) – A rude beggar whom Odysseus fights.

Autolycus – Odysseus's grandfather, with whom he got the hunting scar on his knee.

Ctesippus – A rude, violent suitor.

Philoetius – The cowherd that helps Odysseus fight the suitors.

Eupithes – Antinous's father.

Amphimedon – One of the suitors.

Halitherses – A prophet who correctly prophecies that the two eagles tearing each other to pieces is an omen of the suitors coming destruction. However, the suitors mock him and do not listen.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FATE, THE GODS, AND FREE WILL

Three somewhat distinct forces shape the lives of men and women in *The Odyssey*: fate, the interventions of the gods, and the actions of the men and women themselves. Fate is the force of death in the midst of life, the destination each man or woman will ultimately reach. Though the gods seem all-powerful, "not even the gods/ can defend a man, not even one they love, that day/ when fate takes hold and lays him out at last."

While fate determines the ultimate destination, the nature of the journey toward that fate—whether it will be difficult or easy, full of shame or glory—depends on the actions of gods and men. Sometimes a god works against a particular man or group of men that have in some way earned that god's anger, as when Poseidon blocks Odysseus's attempts to return home to punish him for blinding Poseidon's son Polyphemus. In such instances, the destructive actions of the gods tend to affect men like natural disasters: they alter men's lives but do not curtail men's freedom to act as they choose amidst the rubble.

Sometimes a god works to help a man or group that the god favors, as when Athena disguises Odysseus on his return from Ithaca; but in these cases the line between human free will and divine intervention can get quite blurry. Athena helps Telemachus to take action by giving him courage: but does she affect him like a steroid that artificially augments his strength, or like a wise friend that helps him to more fully grasp his own inherent abilities? Whether the gods manipulate human actions or inspire humans to follow their own free will is never entirely clear.

PIETY, CUSTOMS, AND JUSTICE

The world of *The Odyssey* is defined by rules that prescribe human interactions. Important customs include hospitable behavior to strangers and guests, respect for family and marriage, and punishment of those who have violated these customs. The lines between these customs can be blurry, and at times the customs may even conflict – as in the case of Agamemnon's son Orestes, who must avenge Agamemnon's murder by his wife Clytemnestra, but in doing so has to kill his own mother. A person who fails to follow these customs usually falls victim to violent justice meted out by other humans or by the gods. Those who act quickly, selfishly, or ignorantly are likely to run afoul of the complicated interplay of these customs; at the same time, those who are cunning and thoughtful can get their way within the confines of the rules, bending but not breaking them.

The gods also reward piety and punish disrespect and hubris (excessive pride). Human piety toward the gods takes many forms, such as sacrifice and respect for a divine property and offspring. Yet the gods are often unreliable in their assessments of human piety. It can take very little for a god to feel slighted, and the consequences are often unpredictable. Poseidon remains angry at Odysseus for blinding his son Polyphemus even after he punishes Odysseus repeatedly, but eventually decides to spare Odysseus's life on a whim.

The emotions of the gods sometimes conflict, and the mysterious tugs and pulls of divine influence determine the fluctuations of justice on earth. The Phaeacians follow Zeus's code of hospitality in welcoming Odysseus and speeding him home; but Poseidon (still sore at Odysseus) interprets their actions as a mark of disrespect, so Zeus joins him in punishing the Phaeacians for an action that should have pleased him. The outlines of divine justice align with a set of assumptions about human conduct, but the details are a blurry tangle of Olympian tempers.

CUNNING, DISGUISE, AND SELF-RESTRAINT

The qualities of cunning, disguise, and self-restraint are closely related in *The Odyssey* – in some ways, they're sides of the same coin. Odysseus is cunning, or clever, in many instances throughout his journey; one needs cleverness in order to survive in this ancient world of gods and monsters. As part of his cunning, Odysseus often disguises his identity – sometimes in order to survive a dangerous trial, as when he claims to be called Nobody in the cave of the Cyclops Polyphemus, and sometimes in order to achieve a goal, as when he assumes the appearance of a beggar upon his return to Ithaca (he also disguises himself as a beggar as part of a military maneuver in Troy: both disguises ultimately bring him glory).

"The man of twists and turns" is like Proteus, who escapes his captors by changing shapes.

Odysseus is also cunning in his capacity to separate his feelings from his actions. A "cunning tactician," he often chooses his actions based on previously formed plans rather than on present feelings. When Odysseus watches the Cyclops eat his companions, he does not charge at the Cyclops in blind rage and grief: he suppresses his grief and formulates a plan that allows him to escape with at least part of his crew. Just like in his encounter with the suitors in the second half of the book, he postpones the revenge he craves. Odysseus's self-restraint is symbolized in his encounter with the Sirens: he asks his men to tie him to the mast in order to survive.

Similarly, Odysseus's many disguises are emblematic of his self-restraint: disguise separates the inside from the outside, just as self-restraint separates feeling from action. Penelope and Telemachus are also cunning in their own ways, and their cunning, too, is connected to self-restraint; and Odysseus's crew often meets with disaster because of a lack of self-restraint, as when they slaughter the Cattle of the Sun, or when they eat Circe's poisoned meal. The characters of the Odyssey need cunning, disguise, and self-restraint to survive the trials of the gods and achieve glory.

MEMORY AND GRIEF

Memory is a source of grief for many characters in *The Odyssey*. Grief and tears are proper ways to honor the memory of absent or departed friends, but grief as a mere expression of selfish sadness or fear is somewhat shameful – Odysseus often chides his crew for wailing in grief for fear of death. Moreover, the grief caused by memory is in many instances a guide to right action. Telemachus' grief for his father spurs him to take command of his household and journey to other kingdoms in search of news. Penelope remains faithful to Odysseus because she remembers him and grieves in her memory, and the gods honor her loyalty – just as they scorn the disloyalty of Agamemnon's wife. Odysseus remains faithful in his heart to the memory of Penelope even in the seven years he spends as Calypso's unwilling lover, and his memory keeps alive his desire for home.

If memory in *The Odyssey* is a guide to action, it follows that loss of memory is often a loss of desire - since it is mainly desire that causes people to act. The Lotus-Eaters, Circe and the Sirens all threaten to halt the homecoming of Odysseus's crew by erasing the men's memories and extinguishing their desires. Like grief, desire can be both noble and shameful: desire for home is noble, but desire for food and drink is bestial. In the Circe episode, the men who are stripped of their desire for home become swine – as though a person without desire for something other than food and drink is no longer human.

The opposite of grief seems to be the forgetfulness and innocence of sleep, which Athena often gifts to Penelope or Telemachus to ease their sorrows. But sleep, like loss of memory, can be treacherous: when Odysseus falls asleep after his encounter with the god Aeolus, his crew opens the bag of winds that was the god's parting gift, and the winds cause a terrible storm. Grief and memory are noble, heroic experiences in *The Odyssey*. Lotus flower, Circe, and the Sirens are said to spellbind their victims, as the bards spellbind their listeners; but the songs of the bards enhance memory rather than destroy it. *The Odyssey* itself was such a song, a spell of memory and grief.

GLORY AND HONOR

Odysseus and other characters are motivated by pursuit of glory and honor. In the course of the story, the two terms acquire distinct meanings. Glory is attained mainly by victory in battle and by feats of strength and cunning, while honor is attained by just, lawful behavior. Sometimes the two pursuits conflict with one another, since striving for glory can lead to reckless, proud behavior that violates customs and angers the gods. For example, Odysseus blinds the Cyclops Polyphemus in order to avenge the deaths of six crew members: the violence is an act of honor because vengeance is customary and just.

Odysseus escapes the Cyclops with most of his crew in part by naming himself Nobody – a symbolic act of self-effacement. But at the last moment, he calls out to the Cyclops to declare that it was he, Odysseus, who defeated him, so that the Cyclops can spread his fame and win him glory. And because Odysseus names himself, the Cyclops brings great misfortune to him and his crew by inciting the rage of Poseidon (the Cyclops' father). In seeking glory, he betrays his crew and greatly prolongs his journey home. Similarly, he decides to face both Scylla and Charybdis, "hell-bent yet again on battle and on feats of arms," although it costs him several of his men.

In the course of his journey home, however, Odysseus seems to repent of his youthful hunt for glory. Disguised as a beggar, he says to one of the suitors: "I too seemed destined to be a man of fortune once/ and a wild wicked swath I cut, indulged my lust for violence.... Let not man ever be lawless all his life,/ just take in peace what gifts the gods will send." He humbles himself in front of the suitors in order to avenge the great dishonor they have brought to his wife and his household. Although the vengeance brings him glory in battle, it is ultimately an act of honor. By the end of the journey, honor rather than glory becomes the guide to right action.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FOOD

Almost every fortune and misfortune in *The Odyssey* is a scene of men eating or being eaten. Every kindness culminates in a meal, and nearly every trial culminates in cannibalism or poison. Scylla, the Cyclops, and the Laestrygonians all eat some of Odysseus's men; Circe and the Lotus Eaters slip the men harmful drugs; and the feast of the Cattle of the Sun results in the destruction of his remaining crew. The suitors dishonor Odysseus's household by their incessant feasting, and various people honor Odysseus by giving him food and wine. Odysseus often comments that all men are burdened by their base physical needs; perhaps the tedious human cycle of ingestion and excretion represents the vicissitudes of the mortal world as opposed to the clean permanence of the divine.

BIRDS

Several bird omens foreshadow the final battle between Odysseus's men and the suitors. Early on in the book, two eagles tear each other to death; later, an eagle kills a goose (as in Penelope's dream); and toward the end, an eagle flies by with a swallow in its mouth. As the scene of the revenge draws closer, the birds that symbolize the suitors become smaller and weaker: the suitors' deaths become more and more inevitable. Birds, in *The Odyssey*, are transient messages from the gods. Athena herself takes the shape of a bird on several occasions; birds represent her sly and gentle take on divine intervention.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *The Odyssey* published in 1996.

Book 1 Quotes

❝ Ah how shameless – the way these mortals blame the gods.
From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes,
but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,
compound their pains beyond their proper share.

Related Characters: Zeus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.37-40

Explanation and Analysis

Here Zeus, the king of the gods, surveys the lives of Odysseus and his son, Telemachus. As Zeus prepares to meddle in the life of Odysseus--sending a messenger to free Odysseus from his captivity on Calypso's island--he comments on the relationship between humans and gods. People, he notes, are fond of blaming the gods whenever anything bad happens to them. The truth, however, is that the gods are only partly responsible for human misery--humans themselves are capable of making choices (usually), and thus compounding their own suffering unnecessarily.

On one level, Zeus is being almost comically disingenuous here, as he complains about mortals denying free will while simultaneously Zeus is meddling in mortal affairs and affecting their fates. ButZeus's observations also complicate our understanding of free will and fate. While the gods of ancient Greece are extremely powerful, they leave humans space in which to exercise their freedom (but the exact amount of free will is very blurry and ambiguous). Although Zeus is complaining about the people who blame the gods for their own misfortune, his statement could be interpreted optimistically: humans *do* have the power to control their own destinies. In the poem, we'll see Odysseus exercising his own agency and using his ingenuity and courage to control his fate.

Book 2 Quotes

❝ You should be ashamed yourselves,
mortified in the face of neighbors living round about!
Fear the gods' wrath – before they wheel in outrage
and make these crimes recoil on your heads.

Related Characters: Telemachus (speaker), Antinous, Eurymachus, Ctesippus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.69-72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, young Telemachus yells at the suitors who have overrun his mother Penelope's court. In the absence of Odysseus, suitors have come from across the land to ask for Penelope's hand in marriage, and they're all incredibly rude and sloppy. Telemachus angrily warns the suitors that the

gods will punish them for their rudeness one day (foreshadowing the final scenes of the poem).

Telemachus's outburst reminds us that he's too young and weak to attack the suitors himself, but he's also portrayed as a moral authority in the poem: he's been trained in right and wrong, and immediately recognizes when the suitors overstep their position. In ancient Greece, the highest law is the law of the household: visitors and guests are required to be polite and orderly. Thus, for the suitors to be rude and spend all their time in Penelope's home, abusing the law of hospitality, is a sign of their immorality--a crime for which they'll eventually pay with their lives.

Book 3 Quotes

Some of the words you'll find within yourself,
the rest some power will inspire you to say.
You least of all – I know –
were born and reared without the gods' good will.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), Telemachus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.29-32

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, young Telemachus gets a visit from the goddess Athena. Athena tells Telemachus that she's going to help his father return to his home, and that Telemachus needs to take action as well. Telemachus is reluctant to follow Athena's advice and ask Nestor about Odysseus, but Athena encourages him nonetheless, assuring him that he'll "find the right words."

In one sense, this passage further complicates the idea of free will in the poem. Telemachus must choose to take action on his own, but Athena, a goddess, is also blatantly advising him what to do, and she tells him that he will be inspired by "some power" to say the right things when the time comes. As is typical of Homer and Greek mythology in general, there is a complicated mixture of human freedom, divine intervention, and overarching fate involved in every action.

The passage is also important because it establishes speech and eloquence as a vital part of maturity. Telemachus's story in the poem is a coming-of-age tale: with Athena's help, he'll learn to take control over his own life. The first step in doing so, it's suggested, is learning how to express his opinions with courage and conviction. Homer, a poet, is a little biased in portraying speech as the most important part of maturity, perhaps. He even makes a comparison between Telemachus's speech to Nestor and his own duty to recite the *Odyssey*--in both cases, the mortals look to the gods for inspiration, but also receive glory for rhetorical skill and power.

Book 5 Quotes

Outrageous! Look how the gods have changed their minds
about Odysseus – while I was off with my Ethiopians.
Just look at him there, nearing Phaeacia's shores
where he's fated to escape his noose of pain
that's held him until now. Still my hopes ride high –
I'll give that man his swamping fill of trouble!

Related Characters: Poseidon (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.315-320

Explanation and Analysis

Here Homer firmly establishes the antagonism between Odysseus and Poseidon. Odysseus has disrespected Poseidon by, among other things, blinding his son Polyphemus. Poseidon has vowed to wage war against Odysseus, making his journey back to Ithaca extremely challenging.

And yet, the passage shows, Poseidon is only one god out of many. Many of the other gods on Olympus support Odysseus in his quest to journey home. The indeterminacy of the gods' support for Odysseus (i.e., the fact that some of the gods support him and others don't, and all of them are fickle and likely to change their minds) suggests that the result of Odysseus's journey is not predetermined, unless it is by a power higher than the gods themselves--fate, or perhaps the mysterious divine figures of "the Fates." But because of this ambiguity regarding destiny, it's suggested that Odysseus will have to use his own ingenuity and strength to get home, recognizing that insofar as he's in control of his destiny, he must act in the right way in order to succeed.

Three, four times blessed, my friends-in-arms
who died on the plains of Troy those years ago,
serving the sons of Atreus to the end. Would to god
I'd died there too and met my fate that day ....
A hero's funeral then, my glory spread by comrades –
now what a wretched death I'm doomed to die!

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.338-445

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Odysseus nearly drowns, thanks to the plotting of Poseidon, the god of the sea. Odysseus thinks that he's going to die in the middle of the sea, and wishes that he could have died on the battlefields of Troy instead.

It's important to understand why Odysseus would have preferred to die in Troy, as he declares in this monolgue. Odysseus still abides by the unwritten code of honor and glory: there is no better way for a man to die than on the battlefield, fighting for his people--and it's even better if the story of his death is then retold and glorified to others. To die on the middle of the sea is undignified, even feminine: Odysseus wishes his death could have been a major spectacle, witnessed by his followers and spread throughout Greece.

But there's another reason why Odysseus wishes he could have died in Troy: Odysseus can't stand the agony of *almost* making it back home. For Odysseus, one torture of the Trojan War was being separated from his wife and child--and now, he's eager to return to them. Poseidon wages psychological warfare on Odysseus by allowing him to get *close* to Ithaca, but not actually letting him make it home. Odysseus can't bear his own nostalgia and homesickness.

Book 6 Quotes

But here's an unlucky wanderer strayed our way,
and we must tend him well. Every stranger and beggar
comes from Zeus.

Related Characters: Nausicaa (speaker), Odysseus, Zeus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6.226-228

Explanation and Analysis

Nausicaa, a princess, stumbles upon the body of Odysseus, who's been washed ashore after a horrible storm. While Nausicaa's maids and serving girls run away from Odysseus, a male stranger, Nausicaa is not afraid. Indeed, she orders her attendants to take care of Odysseus. Nausicaa's explanation for her kindness is interesting: all wanderers come from Zeus.

Nausicaa embodies the morality of the ancient world: hospitality is a sacred law, and a good host must provide food and shelter for wanderer, recognizing that all human beings (and gods) deserve respect and welcome. Nausicaa alludes to her common humanity with Odysseus: while they may be very different, they're both human beings, and therefore the creations of Zeus. (Her statement may also be a reference to the myth of Baucis and Philemon, a poor old couple who took in Zeus himself when he was disguised as a beggar, and were richly rewarded for doing so.) Also notice that Nausicaa agrees to take care of Odysseus before she's aware that he's a king of Ithaca--her generosity is motivated by a selfless respect for other people, not a desire to please a king. (It's also possible that Nausicaa has a crush on Odysseus, as Athena has enchanted him to look beautiful.)

The belly's a shameless dog, there's nothing worse.
Always insisting, pressing, it never lets us forget –
destroyed as I am, my heart racked with sadness,
sick with anguish, still it keeps demanding,
'Eat, drink!' It blots out all the memory
of my pain, commanding, 'Fill me up!'

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7.251-257

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Odysseus speaks to King Alcinous. Alcinous is suspicious that Odysseus is really a god in human form, or perhaps a nobleman from a faraway land. Odysseus insists that he's just a common man. To prove his point, Odysseus make a big show of being hungry for more food: he claims that his greatest desire in life is the desire of his stomach.

Odysseus's speech is ironic, since his *real* desire (the desire that has motivated him to travel for so many years) is a desire to return to his wife and family. But Odysseus is clever enough to conceal his true name and background from the people of the kingdom: instead of introducing himself as a king, he pretends to be a commoner.

It's worth asking why, exactly, Odysseus doesn't reveal himself to be a king right away--he's among friends, after all. First, Odysseus has had some rough experiences before, and he's learned the hard way to keep secrets from other people, no matter how friendly they appear to be. Second,

Odysseus loves to lie and deceive: he thinks of lying as "practice" for a more serious deception in the future.

Book 8 Quotes

The gods don't hand out all their gifts at once,
not build and brains and flowing speech to all.
One man may fail to impress us with his looks
but a god can crown his words with beauty, charm,
and men look on with delight when he speaks out.
Never faltering, filled with winning self-control,
he shines forth at assembly grounds and people gaze
at him like a god when he walks through the streets.
Another man may look like a deathless one on high
but there's not a bit of grace to crown his words.

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8.193-202

Explanation and Analysis

Odysseus is here goaded into competing with the talented athletes of Nausicaa's kingdom. Odysseus is initially reluctant to compete in athletic events of any kind, because he wants to conceal his excellence--he's afraid that the others will deduce that he's a king. Odysseus modestly claims that he's not good at everything: after all, people who are good at talking aren't necessarily good at sports.

Odysseus's words are highly ironic, since he's a hero: an all-around "good man." Odysseus is a clever speaker, a talented warrior, a great leader, a fantastic athlete, and a handsome man, too. Indeed, James Joyce commented that Odysseus was the most "complete man" in all of Western literature: a father, a son, a husband, a warrior, a poet. In short, Odysseus embodies more human virtues than just about anyone else--but here he feels he must restrain those virtues, and cover them with a vague speech about how "no one's perfect."

A bad day for adultery! Slow outstrips the Swift.

Related Characters: Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8.372

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, an unnamed bard (a self-portrait, it's been suggested, of Homer himself) tells a comic story for a large banquet audience. In the story, the crippled god Hephaestus learns that his wife, the beautiful Aphrodite, is having an affair with Ares, the strong, handsome god of war. Hephaestus tricks Aphrodite and Ares into making love in a booby-trapped bed: when they're finished having sex, Hephaestus traps his victims in a strong chain.Hephaestus gloats over his victory: even though he's incapable of walking fast, he's managed to trap the swift, powerfulAres.

The story is interesting because it emphasizes the power of thought and ingenuity over physical force. Throughout the poem, we'll see how Odysseus relies more heavily on his mind than on his body: Athena, not Ares, is his god of choice, and Odysseus's epithets (the brief phrases used to describe him when he's mentioned in the poem) almost always refer to his cunning, not his physical exploits.

Book 9 Quotes

Calypso the lustrous goddess tried to hold me back,
deep in her arching caverns, craving me for a husband.
So did Circe, holding me just as warmly in her halls,
the bewitching queen of Aeaea keen to have me too.
But they never won the heart inside me, never.
So nothing is as sweet as a man's own country.

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker), Calypso, Circe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9.33-38

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of this book, Odysseus introduces himself as a lover of his own country, and his own wife (Penelope). Odysseus reinforces his loyalty to his homeland by claiming that beautiful women like Circe and Calypso have tried to seduce him away from his family, but he always proved too strong for them. Odysseus's lust for women is nothing compared to his affection for his home: his family, his house, and his entire kingdom.

The passage is an important statement of the key theme of the poem: the importance of a home, and the memory of home. Odysseus is given many opportunities along the way back to Ithaca to live a good life: he could have stayed on Calypso's island, for example. Instead, Odysseus remembers his duty to his wife and child, and his duty to his

subjects. In short, Odysseus proves himself to be a noble king by refusing to stop short of Ithaca. At the same time, Odysseus is further glorified as a hero by the fact that these goddesses, witches, and queens all fall hopelessly in love with him.

> Since we've chanced on you, we're at your knees
> in hopes of a warm welcome, even a guest-gift,
> the sort that hosts give strangers. That's the custom.
> Respect the gods, my friend. We're suppliants – at your mercy!
> Zeus of the Strangers guards all guests and suppliants:
> strangers are sacred – Zeus will avenge their rights!

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker), Zeus, Polyphemus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9.300-305

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback scene, Odysseus and his crew of sailors land on the island of Polyphemus, a wicked cyclops. Odysseus asks Polyphemus to give his crew food and shelter--he even cites the unwritten laws of Zeus, which compel any host to take good care of his visitors and guests.

The passage spells out the "laws of the home" that dominate life in the ancient world. All people are religiously *required* to take care of their guests--doing so is a sacred duty among the Greeks, backed up by the power of almighty Zeus. Polyphemus, as we'll see, refuses to abide by Zeus's laws--and in the process, he confirms that he's not just a bad host but an evil person as well.

Book 11 Quotes

> Even so, you and your crew may still reach home,
> suffering all the way, if you only have the power
> to curb their wild desire and curb your own.

Related Characters: Tiresias (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11.117-119

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Tiresias urges Odysseus to obey the laws of the gods so that he and his crew can return to Ithaca alive and well. Tiresias instructs Odysseus to refrain from killing and eating the famous Oxen of the Sun, the sacred cattle of the god Helios. Tiresias warns Odysseus that if his men kill the oxen, the gods will punish them all very harshly and make their journey back to Ithaca all but impossible.

It's interesting that Tiresias frames Odysseus's challenge as a test of "wild desire." Throughout the poem, Homer will portray gluttony, lust, and other bodily sins as crimes of *desire*more than anything else. A true leader, it's implied, can control his desires, and those of his followers, completely: instead of giving in to hunger, thirst, lust, etc., he uses his mind and his willpower to stay strong.

> I tell you this – bear it in mind, you must –
> when you reach your homeland steer your ship
> into port in secret, never out in the open...
> the time for trusting women's gone forever!

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Odysseus, Clytemnestra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11.515-518

Explanation and Analysis

In this famous passage, Odysseus visits the ghost of Agamemnon in the Underworld. Agamemnon, who has been murdered by his own wife, Clytemnestra, warns Odysseus against trusting his own wife, Penelope, too much. Agamemnon claims that married women often have affairs with other men--Penelope may have taken a lover while Odysseus was away. Thus, Agamemnon urges Odysseus to arrive on Ithaca in secret--just in case Penelope is planning to kill him.

The passage is important because it adds another layer of suspense to the story: Odysseus is trying to return to Penelope, but does Penelope*want* him back? By returning to Ithaca, Odysseus is hoping to return to his old life--a life of peace, love, and prosperity. But Agamemnon raises the grim possibility that Odysseus will never be able to return to his old life: his wife and child may have changed beyond all recognition.

No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!
By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man –
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive –
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.

Related Characters: Achilles (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11.555-558

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Odysseus, still in the Underworld, visits the ghost of Achilles, who has been sent to the Underworld after being killed on the battlefield at Troy. In life, Achilles made a choice: he decided to die young in return for everlasting glory. But here, Achilles makes it clear that he regrets his own choice: if he could go back, he would choose to live a long, forgettable life, rather than surrender to death so soon.

The passage is important because it calls into question an entire code of honor. Achilles was the very embodiment of glory and honor in the *Iliad*, the precursor to the *Odyssey*. Here, Homer suggests that there's something lacking in Achilles's way of life: Achilles was too willing to sacrifice his worldly pleasure for the abstract promise of glory. Odysseus, an altogether different kind of hero, is by now less interested in glory and valor--instead of fighting and dying on the battlefield, he survives and tries to return to his home. Although Odysseus has previously *wished* he could have died on the battlefield, his encounter with Achilles makes him see that he should savor his home, his family, and a long life of peace. In short, the scene critiques Achilles's militaristic, aggressive way of looking at the world, and puts forth a more moderate, harmonious, and altogether modern form of heroism.

Book 12 Quotes

So stubborn! ...
Hell-bent again yet again on battle and feats of arms?
Can't you bow to the deathless gods themselves?
Scylla's no mortal, she's an immortal devastation.

Related Characters: Circe (speaker), Odysseus, Scylla

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12.125-128

Explanation and Analysis

Odysseus has captured the witch Circe, who gives Odysseus advice for how to survive the coming dangers. Circe explains that Odysseus will have to sail past two dangers: the whirlpool known as Charybdis, and the monster known as Scylla. Odysseus believes that he'll be able to fight off Scylla without losing any of his men, but Circe angrily corrects him: Scylla is immortal, and can't be defeated by mere mortals. Odysseus will have to sacrifice six of his own men to feed Scylla if he hopes to get back to Ithaca.

Circe's point of view is interesting: she encourages Odysseus to accept the inevitable; i.e., accept the fact that he's going to have to lose some men in order to get home. She further accuses Odysseus of being overly eager to fight, and suggests that he's hopelessly violent and desirous of glory. In short, Circe is urging Odysseus to accept his limitations, and sometimes take the easier way out. Odysseus is a hero, but he's also mortal, meaning that he'll never be able to beat Scylla. Odysseus's boundless confidence in his own abilities is part of what makes him such a compelling character, but as we'll see, it also makes him reckless and careless at times.

Book 13 Quotes

Any man – any god who met you – would have to be
some champion lying cheat to get past you
for all-round craft and guile! You terrible man,
foxy, ingenious, never tired of twists and tricks –
so, not even here, on native soil, would you give up
those wily tales that warm the cockles of your heart!

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13.329-334

Explanation and Analysis

Odysseus has finally returned to Ithaca, and Athena appears before him in the guise of a poor shepherd. When the shepherd asks Odysseus who he is, Odysseus tells a lie, thinking on the spot. At this point, Athena reveals that she's really a goddess. Moreover, she affectionately praises Odysseus for being such a quick-witted hero: even when he's back in Ithaca, Odysseus loves to tell lies.

Athena knows her man (Odysseus has always been her favored hero) well, and she recognizes that Odysseus's greatest asset is his brain. Odysseus has used his wit to lie his way to safety again and again: with Polyphemus, with

Nausicaa, etc. As the goddess of wisdom, Athena is understandably impressed with her hero's abilities: by using his mind so skillfully, Odysseus does honor to Athena, and Athena rewards him in turn.

Book 15 Quotes

❝ Even too much sleep can be a bore. ...
We two will keep to the shelter here, eat and drink
and take some joy in each other's heartbreaking sorrows,
sharing each other's memories.

Related Characters: Eumaeus (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15.443-449

Explanation and Analysis

In this Book, Odysseus stays with the humble shepherd, Eumaeus. Eumaeus isn't very wealthy, but like a good host, he provides Odysseus with food and warm clothing, in the process confirming that he's a good, moral person. (This is later contrasted with the goatherd Melanthius, a man who shares a similar social position to Eumaeus, but is rude to visitors and disloyal to his king.)

In this passage, Odysseus and Eumaeus engage in the sacred art of storytelling. Eumaeus is a lonely man, and so he gets pleasure out of hosting visitors: as a host, he has somebody to talk to about his memories of the past. There is, in short, a "quid pro quo" in hospitality. The host provides the guest with food and warmth, and the guest provides the host with good company and stories of adventure. Eumaeus may not be a rich man, but he's a good man: he knows the unwritten, sacred laws of hospitality, and he follows them to the letter.

Book 16 Quotes

❝ Would I were young as you, to match my spirit now,
or I were the son of great Odysseus, or the king himself
returned from all his roving – there's still room for hope!
Then let some foreigner lop my head off if I failed
to march right into Odysseus's royal halls
and kill them all. And what if I went down,
crushed by their numbers – I, fighting alone?
I'd rather die, cut down in my own house
than have to look on at their outrage day by day.

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker), Telemachus, Antinous, Eurymachus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16.111-119

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage Telemachus has made contact with Odysseus, but doesn't yet realize that he's reunited with his own father (Athena has disguised Odysseus as an old beggar). Instead of revealing himself to Telemachus, Odysseus gives a long speech in which he talks about how he'd avenge Penelope's honor if he were young and noble. In another minute, Athena will urge Odysseus to reveal his true identity to his son--but for now, Odysseus keeps himself hidden.

Why doesn't Odysseus just reveal himself to his beloved son right away? Homer suggests a couple of answers. First, Odysseus is unsure if he can trust Telemachus: Agamemnon has inspired him to distrust everyone, even his own family. (Immediately after this passage, Athena appears, assuring Odysseus that he can trust Telemachus.) Second, Odysseus doesn't want to reveal his whereabouts too early: if he tells Telemachus who he is, there's a chance the news could get back to Antinous and the other suitors, and he could be killed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Odysseus genuinely loves to lie, and wants to draw out the suspense of his secret return. He gets a thrill from pretending to be someone he's not--here, for example, he's definitely enjoying himself as he goes on about what he'd do "if" he were Odysseus. One could even argue that Odysseus is a trickster/poet/artist first and a father/warrior/king second.

Book 17 Quotes

❝ Odysseus was torn...
Should he wheel with his staff and beat the scoundrel senseless? –
or hoist him by the midriff, split his skull on the rocks?
He steeled himself instead, his mind in full control.

Related Characters: Odysseus, Melanthius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17.257-260

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Odysseus, disguised as an old beggar, ventures toward his palace. While he's walking there a goatherd named Melanthius gives him a kick and insults him. Odysseus is tempted to reveal himself to Melanthius and punish him for his disobedience. But instead, Odysseus keeps his self-control and walks on. If he were to get in a fight with the goatherd, he'd ruin his plan by revealing his strength and youth.

The passage shows that Odysseus is a very different kind of hero than the ones we met during the Trojan War (including younger-Odysseus himself, at times). Odysseus is a talented warrior, but by now his mind is even more powerful than his body: he has the discipline and caution needed to pull off a complicated plan, and is even willing to take a humiliating beating if it means the plan will succeed. The passage thus suggests that Odysseus has become more disciplined during his journey home. The old Odysseus had ruined his own plan by bragging to the cyclops--the new Odysseus, however, isn't so reckless or so arrogant.

❝ You know how you can stare at a bard in wonder –
trained by the gods to sing and hold men spellbound –
how you can long to sit there, listening, all your life
when the man begins to sing. So he charmed my heart.

Related Characters: Eumaeus (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17.575-578

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Eumaeus has brought Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, to the court where Odysseus once ruled. Antinous, the informal leader of the suitors, angrily asks Eumaeus why he's brought a mere beggar to the court. Eumaeus, thinking fast, claims that he took pity on Odysseus. He adds that Odysseus charmed his heart, like a bard might charm a listener with his song.

The passage is a good example of the *Odyssey*'s unique style of comedy, based on the sudden reversal of social roles. The passage is undeniably funny because it gives a humble shepherd, Eumaeus, the opportunity to patronize Odysseus, a king among men. Later on, this passage was extremely influential in Greek and Roman comedies, which were almost always structured around a similar reversal of social roles.

Book 21 Quotes

❝ Shame?...
How can you hope for any public fame at all?
You who disgrace, devour a great man's house and home!
Why hang your heads in shame over next to nothing?

Related Characters: Penelope (speaker), Antinous, Eurymachus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21.369-372

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, is in the court of Ithaca, surrounded by arrogant suitors. Odysseus asks to handle a heavy bow that--little known to anyone else--was once his property. While the suitors are reluctant to give the bow to a mere beggar, Penelope convinces them to hand it over, arguing that the suitors have already embarrassed themselves enough by squatting in another man's house. In general, she angrily criticizes the suitors for disrespecting Odysseus's memory, and abusing the sacred law of hospitality.

Penelope's speech reinforces her status as a moral center of the poem. Penelope sees firsthand the rudeness and cruelty of the suitors on her property; moreover, she's fully aware of the laws of hospitality, which the suitors are breaking by spending far too much time in the court. It's interesting to note that Penelope's criticism is enough to convince the suitors to hand over the bow to Odysseus, setting in motion the slaughter that follows. The suitors may not be good men, but they're self-aware enough to feel shame and embarrassment about some things--i.e., they know they're doing wrong by living on Odysseus's property, or at least they feel ashamed of being scolded by the woman they're trying to woo.

❝ Like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song –
who strains a string to a new peg with ease,
making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end –
so with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.

Related Characters: Odysseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21.453-456

Explanation and Analysis

In this satisfying, climactic passage Odysseus--still disguised as a beggar--succeeds in a seemingly impossible task. He's able to string a heavy bow, which only the former "King Odysseus" was able to handle, and which all the suitors have failed to string. Homer compares the skill with which Odysseus strings the bow to the way a talented bard strings a lyre. The scene represents the first sign for the suitors that Odysseus the beggar isn't really a beggar at all: Odysseus is confirming his status as the rightful king of Ithaca, and also beginning to reveal his skill and power (both as a warrior and as a cunning, creative man--like a singer or musician) to those who have usurped his position.

Critics have noted that this passage is one of the only times in the poem when Homer alludes to his own profession: Homer was a professional bard, meaning that he had to play the lyre and perform for large audiences. Moreover, by comparing himself to Odysseus, Homer might be implying his own status as a great man, skillful and powerful even if in humble ways. Like Odysseus, Homer is clearly an intelligent person and a quick thinker, and enjoys showing off his abilities.

Book 22 Quotes

❝ No fear of the gods who rule the skies up there,
no fear that men's revenge might arrive someday –
now all your necks are in the noose – your doom is sealed!

Related Characters: Odysseus (speaker), Antinous, Eurymachus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22.40-42

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Odysseus has revealed himself as the rightful king of Ithaca. The suitors, who have been squatting on his property for years now, beg for mercy. But Odysseus refuses to grant them mercy of any kind: there's nobody who can save them now. Odysseus and his son Telemachus proceed to slaughter every suitor on his property.

It's important to note the obvious pleasure that Odysseus takes in avenging the suitors. While he'll later scold others for rejoicing in the deaths of the suitors, he seems to do exactly that here, gloating that he's tricked them all, and that nobody can save the suitors now. Perhaps Homer believes that Odysseus is entitled to some gloating--he's been trying to get home and regain his throne for years, and now that he's back, he should be able to dole out punishments to people like Antinous who have broken the sacred laws of hospitality and marriage.

Book 24 Quotes

❝ What good sense resided in your Penelope –
how well Icarius's daughter remembered you,
Odysseus, the man she married once!
The fame of her great virtue will never die.
The immortal gods will lift a song for all mankind,
a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope.

Related Characters: Agamemnon (speaker), Odysseus, Penelope

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24.213-218

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the ghost of Agamemnon, confined to the Underworld, crosses paths with the ghosts of the various suitors Odysseus has just slaughtered. Agamemnon is glad to hear that Odysseus has reclaimed his place in Ithaca, because it proves that Penelope was a good and faithful wife to him. Agamemnon was murdered by his own wife, but he's pleased to hear that Penelope really is a loyal, moral woman.

Even if Agamemnon is trapped in the Underworld forever, he's gets some relief with the knowledge that not all marriages are treacherous, and Odysseus has come to a happy ending. Furthermore, Agamemnon's speech reminds us that, in a way, Penelope is another true hero of the poem: her intelligence and faithfulness will be remembered for just as long as Odysseus's wiliness and strength. Furthermore, both king and queen are ultimately most praised for their self-restraint--Odysseus when he allowed himself to be disguised as a humble beggar, or chose to give up glory in pursuit of his ultimate goal, and Penelope when she chose to remain loyal to Odysseus, despite all indications that he would never return from Troy.

❝ Now that royal Odysseus has taken his revenge,
let both sides seal their pacts that he shall reign for life,
and let us purge their memories of the bloody slaughter
of their brothers and their sons. Let them be friends,
devoted as in the old days. Let peace and wealth
come cresting through the land.

Related Characters: Zeus (speaker), Odysseus

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 24.533-538

Explanation and Analysis

In the final pages of the poem, the gods tie up all the "loose ends" in Ithaca. While it's possible that civil war could break out with the return of Odysseus and the slaughter of the suitors (all young noblemen with influential families), Zeus ensures that both sides of the conflict make peace and unite around Odysseus's newly restored leadership. In this way, the gods intervene to ensure a happy ending to the story.

The passage is one final reminder of the relationship between free will and divine intervention. Zeus ties up the loose ends, but only because he's pleased with what Odysseus has accomplished all by himself: i.e., his defeat of the suitors and his reunion with his equally-admirable wife and child. In other words, Zeus chooses to intervene in the lives of the people who *deserve* his help. After years of war, jealousy, and betrayal, all caused by Helen's abduction from Greece, Zeus decides to shut the book on the whole affair and bring some happiness to the human race (at least in the case of this poem). He rewards Odysseus, out of all those involved in the Trojan War, because Odysseus has proven his own worth as a free human being beyond all doubt.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1

Homer begins by asking the Muse, the goddess of poetry and music, to sing to him about Odysseus and his travels. Odysseus and his crew have seen many strange lands and have suffered many trials. Their careless behavior has sometimes angered the gods, who have prevented their safe return to Ithaca.

Like The Iliad, The Odyssey begins with a prayer to the Muse: the poet is a vessel for the goddess's song. We learn that some combination of human error and divine will has delayed Odysseus's and his crew's homecoming.

"Start where you will," says the bard to the muse, and so the story begins in the middle of Odysseus's long journey home from Troy. The nymph Calypso has held Odysseus captive for seven years on the island Ogygia, and the goddess Athena has come before an assembly of the gods to plead for his release. Odysseus angered the sea god Poseidon, who has been hindering Odysseus's return to his home in Ithaca. Zeus declares that Poseidon must forget his grievance and agrees to send the messenger god Hermes to Ogygia to ensure Odysseus's release from captivity.

We learn that Athena favors Odysseus, for some reason, and has made it her mission to ensure his safe return. Odysseus's fate hangs on Zeus's decision – will Zeus respect Poseidon's anger or overrule it? Zeus decides to spare Odysseus and sends Hermes to order Calypso to release Odysseus from captivity: here, the gods interfere directly with Odysseus's life.

Meanwhile, Athena flies to Ithaca to speak to Odysseus's son Telemachus. Droves of men courting Odysseus's wife Penelope have been feasting for years in Odysseus's court, pestering Penelope and depleting the resources of the estate. Athena takes the shape of Mentes, a friend of Odysseus's father Laertes. She finds Telemachus sitting idly in the midst of the festivities, dreaming of routing the insolent suitors from the estate.

Athena usually takes human form in her interactions with Telemachus, perhaps in order to make her divine interventions less conspicuous. The suitors dishonor the house by insulting Penelope and stealing Odysseus's property, so Telemachus feels that it's his duty to stop them: it is honorable to stop a dishonorable act.

After Telemachus has given Athena a proper welcome, she tells Telemachus that Odysseus is still alive, and that he is held captive on a faraway island. She prophesies that Odysseus will soon return to his home. Telemachus describes the shame the suitors have brought upon the estate. Athena advises that he gather a crew and sail to Pylos and then to Sparta in search of information about Odysseus. She tells Telemachus that he must avenge his father by killing the suitors that dishonor the estate, as Prince Orestes avenged the death of his father Agamemnon by killing his father's murderer. Telemachus thanks the stranger for the kind advice; his memory of Odysseus grows vivid and his strength increases, and he thinks that the stranger must have been a god.

Telemachus carefully follows the customs of hospitality: he gives the stranger food and drink before asking his name. His conversation with Athena invigorates him, but in what way? Does he simply feel encouraged by a stranger's prophecy and good advice, or by a god's protection? Or does Athena magically grant him increased strength and confidence? Athena confirms Telemachus's sense that it is his duty to drive out the suitors. The memory of Odysseus strengthens Telemachus's resolve to take action.

Penelope comes down from her chambers and asks the bard entertaining the suitors to stop singing about the Achaeans' journey home, because the song brings her too much grief. Telemachus reproaches her; he reminds her that Zeus, not the bard, is responsible for Odysseus's suffering. He tells her to have courage, to listen to the bard's song, and to remember her husband. Penelope obeys him, surprised by his good sense and strong will.

Telemachus's conversation with Athena has transformed him – he reproaches his mother for the same kind of moping he was engaging in earlier, and reminds her that memory can be a source of strength, not just a cause of grief. He tells her not to blame men for something that is the will of the gods, thus shows respect to the gods.

After Athena flies away, Telemachus addresses the suitors. He tells them to leave his household at once, or Zeus, the god of hospitality, will punish them for their wrongdoings. He declares his intentions to remain the lord of the estate in Odysseus's absence. The suitors are amazed at the prince's confidence and daring. Antinous responds that only the gods could give Telemachus the power to speak so courageously. Eurymachus adds that the gods alone decide who will rule Ithaca, and inquires about the strange visitor. Telemachus replies that the visitor was Mentes, a friend of Laertes, but he knows in his heart that the visitor was the goddess Athena.

Telemachus knows now that Athena shares his sense of right and wrong – of honor and dishonor – and so he addresses the suitors with great conviction. He threatens them with the vengeance of the gods: men and gods both punish wrongdoings. The suitors try to belittle Telemachus by implying that he's only a pawn of the gods rather than a man with a will of his own. Telemachus displays cunning in hiding Athena's real identity from the suitors.

BOOK 2

Telemachus rises at dawn and gathers all the Achaeans to the meeting grounds. Athena makes him look particularly god-like and striking. Telemachus describes to the crowd the disgrace of his household - the suitors that dishonor his mother and consume the house's resources. He himself is only a boy: he lacks the strength and experience to drive the suitors from the house. He reproaches the crowd for its indifference, threatens that the gods may revenge the suitors' crimes, and weeps with shame and anger.

Telemachus grows more and more animated in his outrage, but he worries that he does not have Odysseus's power – that he did not inherit his glory. Nevertheless he has the strength of the gods at his back. His grief and tears are not signs of weakness, here, but signs of determination: the grief will drive him to take action.

Antinous replies that Penelope is to blame for the suitors' behavior. Penelope promised to choose a husband once she finished weaving a shroud for Laertes, but in order to postpone the day of decision, she wove the shroud by day and unwove it at night. When one of her maids betrayed her secret to the suitors, they forced her to finish her web. Antinous claims that the suitors are justified in their rude behavior because Penelope tricked them, and because she refuses to choose a husband. Antinous suggests and Telemachus send Penelope back to her father, who would pick her husband

Penelope's trick is a perfect example of cunning: unlike Odysseus, who uses cunning to take action, Penelope uses cunning to abstain from action – to postpone choosing a husband. Her duty is to wait for Odysseus, so her inaction is honorable. By accusing Penelope, Antinous tries to get honor on his side, but his accusations are empty: her behavior toward the suitors is not dishonorable, so the suitors are not justified.

Telemachus responds that to send Penelope back to her father would be a disgrace, and would meet with anger from both his family and the gods. He asks the suitors to heed their shame and to leave his household, and threatens again that the gods will revenge their crimes. At that moment, Zeus sends an omen of the revenge Telemachus describes: two eagles that come down from the mountains and tear each other to pieces as they fly over the crowd. Halitherses, a prophet, interprets the omen to mean death for the suitors. Eurymachus mocks the prophecy and the omen; he says that the suitors will not stop their feasting until the queen chooses a husband.

To exile Penelope from her home would not be just, and injustice toward honorable people is punished by the gods – by that logic, the behavior of the suitors will be surely punished. Zeus's omen strengthens Telemachus's threat. Some of the suitors scoff at the omen, which in itself is an insult to Zeus. The suitors bully and threaten Telemachus to frighten him into submission, but their words don't affect him.

Telemachus declares that he will not discuss the matter any more with the suitors. He asks the Achaeans for a ship and a crew of twenty men to sail to Pylos and Sparta in search of news about Odysseus. If he hears that his father is alive, he will hold the suitors back for another year; if he hears news of his father's death, he will give him a proper burial and encourage Penelope to marry again. Odysseus's friend Mentor reproaches the crowd for their indifference and inaction in the face of the suitors' violence, and reminds them that Odysseus was a kind and godlike ruler. Leocritus hushes Mentor and predicts that the suitors would murder Odysseus even if he were to return. He breaks up the assembly.

No matter what news he learns, Telemachus resolves to do what's right rather than sit by passively. Mentor emphasizes that the offenses of the suitors are made worse still by the fact that they're dishonoring a just, honorable man. The suitors continue to ignore the will of the gods and fantasize about Odysseus's death.

After the meeting, Telemachus prays to Athena with a heavy heart. In the shape of Mentes, she tells Telemachus that from now on he will be as courageous and clever as his father, and that he is sure to succeed in his mission. She tells him to pay no mind to the suitors, who are surely doomed, and to gather provisions for the trip; in the meantime, she will assemble a crew and choose a ship. Antinous encourages him to join the suitors' revelry, but Telemachus declares with restored confidence that he will have nothing to do with the suitors, and promises to bring destruction to their party. He ignores their insults and provocations and goes to the storeroom, where he asks his nurse Eurycleia to prepare food and drink for the journey. The nurse cries out in fear for his life, but Telemachus assures her that a god is watching over his mission, and asks her to keep his departure secret from his mother for ten days.

When Telemachus feels discouraged, Athena lifts his spirits by describing his sure success. But is she predicting his success, commanding it, or promising it? To what degree does she predetermine the fates of father and son? Telemachus's strength increases, and he speaks confidently to the suitors and to his nurse. He decides to hide his departure from his mother to spare her some grief – an act of cunning for an honorable purpose.

In the meantime, Athena walks through the town in the shape of Telemachus: she gathers a crew of twenty men, whom she asks to meet in the harbor at sundown, and borrows a sturdy ship. She also brings sleep to the suitors, who stumble to bed. She calls Telemachus to the ship. With renewed energy, he commands the men to load the provisions into the storerooms. Athena takes the pilot's seat and sends the ship a strong accompanying wind. The crew pours wine in honor of Athena and the other gods as the ship sails off into the night.

Here, Athena acts on Telemachus's behalf: she interferes directly, but masks her interference. She uses sleep to disarm the suitors and to ensure a safe departure for Telemachus. She acts as pilot on the ship, but Telemachus, presumably, is captain: she takes an important but secondary role. The crew shows piety in drinking in Athena's honor.

BOOK 3

When Telemachus's ship arrives at Pylos the next morning, the crew finds 4500 of Nestor's people sacrificing bulls in honor of the god Poseidon. As the crew climbs ashore, Athena urges Telemachus to put his shyness aside and question Nestor about Odysseus. The prince worries about his youth and inexperience, but Athena assures him that the right words will come, with the help of the gods. She leads him to the place where Nestor and his friends and family sit roasting meat.

Right away, we see that Nestor and the people of Pylos honor the gods. We also note that Athena continues to encourage Telemachus in his maturation. Her encouragement seems to be half good faith, half divine meddling: will the right words come because Telemachus is more capable than he suspects, or because a god will place them there?

Nestor's son Pisistratus brings Telemachus and his men meat and wine, and encourages them to say a prayer for Poseidon. With instinctive tact, Telemachus offers the wine to Athena first, and she asks Poseidon to grant Telemachus safe passage home. Telemachus repeats her prayer, and they feast. Only after they've finished does Nestor inquire about their identities. Telemachus explains that they've come to seek news about Odysseus's journey or about his death.

The people of Pylos follow the rules of hospitality by offering the strangers food and drink without delay. These rules acknowledge that a traveler often needs to disguise his identity for one reason or another, because they require a host to give a stranger food and comfort before asking for his name.

Nestor mentions the many men whose deaths he witnessed during the Trojan War; he describes Odysseus as a man of unequalled cunning, and tells Telemachus that his eloquence is similar to Odysseus's. After the fall of Troy, Nestor says, Athena created a feud between the brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon: Menelaus wanted to return home at once, but Agamemnon wanted to stay in Troy to offer Athena sacrifices. Half the men, Nestor included, left with Menelaus, but Odysseus and the other half stayed with Agamemnon. Nestor returned safely to Pylos, but he knows nothing about Odysseus's fate. Nestor mentions that Aegisthus murdered Agamemnon when the king returned home, and that Agamemnon's son Orestes avenged the murder: Nestor tells Telemachus to be courageous like Orestes.

Despite Telemachus's insecurity, his speech makes a good impression on the king; Nestor implies that Telemachus's way with words comes from his father (rather than a god). Nestor's story implies that the fates of all four men in the story were determined by the feud, but it seems that Athena created the feud for no particular reason: the actions of the gods often seem mysterious or arbitrary. Nestor's tale about Agamemnon and Orestes helps cement Telemachus's determination to restore honor to his household by defeating the suitors.

Telemachus tells Nestor that he wishes the gods would give him the power to wreak revenge on the suitors feasting in his father's house. Nestor wonders whether Odysseus will ever return to punish the suitors, and echoes Telemachus in wishing for him the affection of the gods. Telemachus says sadly that this can never be; but Athena (in the shape of Mentes) chastises him for speaking foolishly. Telemachus repeats that Odysseus will never return, because the gods have cursed him. He asks Nestor to tell Menelaus's story – why did *he* not avenge his brother's death?

Though Nestor seems to encourage Telemachus to take strong, independent action, Telemachus emphasizes his dependence on the gods. Nestor admits that Telemachus needs the good will of the gods to succeed, and Athena implies that Telemachus already possesses it. Be that as it may, says Telemachus, the gods hate Odysseus, so his mission is not likely to succeed. The passivity of piety seems to contradict the strength of honorable action.

Nestor says that Menelaus was still at Troy when Aegisthus seduced Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra. She remained faithful to her husband as long as his bard was there to guard her; but Aegisthus sent the bard to die on a desert island, and Clytemnestra yielded to Aegisthus, who made many grateful sacrifices to thank the gods. In the meantime Zeus swept Menelaus to Egypt, where he spent seven years amassing a great treasure. Agamemnon returned home, but was murdered by Aigisthus. After Aegisthus had reigned for seven years over the land of murdered Agamemnon, Orestes came home and killed Aegisthus and Clytemnestra; he avenged Agamemnon the very day that Menelaus returned home. Nestor finishes his tale by advising Telemachus not to stay away from his home for too long, and to visit Menelaus in Lacedaemon.

Bards keep memories alive by repeating stories, and Nestor's story implies that Agamemnon's bard guarded Clytemnestra from infidelity by keeping Agamemnon's memory alive in her. When the bard disappears, Clytemnestra forgets her husband and betrays him. The treacherous Aegisthus shows piety by sacrificing to the gods, but his piety cannot compensate for his dishonorable behavior: the gods do not protect him from Orestes' revenge.

Athena suggests that it's time for them to leave, but Nestor insists on giving them gifts and putting them up for the night. Athena approves this request but says that she will sleep on the ship and leave for another land at dawn; she turns into an eagle and flies away. The king is amazed; he tells Telemachus that he will never be deficient in character if he is so beloved by Athena. Nestor takes Telemachus back to his palace and they drink to Athena, then everyone goes to sleep.

When the king realizes that Telemachus's companion is a god, he stops emphasizing Telemachus's eloquence and will, and focuses instead on the prince's dependence on the gods. It is pious to speak of god-human relationships in terms of complete dependence, though it is honorable to follow one's own conscience.

The next day, Nestor holds a feast. When everyone is gathered, a goldsmith covers a heifer's horns in gold, Nestor pours purifying water and flings barley, and one of his sons chops through the heifer's neck. The women pray, the men drain the heifer's blood, quarter it, and cut out and burn the thighbones. They eat the organs and roast the remaining meat. In the meantime, Nestor's daughter Polycaste bathes Telemachus, rubs him down with oil, and dresses him in beautiful clothes, so that he looks like a god. After everyone feasts, Nestor orders his sons to bring Telemachus a team of horses and a chariot, and his son Pisistratus drives the team towards Sparta.

The feast shows that the requirements of piety can be very elaborate and costly, and that they seem to vary slightly from country to country. We can infer that the gods care less about the details than about the fear and respect that inspire people to invent such complicated rituals. Nestor continues to show his hospitality to Telemachus by assigning tasks to his sons and daughter. Just as he helped the guest arrive, he helps him to depart.

BOOK 4

Telemachus and Pisistratus arrive at Menelaus's palace, where the king is celebrating the two separate marriages of his son and his daughter. Menelaus tells his aide Eteoneus to invite the strangers to feast with them; that way, he says, he can honor the hospitality he received from strangers during his travels. Maids wash, oil, and clothe the travelers and present them with food and wine. Telemachus says to Pisistratus that the splendor of Menelaus's mansion must resemble Olympus, but Menelaus notes that no mortal man could compare with Zeus. He describes his eight years of travels, the wealth he amassed, and his bitterness about the death of his brother. He would rather have stayed home with only a fraction of this wealth, he says, if it could reverse the deaths of the soldiers in Troy.

Menelaus displays piety when he insists that mortals are always inferior to gods, instead of emphasizing his unequalled treasures. In this way, he chooses piety over glory. It is glorious to die in battle and to win great wealth from enemies; Menelaus rejects glory once again when he speaks of the deaths of his comrades with regret and of his plunder with indifference. His experience teaches him that it is better to stay home and live honorably than to seek adventure, risking death and dishonor for himself and his loved ones.

He grieves for all his comrades, Menelaus says, but he grieves for Odysseus the most, because he worked the hardest but suffered the most. Telemachus cries to hear his father mentioned so tenderly, and Menelaus understands then that he's speaking to Odysseus's son. Menelaus's wife Helen comes out of her room and asks about the visitors; she guesses that one of them is Telemachus. They agree that the young man resembles Odysseus in many respects, and Pisistratus confirms their identities.

Menelaus grieves especially for Odysseus, because it is particularly unjust that such a clever and hardworking man should suffer such a harsh punishment from the gods. Menelaus and Helen both display cunning in guessing Telemachus's identity: tears and grief often serve to break through anonymity and disguise.

Helen slips a drug into the wine that makes the men forget their sorrows. She tells the guests about Odysseus's conquest of Troy: he stole into the city disguised as a beggar, killed many Trojans, and returned to his army with useful information about the enemy. Only Helen recognized him, but she didn't give away his secret, because by then she had repented of her infidelity and dreamed of coming home to her husband and child. Menelaus praises her storytelling and recounts how Helen tried to lure Odysseus's comrades from the wooden horse in which they had penetrated Troy by imitating the voices of the soldiers' wives. Odysseus held the soldiers back and saved their lives. After Menelaus finishes the story, everyone retires to different rooms and goes to sleep.

Helen displays her cunning both in guessing Telemachus's identity and in tricking the men into pleasant forgetfulness. The forgetfulness is not dangerous only because it is a company of friends. She had been cunning in Troy as well by taking on the identities of other women, just as Odysseus had been cunning by taking on the identity of a beggar. In both stories, Odysseus's cunning is pitted against Helen's cunning, but in both cases he comes out on top; perhaps Helen damaged her luck by betraying her husband and dishonoring herself.

In the morning, Menelaus asks Telemachus whether he has come to discuss a public or a private problem. Telemachus describes the suitors' disgraceful behavior and begs Menelaus to tell him all he knows about Odysseus. The king tells Telemachus that the gods trapped him in still waters by the island Pharos in punishment for an inadequate sacrifice. When the crew's provisions had run out, Menelaus encountered Eidothea, Proteus's daughter, who decided to help him. She advised him to surprise Proteus by disguising himself and three other men as seals, hiding in the cave in which Proteus slept, and ambushing him when he lay down to rest. Proteus will take many different shapes, she told him, but if they hold on to him until he speaks he will tell them how to cross the sea and return home.

Telemachus does not give Menelaus a clear answer because the problem is both public and private: the honor of the realm and Telemachus's honor are both at stake. The king's story implies that he did not always respect the gods, and that his trials have taught him modesty and piety. A goddess helps him escape his predicament by using trickery and disguise. The gods respect tactics of this kind – Zeus himself often took other shapes for various reasons.

At dawn, Eidothea led Menelaus and three other men to Proteus's resting place and covered them with sealskins. Proteus soon appeared, the men ambushed him, and Proteus then took the shape of a lion, a serpent, a panther, a boar, a stream of water, and a tree. Yet the men held on to him until he began to speak. Menelaus asked how he could escape Pharos and return home. Proteus advised that Menelaus return to Egypt and offer grand sacrifices to the gods. Proteus also told him that Ajax died at the hands of Poseidon, and Agamemnon at the hands of Aegisthus. Odysseus, Proteus said, was trapped on Calypso's island. The next dawn Menelaus and his men set out for Egypt, where they made glorious sacrifices to the gods. The gods then allowed them to return home safely.

Proteus tries to fight Menelaus's cunning with his own cunning, but the king eventually gets his way. Though the gods are very powerful, they must sometimes yield to mortals – especially if mortals employ god-like cunning. Cunning is a quality that narrows the gap between the mortal and the divine. Though Menelaus must feel powerful to have defeated a god, he also learns to show piety and respect toward the gods. Power and humility go hand in hand.

As Telemachus and Menelaus feast at the king's palace, the suitors feast and amuse themselves in Odysseus's palace. Antinous and Eurymachus find out from a citizen that Telemachus has sailed to Pylos with a strong crew and a god on board. The suitors are outraged and plot to murder the prince on his way back home. The court herald Medon overhears their plans and describes them to Penelope. The queen is grieved to learn of Telemachus's absence; she prays to Athena to save her son, and Athena hears her prayers.

Menelaus's piety and hospitality contrast sharply with the callous impiety of the suitors. The suitors are impious to plot against a man that is loved by the gods (not to mention whose hospitality they are abusing), because they are pitting their wills against the wills of the gods. Penelope, on the other hand, respects divine will by asking for Athena's help.

Meanwhile, the suitors gather a crew of twenty men and prepare a ship. Penelope lies in bed tormented; when she falls asleep, Athena sends a phantom in the shape of Penelope's sister to reassure her that her son is under Athena's protection. Penelope questions the phantom about Odysseus, but the phantom refuses to speak. The suitors sail to the island Asteris, and lie in wait to catch the prince on his way home.

Athena responds to Penelope's prayer by giving her rest and comfort. Though Athena assures Penelope of Telemachus's safety, she cannot say anything about Odysseus: perhaps there is a limit to the knowledge permitted to mortals, because certain kinds of knowledge interfere with fate.

BOOK 5

The gods assemble on mount Olympus. Athena implores Zeus to help Odysseus, who was such a kind and just ruler, and is now trapped in Calypso's house without any way home. Zeus instructs Athena to bring Telemachus home unharmed, and tells the messenger god Hermes to tell Calypso to release Odysseus from captivity. Zeus decrees that Odysseus will sail home with great pain and difficulty, and that he will arrive at the land of the Phaeacians, who will speed him home with vast treasures in tow.

Athena criticizes Odysseus's painful lot, implying that the gods ought to reward just rulers. Just as the gods are not omnipotent in the Judeo-Christian sense, they are not all-knowing, or at least the scope of their attention is limited: sometimes a god needs to point another god in the direction of a problem. This gives a touch of arbitrariness to the actions of the gods.

Hermes flies to Calypso's island, where the goddess sings and weaves by a fire in her cavern in the woods. Odysseus sits on the beach and cries. Hermes tells Calypso that Zeus commands her to release Odysseus. In response, Calypso angrily shouts that the gods become jealous when goddesses sleep with mortals, though they often sleep with mortal women. She says that she loves Odysseus as a husband and has even offered to make him immortal. Nevertheless, she agrees to let him go.

It is clear from Odysseus's weeping that he is an unwilling captive and has not forgotten his desire to return home even though Calypso has offered him immortality. Calypso's tirade about the divine double standard shows that Mount Olympus is ruled by jealousies, passions, squabbles, power-struggles, and hierarchies, just like the earth below.

Though Odysseus sleeps with Calypso, he weeps for his wife and home. Calypso comes to him and tells him to weep no longer, because she is sending him home. Odysseus is suspicious, so Calypso swears an oath not to harm him. Odysseus and Calypso share an exquisite meal. Calypso warns him that if he knew the suffering ahead of him, he would stay with her and be her immortal husband; after all, she cannot be less fair than his wife. Odysseus replies that though Penelope is not as fair as Calypso, he still yearns for home. They fall asleep in each other's arms.

Odysseus's grief and tears show that his memory of home has not faded; though Calypso has forced him into the role of a husband, he remains loyal at heart to his wife. Odysseus chooses mortal suffering and imperfection over divine tranquility. Though mortals often acknowledge their inferiority to the gods, it is sometimes implied that they prefer human life to divine life.

The next morning, Odysseus sets to work making a raft with the goddess's tools. When he finishes, Calypso gives him provisions and he sails away. He sails for seventeen days until he sees the island of the Phaeacians. But at that moment Poseidon spots him and grows angry at his good fortune, so he sends down a terrible storm. Odysseus begins to fears death, and wishes he had died a hero's death on the battlefield instead. A wave throws him from the ship and pulls him under, but he comes up to the surface and clutches his splintering raft. Just then, the goddess Ino sees him and takes pity; she gives him a magical scarf that will temporarily make him immortal, and tells him to swim to shore – once he reaches land, though, he must throw the scarf back into the sea without looking. Odysseus does as she says, and Poseidon decides that Odysseus has suffered enough and lets him go. Athena controls the winds so that they blow Odysseus to the Phaeacian shore.

Though Odysseus has already suffered a great deal on his journey home, Poseidon decides –following no strict logic – that he must suffer further. Poseidon is angry because Odysseus broke a rule, but the punishment is a matter not of rule but of whim. With Ino's arrival, we see once again one divine will pitted against another. Poseidon wants Odysseus to suffer or drown, but Ino wants him to find shelter, and she prevails not according to some judicial system but because of chance and circumstance: she happens to be near Odysseus. Poseidon might have resented her intervention, but he accepts it placidly. Justice in divine hands is often arbitrary.

Odysseus floats for two nights and two days, and at the dawn of the third day he spots land. He despairs to see, however, that waves and sharp rocks separate him from shore. A wave throws him against the rocks, but Athena inspires him with the strength to cling hard to one of the reefs; then a wave drags him back into the sea. Athena inspires him again, and he swims along the shore looking for a safer place to land. He prays to Poseidon, and the god brings him to a safe place to climb ashore. Odysseus throws himself onto the beach; despite his pain and exhaustion, he remembers to throw the scarf back into the sea. He crawls into the woods and falls asleep.

Though Poseidon decides to let Odysseus live, he takes one last parting shot at him and flings him against the rocks. Athena intervenes and helps him survive: divine will pitted against divine will once again. Now Poseidon is finally placated; he helps the same man he tried to kill just a moment earlier. Odysseus shows his respect for the gods by following Ino's instructions even though he can barely move.

BOOK 6

As Odysseus sleeps, Athena flies to a Phaeacian city where the princess Nausicaa, daughter of the king Alcinous, lies sleeping. Disguised as a girl the princess's age, Athena scolds her for the poor condition of her clothes, and suggests that they go to the shore to wash them. In the morning, the king gives her a wagon and a team of mules, the queen packs her a lunch and some olive oil for applying after bathing, and she goes with her maids to the beach where Odysseus lies sleeping. They wash the clothes, bathe, and oil themselves. As they wait for their clothes to dry they play games in the sun.

Athena intervenes in Odysseus's fate, but indirectly – instead of carrying Odysseus to the Phaeacian castle herself, or better yet winging him right to Ithaca, she acts by influencing another mortal. Moreover, she influences the princess in the disguise of a mortal: though her role in Odysseus's fate is very significant, she takes pains to mask that role whenever possible, muddying the question of whether those mortals act by free will or divine influence.

By Athena's design, the girls romping wakes Odysseus. He's a little apprehensive at first but he walks out toward them, shielding himself with leaves. All the girls except Nausicaa run away at the sight of the naked, sea-briny man. Odysseus stands at a respectful distance, compliments her beauty, and begs her for help. The princess responds that Zeus must have destined Odysseus for pain, but agrees to lead him to town, because it is customary to be friendly to strangers and beggars. Odysseus bathes, oils, and clothes himself, and Athena makes him very beautiful. The girls are amazed at the transformation; they give him food and drink.

Athena not only brings the princess to the shore where Odysseus lies but makes her shouts loud enough to wake him: she is present in the smallest details. In the princess's response, we see two customs in conflict: on the one hand, one should assume that an unlucky person is hated by the gods and therefore does not deserve help; on the other hand, one should help strangers and beggars. Nausicaa chooses to honor the latter.

Nausicaa invites Odysseus to ride into town with her, but on second thought asks him to enter the town alone, to avoid giving the townspeople cause for gossip. On the way to town, she says, Odysseus should turn into a grove near her father's estate and wait for the girls to reach town. Then he should walk into the palace, find the king and queen, and beg the queen for mercy. Odysseus does as she says; in the grove, he prays for Athena's protection. She hears his prayers, but she is too frightened of Poseidon to appear to Odysseus undisguised.

Nausicaa shows good sense by honoring customs dictating proper behavior for unmarried young women. Because of her uncertainty about the stranger, Nausicaa decides to let her more experienced parents make the final decision. Here, we see another possible reason for Athena's reticence: she does not want to provoke Poseidon's anger. She does what she thinks is right but she uses cunning to avoid conflict.

BOOK 7

As Odysseus walks toward the city, Athena surrounds him with a protective mist. Disguised as a little girl, she guides him to the castle. She tells Odysseus to be bold and advises him to win the queen Arete's sympathies, because her judgment holds much weight in the kingdom. Odysseus marvels at Alcinous's fruitful realm and luxurious household. He goes inside the palace, where many people are feasting, and puts his arms around Arete's knees – at that moment, the mist around him dissipates. He blesses her family and begs her for safe passage home.

Athena hides herself and Odysseus from the Phaeacians; she uses cunning to avoid confrontation, though open battle is considered glorious. In his behavior with the king and queen, Odysseus chooses cunning and humility over glory. Rather than announce his famous name and flaunt his strength and nobility, Odysseus abases himself in front of the queen.

Alcinous sits Odysseus down next to him, Odysseus eats and drinks, and they all raise their wine glasses to Zeus. Alcinous tells the lords that they will convene tomorrow to sacrifice to the gods and arrange the stranger's journey home. He wonders whether the stranger might be a god; the behavior of the gods has changed – they used to come to mortals undisguised. Odysseus responds that he is only mortal, weighed down with mortal suffering, and regrets that he must eat despite his grief: hunger eases his memory. He begs to be conveyed home – all he wants is to see his home and family again, and to die happily.

Odysseus emphasizes the distinction between different kinds of desire when he complains that the ignoble desire for food replaces the noble desire for home. Note also how once again a mortal is almost mistaken for a god: Alcinous implies the world is changing, and the distinction between gods and mortals seems to be eroding. Why have the gods become more secretive, more circumspect? The answer isn't clear.

As the servants clear away the plates, Arete notices that Odysseus is wearing clothes from her household, and asks about them suspiciously. Odysseus tells her a fuller version of his story, then: he describes his entrapment on Calypso's island, his escape and difficult journey, and his encounter with Nausicaa – how she gave him clothes and directed him to the castle. He claims that it was his idea not to accompany the princess into the city. Alcinous wishes that such a man as Odysseus could stay in Phaeacia and wed Nausicaa. He tells Odysseus that he will arrange that a ship will carry him home the following morning.

Odysseus is not averse to a white lie, here and there: though the plan for entering the city was the princess's, he takes the credit. But he also knows when to loosen his disguise and reveal a bit more about himself. When the queen becomes suspicious, Odysseus appeases her with honesty and openness. To be cunning, one must sometimes be honest.

BOOK 8

At dawn, Athena in the guise of Alcinous gathers people to the meeting grounds. When everyone arrives, Alcinous asks his people to bring a ship down to the sea and to find a crew of fifty-two men to transport Odysseus home; everyone else, he says, should gather to feast and celebrate. After everyone eats and drinks, the bard Demodocus sings about the battle between Odysseus and Achilles. The song moves Odysseus to tears. Though Odysseus hides his weeping under his cape, Alcinous notices the tears and urges the guests to move on to athletic competitions.

Just as Telemachus's tears reveal his identity to Menelaus, Odysseus's tears give him away to Alcinous. Though it benefits Odysseus to keep his identity hidden for the time being, it is honorable to weep for his dead comrades: he chooses honor, memory and grief over prudence, or perhaps the emotions or so strong he just can't hide them.

Everyone goes to the meeting grounds, where the strongest and most talented men get ready to compete. There is a footrace, followed by wrestling, jumping, and discus-throwing. Laodamas invites Odysseus to join the competition, but Odysseus declines, citing his long suffering and exhaustion. Broadsea, another champion, taunts Odysseus, claiming that he must not be skilled in athletics. This angers Odysseus, and he agrees to compete in the games.

Odysseus initially refuses to join the games out of prudence, since his strength and skill might give away his identity. But he can't tolerate an insult: his desire for glory, and its accompanying intolerance to shame, overtake his prudent desire to hide his identity.

He takes up the discus and throws it farther than any other competitor; Athena in disguise praises him and goads him on, and Odysseus boasts that he'll defeat anyone in the crowd in any sport – anyone except the king, because he is Odysseus's host. Alcinous admits that Odysseus's anger is reasonable, and tells him that the Phaeacians do not excel in all sports but are masters of racing and sailing, and feasting as well, and tells his court dancers to begin dancing.

Odysseus gets his fill of praise when he displays his strength. But even in his quest for athletic glory, Odysseus remembers to be polite to his host—he manages to both pursue honor and glory and to remain pious, a tricky task that many men who don't have Odysseus's skill at self-restrain fail to accomplish.

Meanwhile, the bard tells the story of Ares and Aphrodite. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was unfaithful to her goldsmith husband Hephaestus with Ares, the god of war. When Hephaestus learned of the infidelity from Helios, the god of the sun, he created very fine gold chains that he slipped around the posts of Aphrodite's bed. He pretended to leave for a trip, and when Ares and Aphrodite went to bed together the near-invisible chains trapped them in each other's arms. When Hephaestus found them he cried out in anguish and all the gods gathered at his house, laughing at the unusual sight. The gods laughed because the crippled Hephaestus defeated the powerful god of war. Only Poseidon can convince Hephaestus to free Ares.

The story of Hephaestus and Ares is a variant on the parable of the weak outwitting the strong: though Hephaestus is crippled, he traps the mighty god of war. The gold chains represent the power of the mind: they are invisible and fine but infinitely strong. The episode resembles Odysseus's encounter with the Cyclops, whom he defeats using cunning despite his inferior strength. Though Hephaestus is similarly cunning, his physical weakness disqualifies him from glory, so the gods laugh at him instead of praising him.

After the story ends, Alcinous's best dancers perform, and Odysseus is amazed at their skill. Alcinous calls on the twelve peers of his kingdom to gather fine parting gifts for Odysseus. Broadsea gives Odysseus a beautiful sword to apologize for his taunts, and Odysseus graciously accepts the apology. Queen Arete gives Odysseus a trunk of fine clothes, and the maids give him a bath. He talks to Nausicaa, who teasingly reminds him that he owes her his life. Then he joins Alcinous at the table.

Though Odysseus has acted proudly and perhaps even vainglorously, he generously praises the dancers and easily forgives his offender. He can turn it on and off; he has self-restraint, and acts appropriately at all times. Just as Calypso represented a temptation for Odysseus to give up his quest to return home, so does the flirting, beautiful, young Nausicaa, but Odysseus desire to return home is not swayed.

The bard Demodocus describes how the wooden horse full of Achaean soldiers secretly entered Troy, and how the Achaeans burst from the horse and defeated the Trojans; the bard mentions the particular courage of Odysseus and Menelaus. Odysseus cries to hear the tale. Only Alcinous notices his tears, and he asks the bard to stop singing. He urges Odysseus to finally reveal his identity and to explain his tears.

Odysseus grieves for the soldiers dead in battle, but perhaps he also grieves for his own past glory. The grief is a mixture of the honorable and the dishonorable (self-pity is not an honorable reason for tears). Though Alcinous asks the stranger his name, he has likely already guessed it.

BOOK 9

Odysseus names himself and begins telling the story of his long travels after leaving Troy. In the beginning of the journey, he and his men sacked the city of the Cicones and carried away many spoils; Odysseus wanted to leave, but his men decided to stay and plunder and feast. Meanwhile the Cicones called their neighbors for backup, and the expanded army killed many Achaeans before the rest escaped. Zeus sent down a hurricane, the men rested for two days, and then a North wind sent the ships in the wrong direction.

The story of the Cicones is a parable about moderation. If the men had restrained their bloodlust, they could have escaped with spoils and their lives. Instead, their greed led to many deaths (and in so doing foreshadows the suitors at Ithaca). The story also displays one of the stranger aspects of ancient law: though men have the right to attack and plunder other men, they should only plunder to a point: plundering excessively is dishonorable.

After nine days, the ships reached the land of the Lotus Eaters. There, the crewmen that ate the fruit of lotus lost all desire to return and all memory of home – they only wanted to stay and eat lotus. But Odysseus forced them to return to the ships, tied them to the masts, and told the remaining men to set sail.

This story perfectly illustrates the connection between memory and desire: to lose the memory of a desired object – either magically or naturally – is to lose the impetus for action.

Next they came to the land of the Cyclops. The one-eyed Cyclops have no laws, no councils, no farms, no ships or traders. Odysseus and the crew from his ship went to explore the continent while the other men waited on a nearby island. When the men reached the shore, they saw a large cave with flocks of sheep and goats in the yard: the home of a giant. Odysseus left most of his crew on shore and went with twelve men to the cave, taking along a container of very strong wine. The giant was not at home, and the crew looked at his flocks, his cheeses, and his buckets for milking. The men wanted to take what they could and run back to the ships, but Odysseus insisted that they stay to receive the giant's gifts (thought now, he tells the Phaeacians, he regrets his stubbornness).

The Cyclops are a people outside of civilization: they do not recognize any human or divine justice, nor do they have any sort of social structures (such as farms or councils). This episode shows the dark side of Odysseus's vainglory: his greed and his thirst for adventure overtake his good sense and cost several men their lives. Though Odysseus is the hero of the story, he is far from infallible. Sometimes he is more sensible than his men; sometimes less. Though by voicing regret Odysseus also shows that he has learned from his errors.

In the evening the Cyclops came home, closed the entrance to the cave with a giant rock, milked his sheep and goats, and lit a fire. Suddenly he noticed the men and asked them angrily who they were. Odysseus responded that they were Achaeans that had lost their way home, and urged the Cyclops, whose name was Polyphemus, to obey custom, respect the rules of the gods, and receive them generously. Polyphemus scoffed at Odysseus's warnings and said that his kind doesn't fear Zeus or any other god. He promptly bashed two men dead against the ground and ate them gruesomely. Odysseus wanted to kill Polyphemus there and then, but realized that if he killed Polyphemus he and his men would have no way out of the cave, since only the giant could roll back the huge rock blocking the entrance. So they lay there all night in the cave in terror.

Odysseus relied on the Cyclops to respect the same rules of piety that govern men (though one could also argue that Odysseus was also driven by a vainglorious desire to seek adventure). The Cyclops, though, show no piety to the gods, but he is no mere mortal – as the son of a god, he lives under different rules. Rather than give his "guests" a feast, the Cyclops feasts on them. Though Odysseus shows lack of self-restraint in the beginning of this episode, he shows good sense and self-restraint in delaying his desire for revenge. His good sense is cold-blooded, though, because he must realize that if he postpones action the giant will eat more of his men.

At dawn Polyphemus lit the fire, milked his sheep, and ate two more men for breakfast. He then left for the day, shutting the entrance of the cave behind him with the huge rock. Meanwhile Odysseus plotted revenge. He took Polyphemus' club and his men filed it down to a point and singed it at the end. At dusk Polyphemus returned, milked his sheep and goats, and ate two more men for dinner. Odysseus offered Polyphemus his strong wine, and Polyphemus drank three bowls. As the giant became drunk, Odysseus mentioned that his own name was Nobody. In thanks for the wine, Polyphemus promised to eat him last and fell asleep, vomiting human flesh. Seeing their chance, Odysseus and four other men heated up the sharpened club and used it to gouge out the Cyclops' eye. Polyphemus screamed in agony, and other Cyclops rushed up to his cave and asked who was hurting him. The Cyclops yelled 'Nobody,' so they walked away. Odysseus was delighted that his trick succeeded.

Odysseus does not overpower the giant but uses cunning to strike him where he is weakest (which turns out to be both his eye and his mind, as Polyphemus is not the brightest fellow). During his plan, Odysseus feigns friendliness and helplessness: his cunning hinges on his playacting, his capacity to disguise his intentions. He pretends to humble himself before the Cyclops so that the giant accepts the wine without suspicion. The false name, with its implied self-deprecation, symbolizes the king's talent for disguise.

Next, Odysseus plotted their escape. He arranged the rams in the cave in groups of three and lashed a man to the belly of each middle ram; he lashed himself to the belly of the remaining old ram. At dawn, when Polyphemus let the rams out of the cave, the men escaped too. Once outside the cave, Odysseus untied himself and his men and they all hurried to the ships. When they were out on the water, Odysseus yelled back to Polyphemus that Zeus has punished him for his crimes. In response, the furious Polyphemus broke off the top of a cliff and threw it in the direction of the ship, so that a wave drove the ship back to shore. Once they were at a safe distance again, Odysseus yelled back again to say that it was he, Odysseus, that blinded the Cyclops, if anyone should ask.

Even the final part of Odysseus's plan relates to the idea of disguise: the Cyclops only lets the men pass because he takes them for rams. Odysseus initial boast to Polyphemus is both pious and careful: he credits the punishment to the gods, almost as though any human action is guided the divine hand in some sense. But Odysseus's prudence gives out in his second boast: in calling out his name, he yields to his desire for glory: it is not enough to punish the Cyclops for his cruelty and injustice – Odysseus must have the fame of the deed as well. But in calling out his name, Odysseus also makes himself vulnerable.

Polyphemus remembered that a prophet once told him that he would be blinded by someone named Odysseus and called out to his father Poseidon to exact revenge: he prayed that Odysseus should never reach home, or that he should reach home alone and after great suffering. The Cyclops threw another rock, and the resulting wave threw the ship back to the island where the rest of the crew sat waiting. Odysseus divided up the stolen sheep, but he slaughtered the old ram in Zeus's honor. However, the sacrifice did not appease the god. The men slept and departed at dawn.

Though Polyphemus doesn't hide his disrespect for the gods, his father Poseidon still heeds his prayers – the children of immortals are not subject the same requirements as mortals. Odysseus's respect for Zeus does not carry the same weight as the Cyclops' offense. The prophecy calls Odysseus's free will into question: if the assault was fated, do the gods simply use Odysseus to act out a pre-written script?

BOOK 10

Odysseus continues his story to the Phaeacians: The men's next stop was the Aeolian island, home to the god of the winds. They stayed with Aeolus for a month, and his parting gift to Odysseus was a sack holding the winds. Aeolus freed the West Wind to blow Odysseus's ship toward home, the men sailed for nine days, and on the tenth they caught sight of Ithaca's shores. Just then, Odysseus fell asleep from exhaustion. His crew became suspicious that the tied up bag Odysseus had gotten from Aeolus contained a great treasure he wasn't sharing, so they untied it to see what was inside and in doing so freed the winds. Odysseus woke and watched in despair as the winds blew them back out to sea and then to Aeolus's island.

Even gods like Aeolus follow the laws of hospitality: they welcome guests and give parting gifts. In this episode, the men themselves (rather than the gods) delay their homecoming. But there is still a sense of justice at play: one can say that fate punishes the crewmen for their dishonorable, unjustified suspicions of their captain, not to mention their inability to show some self-restraint. The episode also illustrates the dangers of sleep and forgetfulness.

Odysseus begged Aeolus for help, but Aeolus believed that Odysseus's misfortune proved that he was hated by the gods, and turned him away. There was no wind to help them, so the men had to row; after seven days, they reached the island of the Laestrygonians. Odysseus sent a few men to investigate – were the inhabitants civilized people or monsters? They met a princess at a well, and she sent them inside her father's palace. They saw an enormous queen, who called over her husband Antiphates; he walked in and ate one of Odysseus's men, but the other two fled. The Laestrygonians ate most of Odysseus's crew, but one ship escaped.

Aeolus's response shows the ways in which chance is conflated with fate, luck with justice. If someone is unlucky, he was believed to have wronged the gods: nothing is random, though most things seem *random. And it seems that bad luck, in this world, attracts more bad luck: it seems quite improbable that Odysseus's ship should encounter two cannibalistic cultures in such quick succession.*

Odysseus and his single ship sailed on, and anchored on Circe's island. They rested for two days, and Odysseus went out and killed a deer to feed his men. They feasted and slept. The next morning, Odysseus told the men that he saw smoke rising somewhere in the middle of the island, and the men cried out in fear of the inhabitants of the island. Odysseus responded that crying does them no good, and sends half his men to investigate. When the men came to Circe's palace, they heard her singing as she weaved. They called out to her and walked in – all but Eurylochus. She welcomed them to her table, but she mixed a potion into their food that erased their memories of home and turned them into pigs.

The men cry not in honor of absent or departed friends, but in fear for their own lives: as Odysseus points out, this kind of grief is neither useful nor honorable. When Circe erases the men's memories, she turns them into pigs at once: we might interpret this to mean that a person without memories, without desires and goals, is like an animal: a person stripped of the most important human qualities.

Eurylochus ran back to the ship and told Odysseus that the men vanished into the palace and did not return. Odysseus set off for the palace, but before he reached its doors he met Hermes, who was disguised as a young man. The god gave him a drug called moly that would make him immune to Circe's potion. When Circe touches you with her wand, the god advised, run at her with your sword until she backs away in fear and invites you to her bed. The god told Odysseus to accept the goddess's offer, but only after she swore a binding oath not to hurt him.

Odysseus's encounter with Hermes is another apparently random divine intervention. Earlier in the book, Hermes acted on behalf of Zeus; but Odysseus is not at this moment in Zeus's favor, so Hermes appears to be acting of his own accord. Again, the intervention is indirect: Hermes does not disable Circe or grant Odysseus magic powers – he uses the plant as an intermediary.

When Odysseus walked into Circe's palace, everything happened just as Hermes predicted, and Circe then guessed that the stranger must be Odysseus. When they retired to bed, Circe's maids prepared a bath and a feast. But Odysseus was too troubled to eat, so Circe transformed his crew from swine to men again. Odysseus returned to his ship to hide his cargo in caves and to call the rest of his crew back to the palace. Eurylochus urged the men to depart right then, instead of rushing into a situation that might be a trap; he reminded them of the men that died in Polyphemus's cave because of Odysseus's poor judgment. But the men followed Odysseus, Eurylochus included.

Though Odysseus acts honorably in following Hermes' advice, because it enables him to save his crewmen, it is an idea of honor that lies uneasily with our own: he threatens a woman with violence until she offers herself to him. (Odysseus's sleeping around also doesn't seem like the act of a man who is so desperate to return to his wife, but some things you just have to chalk up to different times.) As Eurylochus points out, Odysseus's decision to return to the palace is risky and unwarranted. Perhaps Odysseus is flattered by the goddess's attention: it is glorious to have a goddess for a lover.

The men stayed on the island for a year, living in luxury, but after a year the crew grew increasingly restless and finally convinced Odysseus that it was time to leave. Circe advised him to go down to the land of the dead to speak to the ghost of Tiresias, a blind prophet.

Odysseus, here, is guilty of the crime of forgetfulness in the pleasures of Circe's palace: the crew has to remind him of his desire for home. Again, here, we see that though the gods are powerful they are not all-knowing: Circe herself cannot tell Odysseus how to return home, so she sends him to see Tiresias. The limits to the power and knowledge of the gods perhaps allow some room for human free will.

Circe told him to find the spot where the River of Fire and the River of Tears meet, to dig a trench there, to pour milk and honey, wine, and water for the dead, to sprinkle barley; finally, she said, he must promise the dead to kill a heifer when he returned to of Ithaca and to slaughter a black ram for Tiresias. Afterwards, Odysseus must slaughter a ram and an ewe with his head turned away. Only then will the shades emerge. At that moment, Odysseus's crew must burn the corpses while Odysseus keeps the shades away from blood; then Tiresias will appear and advise him how to complete his journey home.

Though the men make the choice to leave the island, they must blindly follow Circe's bizarre advice. Their actions are a mixture of free will and obedience.

As Odysseus and his crew woke the next morning to depart, they discovered that Elpenor, the youngest member of the crew, had gotten drunk the night before, slept on the roof, and when he woke in the morning at the sound of the other men working he fell off the roof and broke his neck. Odysseus explained their coming journey to the underworld, and the men were disappointed to learn how complicated the trip will be.

Elpenor is an example of a lack of self-restraint—he gets so drunk he goes to sleep in a dangerous place and kills himself by waking up. The men's reaction to their journey shows how they don't seek glory any longer, they just want to get home.

BOOK 11

Odysseus continues telling his tale to Alcinous and the Phaeacians. When he and his men reached the entrance to the world of the dead, they did exactly as Circe said: they dug a trench, offered libations, and sacrificed a ewe and a ram. Thousands of ghosts appeared when the blood started flowing. The first ghost that approached them was Elpenor. He asked Odysseus to bury him and grieve for him properly when the crew returned to Aeaea, and Odysseus gladly agreed. The next ghost was Anticleia, Odysseus's mother, but Odysseus did not let even her approach the blood.

Even ghosts in the land of the dead concern themselves with earthly custom: Elpenor cares above all that he receive proper burial rites. When Odysseus meets the ghost of his mother, we see the degree to which he is willing to sacrifice personal feeling to prudence and piety: he holds his own mother at bay in order to follow Circe's instructions.

Finally Tiresias appeared. Once he drank the blood of the slaughtered animals, he told Odysseus that his journey home would be full of trouble: Odysseus had angered Poseidon by blinding Poseidon's son, the Cyclops Polyphemus. The men *will* reach home, said Tiresias, if they leave the Cattle of the Sun unharmed. If they kill the cattle, Odysseus will come home alone. But before settling down in peace, he will have to make one more voyage to a land far away from any sea and make sacrifices to appease Poseidon. Only then will his long travels come to an end.

In Tiresias's prophecy, we see a certain logic in divine justice: the men have harmed something dear to the gods, so to save themselves they must refrain from harming something else dear to the gods (the Cattle), no matter the cost. And yet now the Odysseus and his men's fate has been told clearly, so is what happens to fulfill the prophecy fate or free will?

Odysseus asked Tiresias how to speak to the ghost of his mother, and Tiresias explained that a ghost would speak only if it drank the animals' blood. Odysseus let his mother drink the blood, and suddenly she recognized him. She told him that Penelope still grieved and waited for him, that his estate was still in Telemachus's hands, and that his father lived in poverty and solitude. She herself died of grief and longing for Odysseus. He tried to put his arms around her, but each time she dissolved at his touch. At this point Odysseus concludes his tale. It is late, and he asks the court again for passage home. The king and queen promise him many fine gifts if he stays on a little longer and ask him to describe the soldiers and heroes he met in the land of the dead.

In the conversation with his mother, Odysseus must fully face the tragic consequences of his absence: while he has been seeking glory and adventure, his family has suffered a great deal. Throughout Odysseus's journey, we observe his desire for glory slowly give way to his desire for home; his encounter with his mother tips the scale toward home. We have seen him take responsibility for his soldiers, but we will soon see him shift that sense of responsibility to his family. His central value changes from glory to honor.

Odysseus describes the conversation he had with Agamemnon. The ghost discussed his wife's infidelity; he told Odysseus that her lover Aegisthus murdered him and his comrades right at the dinner table. His wife's behavior, he said, stained all women everywhere. He advised Odysseus to keep some things hidden from his wife, and to arrive home in secret.

Talking to his mother makes Odysseus long for home and family, but talking to Agamemnon makes him wary of that home. Though Odysseus loves his family, he must treat them with suspicion: he must employ cunning in dealing with friends and enemies both. One must always keep oneself partially hidden.

Next Odysseus talked to Achilles, who said that he would rather be a slave on earth than a king in the land of the dead. Odysseus told him that his son , acted very bravely and killed many men, which pleased Achilles. Then the shades swarmed violently around him, wanting to talk to him. He ran back in fear to his ship, and they set sail.

Achilles is a king in the underworld because of the glory he achieved while alive. But, now dead, he would throw away all that glory just to be alive. Like Menelaus, he has come to value glory less and less. He is still pleased to hear of his son's glory in battle, though; he can't give up glory entirely.

BOOK 12

The men returned to Aeaea, performed all the proper funeral rites for Elpenor, and buried his body. Before Odysseus and his men depart, Circe told Odysseus that he must pass the island of the Sirens, who will try to lure the men to their deaths with their songs. She advised that Odysseus put beeswax in the men's ears, and that they tie Odysseus to the mast if he insisted on hearing the Sirens' songs.

The songs of the Sirens create pure, unmotivated desire, which overrides the listener's more particular desire for home, life, or anything. It is a dishonorable, selfish desire, lacking all self-restraint, that has no object but personal satisfaction. In contrast, the desire for home is directed outward toward family and friends.

Next, she told him, the crew must pass between Scylla, a terrible six-headed monster, and Charybdis, who creates a whirlpool that sucks whole ships down into the sea three times a day. Only the ship Argo has passed between these monsters with no lives lost. Circe advised that Odysseus sail his ship past Scylla and sacrifice six men rather than risk getting sucked down into the whirlpool and sinking. Odysseus asked if he can escape Charybdis and fight off Scylla, but Circe chastised Odysseus for his stubbornness: Scylla is immortal and can't be defeated.

Circe advises him to choose Scylla's violence over the whirlpool of Charybdis, but Odysseus wants the glory of repeating the Argo's amazing achievement and fight them off: a plan that risks the lives of the crewmen and shows disrespect to the gods. Scylla may not be a goddess, but she is immortal: it is impious to pit mortal will against immortal will.

The sun rose as Circe finished, and the men prepared their ship for departure. As the ship sailed away, Odysseus told the men Circe's advice, though he told them that Circe said he *must* hear the Sirens' songs, and didn't mention Scylla and Charybdis because he didn't want to paralyze the men with fear. As they pass the island of the Siren's the men put wax in their ears and lash Odysseus to the mast and they pass without incident. When they came to Charybdis they carefully sail around the whirlpool, and Scylla grabbed and ate six men. Filled with grief and pity, the men sail away as fast as possible.

Odysseus follows Circe advice exactly. He manages to the glorious achievement of hearing the siren's song, but does not pit his will against that song. He literally has himself restrained. And though he wants to fight Scylla and gain glory, he does not. His honorable sense of responsibility to his crew overrides his desire for glory.

Next they reached the island of the Sun. Odysseus wanted to avoid the island altogether, but Eurylochus insisted that the crew needed rest. Odysseus made the men swear an oath not to eat any cattle, but they were trapped on the island for a month by an inopportune wind; eventually their stores ran out and the men began to starve. One day Odysseus fell asleep, and Eurylochus convinced the men to eat the Cattle of the Sun: it's better to die at sea from the wrath of the gods, he said, than to die of hunger. Odysseus woke up to find that the men had broken their oaths and killed some cattle.

The roles of Odysseus and Eurylochus are reversed. On Circe's island, Eurylochus had been the sensible one and Odysseus had been the risk-taker. On the island of the Sun, Odysseus is sensible and Eurylochus is careless and disobedient. When glory is not in question, Odysseus is more capable of exercising self-restraint. The episode is another instance in which the men make a fatal error while Odysseus is asleep.

The sun god Helios angrily asked Zeus and the other gods to punish Odysseus's crew for killing his cattle, and Zeus complied. Strange things began to happen to the cattle that had been killed: they bellowed and moved. But the men continue to feast for six more days before sailing away. As soon as they were out at sea Zeus sent down a storm that destroyed the ship and killed everyone aboard except Odysseus, who hung on to some pieces of wood. The wind drove him back toward Charybdis right when the monster made the whirlpool, but Odysseus saved himself by hanging on to the branch of a fig-tree. After the whirlpool spit back out his little raft he drifted at sea until he reached Calypso's island. Here Odysseus stops his tale: he had told the rest earlier.

The men show impiety when they ignore the bad omens sent down by the gods and continue to feast on the cattle. In this world, people must not only obey the direct orders of the gods but also try to guess their desires and intentions based on more or less ambiguous signs. Impiety or not, the crew is doomed. According to divine justice, their lives are less valuable than the lives of Helios's cattle. Justice in this world is not determined by the sanctity of human life but by rules of honor and piety.

BOOK 13

The next day, King Alcinous stows Odysseus's many gifts on the ship and everyone feasts. When Odysseus walks onto the ship the next morning, he falls into a deep, sweet sleep – a sleep that resembles death, and that erases briefly the memory of his twenty years away from home. The ship lands in a harbor in Ithaca and the crew places the sleeping Odysseus and his gifts in a spot far away from any road to hide him from thieves.

Like Circe's potion and lotus flower, sleep temporarily erases memory and strips one of will and desire. For Penelope, sleep is a blessing, because she is powerless to take any action. For Odysseus it is often a trap, because he must constantly take action. In this case, though, Athena and the crew protect him from harm, and the sleep seems like a kind of temporary haven from the stress of the last 20 years, almost like a preparation for his return home by making him, for a while, forget that he had ever left.

Poseidon is angered that the Phaeacians helped Odysseus and gave him so much treasure, despite Poseidon's grudge. Zeus considers Poseidon's complaint a bit trivial, but he encourages him to take whatever action will soothe his anger. To take revenge, Poseidon fulfills a prophecy mentioned in book 8: he turns to stone the Phaeacian ship that carried Odysseus to Ithaca just as it returns to the Phaeacian harbor, so that the ship sinks. The Phaeacians are terrified that he will also create a mountain around their harbor and block their access to the sea, as the prophecy says, so they pray and sacrifice to him to try to appease him.

The Phaeacians are following Zeus's code of hospitality in welcoming Odysseus, giving him gifts, and escorting him home. But Poseidon considers their behavior impious: by helping Odysseus, they impede Poseidon's anger, and therefore pit their human wills against his divine will. The situation demonstrates the messy complications of divine justice. Though Zeus might defend the Phaeacians, who obeyed his rules, he chooses not to stand in Poseidon's way.

Back in Ithaca, Odysseus wakes from his long sleep. Athena has surrounded him with mist to protect him, so at first he doesn't recognize his surroundings. He thinks that the Phaeacians tricked him and brought him to some foreign land. Then Athena appears in the guise of a young shepherd, and tells Odysseus that he *is* in Ithaca, after all. Odysseus conceals his joy and tells Athena (who he doesn't recognize) that he's a fugitive from Crete, wanted for killing a man who tried to steal from him. He says that the Phaeacians took pity on him and brought him to Ithaca while he slept. Now Athena changes into a woman, praises Odysseus for his cunning, and reveals her real identity. She explains that she will help Odysseus hide his treasure and conceal his identity, and warns him that he must suffer further even under his own roof.

Athena's mist is another kind of protective disguise, and ensures that sleeping Odysseus stays out of harm's way. Odysseus follows Agamemnon's advice and keeps his identity hidden from the moment he steps onto home soil. The story he tells Athena is one of many alternate identities he constructs while he's in hiding in his own court. Like many of the stories, the fugitive story is both true and untrue: many of the details are fabricated, but Odysseus did *kill the Cyclops for trying to steal his life, and he* is *a fugitive from Poseidon. This half-truth places emphasis on his guilt.*

Odysseus notes that Athena had been kind to him during the war but that she seemed to have abandoned him during his long travels. Athena delights in his grace and cunning: these qualities, she says, are the reason she can't help but stick by him. She explains that she had not helped him during his travels for fear of inciting Poseidon's anger. She tells Odysseus about the suitors' treachery and about Penelope's loyalty. Odysseus realizes he might have died Agamemnon's ignoble death had Athena not warned him, and asks her to help him plan his revenge. She changes Odysseus into an old beggar and tells him to visit his old swineherd, Eumaeus, who remains loyal to him.

Athena's loyalty to Odysseus derives from an odd mixture of justice and affection. Does she protect him because his cunning is honorable and merits reward, or because she finds it charming and impressive (and because she herself is cunning, and therefore admires the trait in others)? We envision the law as cold and objective, but in this world the instruments of the law are emotional and capricious. Similarly, Athena does not protect Odysseus during his journey not because she believes he was wrong or deserving punishment, but because she fears another god.

BOOK 14

Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, walks to the swineherd's house. Eumaeus invites Odysseus in to eat and drink and tell his story. Odysseus thanks the swineherd for his hospitality, and Eumaeus answers that Zeus decrees that everyone be kind to beggars and strangers. He serves Odysseus two pigs, barley, and wine. He complains that the suitors eat all the best hogs without fearing the revenge of the gods, who honor the just acts of men. The suitors must think Odysseus is dead, says the swineherd, because they shamelessly deplete what was once the richest realm in this part of the world.

We see right away that Eumaeus lives piously and respects custom. He has also remained fiercely loyal to Odysseus, and has therefore grown to hate the suitors. He is amazed that the suitors can disregard the rules of honor so blithely – yet he continues to believe in the gods, and sees the suitors as foolish not to fear retribution. In this world, it seems that people always get their just deserts.

Odysseus-the-beggar tells Eumaeus that he was born in Crete, the unlawful son of a rich man and a concubine. As a young man he loved adventure and war but not home and family: he won honor in battle and took a lot of treasure from foreign lands. Then he led a fleet in the Trojan war, battled for ten years and came home; but only a month after homecoming he set out again for Egypt to seek more treasure. However, his men killed and plundered in the Egyptian farms against his will, and an army from the Egyptian city came and killed or enslaved the whole crew, though he escaped by begging the king for mercy. He stayed in Egypt for seven years and collected a great fortune.

In this new identity story, Odysseus implies that he, too, has chosen glory over family; his downfall, also, had been an immoderate quest for treasure, fame, and glory. The story about Egypt corresponds in most details to Odysseus's encounter with the Cicones. In reality, Odysseus and part of his crew manage to escape, but the older, wiser Odysseus revises the story: in this version, he must humble himself to survive. Odysseus has come to doubt glory-seeking and respect humility.

Odysseus-the-beggar left Egypt with a Phoenician con man, who convinced him to go to Libya. But Zeus struck their ship with lightning and he alone survived. He floated on the mast of the ship for nine days until he reached Thesprotia, where king Phidon treated him kindly and told him that Odysseus was sailing home with great treasure. Phidon sent him to the city of Dulichion by ship, but the crew of the ship dressed him in rags and tied him up on an Ithaca beach. Finally, he escaped and stumbled across Eumaeus's home. Here Odysseus-the-beggar finishes his invented tale.

The remainder of the story corresponds in many details to Odysseus's voyage: Zeus's punishment, nine days of drifting, a strange king's kindness. Odysseus was not the one to provoke Zeus's anger, so he does not take the blame in this version of the story. Such an identity story, like disguise and self-restraint, has elements of both truth and untruth. A lie, in this world, does not only mask the truth – it has a certain truth of its own.

Odysseus decides to test Eumaeus's generosity: he describes a freezing, snowy night during the Trojan War when he complained to Odysseus that he was about to die from the cold. Odysseus then sent one of his own men on a made-up mission so that he, the beggar, could take his cloak. Eumaeus praises the story and lends Odysseus-the-beggar a cloak of his own.

Odysseus has no particular reason for asking for the cloak in such a roundabout way: Eumaeus has already proved his kindness and hospitality. Odysseus seems to enjoy lying and disguise the way he once enjoyed glory. Further, he makes up a story that doesn't only disguise who he is but actually includes himself treating his made-up self in a noble and honorable way. That's a lot of cunning and, to use a word the Greeks wouldn't, chutzpah.

BOOK 15

Athena flies to Lacedaemon and tells Telemachus to come back to Ithaca. She warns him that some of the suitors will try to ambush and kill him on his way home, and tells him to avoid all the islands. The next morning, Menelaus arranges for Telemachus to leave for home with Pisistratus. When Telemachus mentions Odysseus in his good-byes, an eagle with a goose in its claws flies by: a good omen. At Pylos, Telemachus loads his gifts into his ship and sails to Ithaca; he takes along Theoclymenus, a prophet's son who killed a man in Argos and begs for hospitality.

Athena orchestrates the meeting of father and son by commanding Telemachus to return home. She manipulates Telemachus more directly than she does Odysseus (she tends to help Odysseus with his own plans, but not give him orders). Meanwhile, she also thwarts the plans of the impious, dishonorable suitors, who want to do to Telemachus what Aigisthus did to Agamemnon. And Telemachus continues to practice hospitality.

Meanwhile, back in Ithaca, Odysseus decides to test Eumaeus one more time. He tells Eumaeus that he plans to leave the next morning and try his luck begging at the palace, but Eumaeus urges him to stay until Telemachus returns. In response to Odysseus-as-beggar's questions, he tells him that king Laertes lives grieving for Odysseus and for Odysseus's mother. Odysseus then asks Eumaeus to tell his story and the swineherd gladly agrees, reflecting on the pleasure of remembered sorrows.

Eumaeus proves the extent of his hospitality by asking the strange beggar to stay in his home for as long as need be. Eumaeus confirms the sad fate of Odysseus's family: Odysseus most likely wants to hear the sad facts repeated because the grief inspires him to take action. And Eumaeus himself agrees that remembered sorrows can offer some pleasure.

Eumaeus says that his father was lord of two cities on the island Syrie. A Phoenician crew landed one day on the island and one of the men seduced a Phoenician nurse from his father's household. She left with them, and she brought the king's child with her: that child was the swineherd. Eventually the ship landed in Ithaca and Laertes bought the infant. Here Eumaeus's story ends.

Eumaeus's story illustrates the wild vacillations of fate in the ancient world. Though Eumaeus was born royal, his chance abduction transformed him into a servant. Heredity does not necessarily determine one's fate; the events of one's life and the actions of the gods can erase any sort of status in a moment. Justice, in this world, does not mean that each person gets what he deserves: chance is part of this justice.

The next morning, Telemachus arrives safely and secretly in Ithaca. He directs the ship to continue on to the city while he goes to Eumaeus farm. As he leaves the ship, they all see a hawk with a dove in its claws. Theoclymenus interprets this omen to mean good things for Odysseus and his descendants.

Telemachus's decision to go see Eumaeus seems likely to have been orchestrated by Athena, and excitement builds as father and son will finally meet. Meanwhile, the gods seem to favor coming events...

BOOK 16

When Telemachus arrives at the farm, Eumaeus asks him to take care of the stranger. Telemachus gladly offers to give the stranger clothes and a sword. Odysseus-the-beggar interjects to say that it upsets him to hear about the sad state of affairs at the palace, and that he wishes he could help fight the suitors; if he were Odysseus, he says, he would deserve death if he did not fight his offenders, and he would gladly die trying to fight them rather than tolerate their insulting behavior. Telemachus asks Eumaeus to go to the palace and tell Penelope that her son has returned home safely, but to tell no one else, not even Laertes.

Telemachus proves his hospitality when he offers to help the stranger. It seems that hospitality is not only a custom, in this world, but a cardinal virtue: a quality, like integrity or kindness, that implies most other human merits. Odysseus spells out the requirements of honor for Telemachus and Eumaeus: they must defeat the suitors or die.

Athena approaches the farm, but only Odysseus and the dogs can see her. He walks outside to talk to her, and she tells Odysseus to reveal his true identity to Telemachus so that the two can plan their revenge against the suitors. She makes Odysseus look like himself again. When he steps back inside, Telemachus is amazed at the transformation – he thinks Odysseus must be a god, since only gods can change so easily. I am your father, Odysseus tells him; Telemachus can't quite believe it at first, but Odysseus explains that Athena is responsible for his magical transformation.

Athena helps Odysseus carry out his vengeance by helping him conceal and reveal his identity: she enhances his talent for disguise by intermittently changing his appearance. We see again that she helps Odysseus, she augments his own skills, but she does not control him. And note how the capacity for transformation and disguise is seen as a godlike quality.

Odysseus asks Telemachus to describe the suitors so that they can plan an attack. Telemachus doubts that only two men can defeat such a large group of suitors – over a hundred in total – but Odysseus reminds him that Athena and Zeus will stand by them as well. Odysseus tells him to go to the palace and mingle with the crowd of suitors. Eumaeus will bring Odysseus, once again disguised as a beggar, into town later. Odysseus further instructs Telemachus to keep his return secret – even from Laertes, Penelope, and Eumaeus.

Athena has assured Odysseus that he can trust Telemachus, but he does not trust any other member of his family with the news of his return. His suspicion is not unkind: in a world where people's lives and loyalties change constantly (just ask Agamemnon), it would be foolish of Odysseus to expect his family to stay exactly as it was for the twenty years of his absence.

Both Eumaeus and a herald from Pylos report to Penelope that Telemachus has come home. The suitors are dismayed to hear the news. They gather at the meeting grounds and complain that a god must have saved Telemachus's life. Antinous proposes to murder him on home soil, but in secret, to avoid persecution. Amphinomus suggests that they should only kill the prince if the gods are in favor of the murder, and the suitors all agree to this more moderate plan.

The suitors are both impious and foolish to try to harm a person who seems to have the protection of the gods. It is disrespectful and futile to pit one's will against the will of the gods. Mortals can act freely, in this world, only if they do not interfere with the plans of the gods: they are free the way cattle are free to roam in a very large pen.

Penelope emerges from her chambers and confronts Antinous about his schemes against Telemachus. She reminds him that Odysseus once saved his father, and shames Antinous for mistreating Odysseus's land and wife in his absence. Eurymachus tells Penelope that he will not let Telemachus be harmed, but his reassurance is dishonest. Meanwhile, Eumaeus returns to the farm, and he, Telemachus, and Odysseus (once again disguised as the beggar) eat and fall asleep.

Slowly, the suitors begin to acquire distinct personalities. Antinous is impious and violent; his behavior seems all the more heinous when we learn that he owes Odysseus a debt of honor for saving his father. Unlike the other suitors, he has no consideration of honor and piety – he is almost as lawless as Polyphemus.

BOOK 17

Telemachus goes into the city; the suitors are friendly to him, but their intentions are dark. He tells Penelope that Menelaus had heard that Odysseus had been trapped on Calypso's island. Theoclymenus adds his prophecy: he says that Odysseus is in Ithaca as they speak, plotting revenge. Not long after, Eumaeus and Odysseus set out for the city, with Odysseus disguised as a beggar. On their way, they run into the goatherd Melanthius, who insults them and even gives Odysseus a kick. Odysseus wants to hit him back but he stays calm.

Though the suitors try to act deceitfully, no one seems fooled; to the reader, who shares the author's omniscience, their attempts at cunning seem transparent and pathetic. The episode with the goatherd shows how much Odysseus king has changed during his travels: only recently, he could not endure an insult from Broadsea or from the Cyclops without retaliating.

As the two men approach the castle, Eumaeus warns Odysseus-the-beggar that someone might hit or mock him just for the fun of it, and Odysseus replies that he can withstand any humiliation after his years of wandering. As they speak, Odysseus notices an old dog lying neglected in the dust and dung: it's Argos, who was once Odysseus's puppy. Master and dog recognize each other right away, but at that moment the old dog quietly dies.

Odysseus implies that his desire for home has become stronger than his pride. He has suffered so much, and so ingloriously, that he no longer fears suffering of any kind. The gods have flung him from place to place, they have spared his life on a whim; he has no vanity left to protect. His only goal is to defend the honor of his house and family. He begins by bringing joy to his dog as it draws its dying breath.

Odysseus enters his own house for the first time in twenty years. Telemachus tells Eumaeus to instruct Odysseus-the-beggar to go around the table begging for scraps, and Athena seconds that advice: it's a way of separating the bad suitors from the innocent ones. Most suitors pity him and give him food, but Antinous asks Eumaeus angrily why he has brought the strange beggar to court.

Though all the suitors except Antinous treat Odysseus-the-beggar quite well, they are all fated to die. Athena and Odysseus may want to test the suitors individually, but they are already guilty as a group. Their dishonorable actions outweigh any private kind-heartedness.

Antinous flings a stool at the king, but Odysseus contains his anger once again, and tells the other suitors that such undeserved violence will meet with punishment from the gods. The other suitors agree that the gods will strike down Antinous for his crime. Telemachus is anguished to see his father abused, but he hides his feelings. Eumaeus speaks briefly to the queen and then goes back to his farm, but Odysseus and Telemachus stay behind with the suitors.

Odysseus and Telemachus both show great self-restraint; they are willing to tolerate momentary disgrace – to disguise their anger and shame – to restore the honor of the household. Glory is more selfish than honor, which often requires one to sacrifice one's vanity to defend an idea.

BOOK 18

A rude beggar named Arnaeus (Irus for short) wanders into the palace. He insults Odysseus-the-beggar when they meet on the grounds, and Antinous decides to pit them against each other so that the suitors can enjoy the fight; the prize is sausage and a seat at the suitors' table. Odysseus-the-beggar pulls up his rags to reveal a powerful-looking body, and Irus is filled with fear. Odysseus decides to hurt him only slightly; he punches Irus on the neck and flings him outside. The suitors laugh and invite the stranger to eat at their table.

Odysseus agrees to fight the beggar that insulted him not out of anger but out of shrewdness. We see that Odysseus is in control of his emotions, because he carefully chooses the degree of violence to inflict on the man: he does not let his anger run wild despite Irus's insults. Even when his actions (violence) correspond to his emotions (anger), he still maintains a prudent separation between the two.

The suitor Amphinomus is especially kind to Odysseus-the-beggar. As they talk, Odysseus mentions his own past violence and error, advises him to live lawfully, and hints at the suitors' impending deaths. Amphinomus feels very ill at ease, but the narrator notes that there is nothing to be done – he is fated to die on Telemachus's spear.

Odysseus takes pity on Amphinomus, so he tries to prevent his death by hinting that he should flee the palace as soon as possible – to break his allegiance to the group of suitors that he must defeat. But, while Amphinomus feels anxious, he does not leave—is that his free will to stay, or because he is fated to die?

Athena inspires Penelope to come down and speak to the suitors. The queen tells the suitors that if they hope to win her hand they should give her gifts, as is customary. Odysseus is pleased at this clever trick. The suitors send their servants to bring fine treasures and begin to dance and sing.

Though Penelope does not know about Odysseus's plan, her cunning helps to give the suitors a false sense of security, because her announcement gives them the impression that she will soon choose a husband.

Athena wants to rile Odysseus as much as possible, so she inspires Eurymachus to mock him once more, but Odysseus remains calm and predicts the suitors' deaths. Eurymachus throws a stool at Odysseus-the-beggar but the stool hits a servant instead. Telemachus scolds the suitors and sends them all to bed.

Though the suitors are by nature haughty and rude, Athena seems to force them to commit greater and greater offenses so that Odysseus will not spare them when the fated battle begins. Odysseus continues to show self-restraint.

BOOK 19

That night, as the suitors sleep, Odysseus and Telemachus lock up most of the weapons as part of their plan. Telemachus goes to sleep, and soon after Penelope comes to question the strange visitor, and she and Odysseus-the-beggar sit down to have a conversation. He tells her that he once hosted Odysseus in his home. She weeps to hear her husband's name, but decides to test the stranger's honesty by asking him for details. The king describes Odysseus's clothes and his herald, and Penelope weeps again; she herself gave Odysseus the clothes in the story. He tells her that Odysseus has been at sea for a long time but that he will be home before the month is over.

Despite Penelope's grief, she has the sense to test the stranger, just as Odysseus has tested many others. Such a test is cunning pitted against cunning: a trick to separate lies from truth, appearance from reality, the outer from the inner. It is cunning used to disarm someone else's cunning, a sleight-of-hand to strip off someone's disguise – or to establish their sincerity. Only after cunning can there be sincerity.

Penelope asks her maids to bathe the stranger, but he refuses such a luxury; instead, the nurse Eurycleia washes his feet. The old nurse cries to hear Odysseus's name and swears the there is a great likeness between her king and the old beggar. Odysseus slyly agrees. But when the nurse begins to wash Odysseus's feet, she notices a scar Odysseus received while hunting with his grandfather Autolycus. She drops his foot, spilling the basin of water, and cries out in recognition. Odysseus begs her to be silent, however, and she gladly promises to keep his secret. Meanwhile, Athena distracts Penelope from noticing the scene.

Only the dog Argos recognizes Odysseus in his disguise, and only the old nurse who knew and cared for him as a boy notes a resemblance between the beggar and the king. It is as though they are loyal and connected to the spirit of the king, and therefore are not tricked by his complicated exterior; Penelope and Telemachus, who love him for both his interior and his exterior, cannot see through the disguise. The scar connects his changed appearance to his past, just as it cuts through skin to flesh.

When the nurse leaves, Odysseus-the-beggar resumes his conversation with Penelope. She asks him to interpret a dream in which an eagle flies down from the mountains and breaks the necks of twenty geese in her household, and then announces that it is her husband who has just killed the suitors. Odysseus tells her that the dream means certain death for the suitors, but Penelope is skeptical that the dream was a prophecy rather than mere fancy. She also tells him that she plans to announce an archery contest to finally choose a new husband. Odysseus promises that her husband will return before a single man strings the bow.

Even pious people like Penelope cannot always recognize signs from the gods: piety requires cleverness, not just obedience. Though Penelope does not want to choose a new husband, she decides that she can't keep the suitors at bay any longer. Odysseus has come home just in time to save her from disloyalty and unhappiness; his timely arrival will preserve her honor.

BOOK 20

Odysseus lies awake and worries about fighting an entire crowd of suitors - and the crowds that will come to avenge their deaths. Athena reassures him and helps him fall asleep. Meanwhile, the queen lies awake and wishes for death: even death is better than the infidelity she fears will be forced upon her. Her crying rouses Odysseus, who asks Zeus for a good omen. Right away, Zeus sends a clap of thunder.

Athena can soothe Odysseus because she knows his future: the suitors will be defeated, the husband will come home. Her peaceful presence acts on him like a sudden faith in the future: here, she seems to serve as a metaphor for that faith rather than as a meddlesome god.

Eurycleia instructs the maids to clean and decorate the house for the feast to be held during the archery contest. Odysseus ignores another insult from the goatherd and speaks briefly to the cowherd. An eagle flies by with a dove in its claws, and Amphinomus convinces the suitors to stop plotting against the prince and start feasting instead.

Amphinomus recognizes the omens predicting death and destruction. He cuts short the suitors' futile and impious planning in hopes of reducing their punishment, but it is too little too late.

Athena wants to rouse Odysseus's anger so she inspires a suitor names Ctesippus to fling a hoof at him; Telemachus loudly chastises the suitor, but Odysseus remains calm. Another suitor urges Telemachus to convince Penelope to take another husband, and Telemachus refuses yet again. Athena makes the suitors break into irrational, hysterical laugher. The seer Theoclymenus points out dark omens: blood on the walls, ghosts at the doors, a mist that covers the sun. The suitors mock the seer and insult the king once again.

Athena continues to exacerbate the behavior of the suitors. Suddenly, they seem like marionettes throwing hard objects at her command; they themselves seem bewildered by their behavior. They're frightened by the morbid signs, but they keep mocking and insulting. Athena forces them to continue to commit their earlier offenses: she forces them to be the worst version of themselves.

BOOK 21

Penelope sets out Odysseus's bow and axes, and announces to the suitors that the archer that can shoot an arrow cleanly through the axes will have her hand in marriage. Telemachus tries it first, to set an example, but he can't even string the bow. The suitor Leodes tries the bow and fails: it is too stiff to bend. Other suitors lack the strength to string it as well. Meanwhile, Odysseus speaks to Eumaeus and the cowherd, Philoetius, outside the palace: he tells them his true identity, shows them his scar as proof, and enlists them in the coming battle. He asks Eumaeus to carry him the bow after the suitors have tried it, and to tell the maids to lock their doors; he asks Philoetius to lock the courtyard so that no men can escape.

We are reminded, after watching Odysseus beg in rags and tolerate insult after insult, that he is a hero in the traditional sense as well: he has extraordinary strength and skill. His weapon alone shows that he is far superior to the other men; they can't even string it! But even a hero like Odysseus is not too proud to resort to trickery or to accept help from servants. The notion of the mighty, singular hero is no longer accurate, in this book; 2700 years ago, it is already outdated. Ancient ideas of glory give way to more human notions of honor.

Odysseus reenters the palace, where Eurymachus has just failed to string the bow. Odysseus-the-beggar advises the suitors to rest and pray to the archer god while he himself tries the bow, just to amuse them. Antinous warns him angrily that he may end up like the drunken Centaur Eurythion, who was mauled by his hosts the Lapiths. But Penelope urges the suitors to let the stranger try his luck; there is no shame in such a thing, she says, compared to the shame the suitors have brought on the household. Telemachus asserts his right to be the one to hand over the bow and sends Penelope to her quarters.

Odysseus maintains his ruse until the very end – perhaps he takes pride in the art of disguise. Antinous's warning shows that he does not comprehend honor and custom: honor does not lie in one's social standing, so there is nothing dishonorable in a beggar competing against a lord. Penelope says as much. Telemachus demonstrates his growing maturity and confidence by giving his mother orders and thereby protecting her from the coming battle.

Eumaeus carries the bow to the king amidst the mocking of the suitors. Odysseus strings the bow as gracefully as a bard tuning his lyre; Zeus sends down a bolt of lightning. Then the king shoots the arrow cleanly through the row of axes. He says to Telemachus: it's time for the song and dance that follow a feast.

Homer compares Odysseus to a bard to show both his facility with the unwieldy bow and the artfulness of his schemes. In this moment, Odysseus regains his heroic stature; but his glory is now more human as it contains traces of the helplessness, despair, and humiliation he experienced in his 20 years of travel back to Ithaca.

BOOK 22

Odysseus shoots Antinous through the throat just as the suitor is about to take a sip of wine. The king kicks the table and scatters the food on the floor, and the food mingles with Antinous's blood. He reveals himself to be the long-absent king of Ithaca. The suitors, horrified, plead for mercy, blame Antinous for their wrongdoings, and offer to repay all they have stolen. But Odysseus tells them that no amount of wealth can wipe out their crimes. Eurymachus calls the suitors to battle, but Odysseus quickly kills him. Telemachus kills Amphinomus and then runs to get weapons for himself, Odysseus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius.

This scene makes it clear that the suitors' crimes are not merely financial. They are crimes of honor against Odysseus and his wife and son, and the suitors cannot compensate Odysseus for honor lost. Only vengeance – the mechanism of justice – can wipe out the dishonor they have brought upon his family. The punishment defines the crime, and the crime separates the guilty from the innocent. In this way, Penelope, Telemachus, and Odysseus restore their innocence.

Eumaeus guards the side-door to the palace so that no suitors can escape. The goatherd Melanthius climbs through a secret passageway into Odysseus's storeroom and brings weapons to some of the suitors. Eumaeus and Philoetius catch Melanthius when he returns for more weapons and leave him strung up in the storeroom in great pain. Athena appears in the guise of Mentor; she then turns into a swallow and flies to a beam on the roof to watch the fighting. The suitors shoot arrows at Odysseus, but Athena makes sure the arrows miss their mark again and again. Odysseus and Telemachus slaughter the suitors like eagles attacking little birds. Odysseus spares only the bard and the herald Medon.

Athena helps to assure Odysseus's victory, but her intervention is, again, very indirect. In theory, she could strike down all the suitors herself, or ask Zeus to send lethal lighting bolts; instead, she allows the men to fight their own battle, but she protects Odysseus and his men form the arrows of the suitors: she exaggerates Odysseus's superiority and the suitors' clumsiness. She also takes the form of a bird, not a god – perhaps as a reminder of the many bird omens that have foreshadowed the battle.

Telemachus brings out Eurycleia; she is happy to see the suitors dead, but Odysseus warns her that it is wrong to rejoice over the bodies of the dead. He tells her that the men's dishonorable behavior earned them the wrath of the gods. He then asks her to gather the dozen servant women who shamed the household by sleeping with the suitors. Once they arrive, he tells the servant women to help Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius clear away the corpses and the blood. When they finish the job Telemachus beheads the women with a cable; then the three men take Melanthius outside and cut off his nose, ears, genitals, hands, and feet. Finally, Odysseus asks the servants to sterilize the house with smoke.

Even in his heroic moment, Odysseus remains temperate, modest, and mindful of custom. His victory is bloody, but not bloodthirsty: he does not seem to take an animal pleasure in the slaughter. He does only what's necessary: he spares the innocent, and metes out punishment according to the severity of the crime. And the punishment, however elaborate and brutal it may seem, does not satisfy an injured ego – Odysseus sees himself merely as an instrument of the gods' wrath. To be pious, he must relinquish part of his free will.

BOOK 23

Eurycleia tells Penelope that Odysseus has finally come home and killed the suitors. The nurse mentions the telltale boar tusk scar on Odysseus's knee, but Penelope refuses to believe the story. She comes downstairs to speak to the stranger; he looks like Odysseus but also like the mysterious beggar. As she considers the stranger in indecision, Odysseus tells Telemachus that the palace must look as though they are celebrating a wedding; he wants to keep secret the fact that he has killed most of the high-born young men in Ithaca.

The scar is not proof enough for Penelope. Her suspicion is not cold-hearted, but just the opposite: she is so loyal to Odysseus that she fears betraying him in any way – even accidentally. To be loyal, she has to act disloyal at first; to love him, she has to act as though she doesn't love him. Disguise, to many of the characters, is a circuitous route to sincerity.

Athena changes Odysseus back into a handsome younger man. He chides Penelope for her cold welcome and tells the nurse that he will sleep alone. To test the stranger, Penelope tells Eurycleia to bring him the bridal bed, but Odysseus cries out angrily that the bed cannot be moved because he built it around an olive tree. The story is definite proof of his identity; Penelope cries and embraces him.

Penelope resists Odysseus because she fears that the gods want to trick her into disloyalty; if that were true, her reticence would be resistance to the will of the gods. In her small way, Penelope is choosing loyalty to her husband over piety, earthly honor over divine grace.

Odysseus warns Penelope that he must make one more long, dangerous journey before they can settle down in peace. According to the prophecy in Book 11, he must travel to a land far from any sea, plant an oar, and sacrifice animals to Poseidon. Finally they retire to bed. Before he leaves the following dawn, Odysseus tells Penelope to stay with her maids in her room, because men might come to avenge the suitors. He sets out with Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd.

Now that he has restored honor to his household, Odysseus must make amends to Poseidon. Piety to the gods takes priority over his longing for family. In this, too, Odysseus shows great self-restraint: to protect his family from Poseidon's wrath, and therefore to benefit them in the long run, he must cause temporary pain to them and to himself.

BOOK 24

The suitors' ghosts fly crying to the underworld. As the ghosts arrive, Achilles, Agamemnon, and Ajax discuss their own deaths. Agamemnon envies Achilles and Ajax their deaths in battle. Agamemnon recognizes Amphimedon, one of the suitor's ghosts, and asks him why so many noble young men have died all at once. Amphimedon describes the suitors' courtship, Penelope's loyalty, and Odysseus's revenge. Agamemnon is glad that Odysseus's wife was more faithful than his own, and says that gods and men will forever praise her good sense and self-restraint.

Although for most of the book it seems that Penelope has to wait passively at home while Odysseus commands armies and battles monsters, by the end of the book their roles seem to converge: both are patient, cunning, and loyal, and both have become famous for their intelligence and honor. Though Penelope, as a woman, cannot gain glory in battle or athletics, she can equal a man in cunning and self-restraint.

Meanwhile, Odysseus and his three companions come to Laertes' farm. Odysseus finds his father working in the vineyard and weeps to see his decrepitude. Despite his pity, he decides to test his father's loyalty. He tells Laertes that he is a traveller from another land, and that he once hosted Odysseus. But Laertes cries to hear Odysseus's name, and Odysseus breaks down and reveals his identity. Laertes asks for proof, so Odysseus shows him the scar and describes the fruit trees Laertes gave him when he was a boy. They embrace joyfully.

Odysseus has defeated the suitors and regained control of his realm, so he has nothing to fear from his father. The test of loyalty he plans is, once again, the deceit that brings one to sincerity: it allows for complete trust. But Laertes' tears are proof enough. It seems that grief, in this world, cannot be faked, so tears of grief dissolve any disguise.

As the men eat lunch, Dolius and his sons come in after working in the fields and happily greet the long-absent king. The goddess Rumor flies around the town and spreads the news of the suitors' deaths. Soon, the dead men's relatives come to gather the corpses. Antinous's father Eupithes calls out for revenge, but the herald Medon warns the crowd that the gods are on Odysseus's side. Some back down in fear, but others get ready for battle.

Like the suitors, some of the relatives are foolish enough to try to fight the gods. To be pious, one must understand the role that gods play in the lives of men: piety requires a certain degree of cleverness and self-control.

Athena appears at Zeus's side and asks him if he wants the fighting to continue; he tells her that the townsmen should forget their grievances and live in peace. Back at the farm, Odysseus and the other men get ready to face the army from town. Athena in the disguise of Mentor gives Laertes great strength and he kills Eupithes with a spear. Athena orders the townsmen to stop fighting, and they flee in terror; Odysseus obeys the decree as well. Ithaca is finally at peace.

Notice the symmetry of Laertes, Odysseus's father, killing Eupithes, Antinous's father. The ending of the Odyssey might be the original deus ex machina, or "god from the machine": a literary device in which a complicated problem is suddenly resolved by an unexpected intervention. Uncharacteristically, Athena appears undisguised and gives direct orders. Perhaps the gods are too sly to adhere to patterns; perhaps the end of the story must be as jarring as the bard's sudden silence.

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