

CHAPTER 12

A DIFFERENT KIND OF HERO: THE QUEST OF ODYSSEUS

MAIN POINTS

1. A popular Greek tradition suggests that the *Iliad* is a work from Homer's youth and that the *Odyssey* is a product of his old age. Some modern critics assume that the *Odyssey's* author is a woman.

2. Some differences: the *Iliad* takes place in a limited space, whereas the *Odyssey's* world is the entire Mediterranean basin, and a tour of heaven, earth, and Hades as well.

NOTE: The geography of the *Odyssey*, while traditionally well mapped, has recently acquired a new, highly controversial interpretation: The Italian nuclear physicist Felice Vinci has, based on his research of Plutarch, published the theory that Calypso's island Ogygie is not in the Mediterranean, but one of the Faroe Islands (Denmark), which indeed include an island named Hogoyggi. On the basis of this anchor point, Vinci remaps the travels of Odysseus to include the coast of Norway (Scheria), Zealand of Denmark (Pelops), and the island of Bornholm with the town Nexø (Naxos). Ithaca itself he pronounces to be the Danish island of Lyø. He locates Troy by the town of Toija in Finland, and explains the shift in geography to Greece and the Mediterranean by a deterioration of the Nordic climate around 1600 B.C. that prompted a mass exodus south by the members of the local Bronze Age culture who brought their tales of war with them. Vinci supports his claims by pointing out that the weather in the Homeric poems is always cold and foggy, and the Greeks are described as fair-haired. Most classicists remain skeptical of his interpretation, however.

3. The structure of the poem: Odysseus does not appear or speak until Book 5 of the *Odyssey*. Reference to him in the opening line—as “man of many wiles”—brings him immediately into the listener's mind. The first four books can then describe conditions in Ithaca in his absence. The story itself covers the six weeks between Odysseus's departure from Calypso's island and his revenge on the suitors at Ithaca.

4. The central section tells of his exploits before arriving at Calypso's island. The end of the poem focuses on his return to his home.

5. Demodocus, the blind bard identified with Homer in the ancient tradition, has received the typical two-edged gift from Zeus. The Muse who inspires his poetic gift has made him blind.

6. Homer's loving descriptions of Demodocus help us to understand the creative process of such a bard. He takes requests for a theme and then constructs a poem around that theme. He may sing about gods or heroes, but his essential function is to preserve the hero's glory by embodying his name in a song that will be passed down through the generations.

7. Odysseus, constantly defined by his intelligence, is an extraordinary epic hero in that he prefers to use cunning rather than force. In addition, he has fully human parents (Laertes and Anticleia), in contrast to most Greek heroes, including Achilles.

NOTE: According to Sophocles and several other Greek sources, Odysseus's natural father was not Laertes, the old man anxiously awaiting his son's return, but the wily Sisyphus, who seduced Laertes's wife, Anticleia, during an argument with her father over stolen horses. This parentage was supposed to account for the cunning of Odysseus, since Sisyphus was the only human ever cunning enough to fool Hades into letting him go back to earth after death. For his cunning, Sisyphus was later punished in the Underworld.

8. Odysseus does not have the heroic stature of Achilles, either; he dons disguises, and Athene helps him look taller and handsomer when the situation requires it. This accentuates Odysseus's chameleon-like character.

9. Achilles argues for bravery, while Odysseus advocates prudence; the heroic warriors obsessed with personal glory die in battle, while Odysseus lives until old age.

10. The moral universe of the *Odyssey* reflects the idea of heavenly justice: people bring suffering on themselves, exceeding what evil Necessity brings.

11. Zeus's example: Aegisthus, who murdered Agamemnon and was slain by his son Orestes. The example illustrates three issues: (1) if the suitors kill Odysseus, his son must revenge him; (2) Odysseus will cause many of his own problems; and (3) there is retributive justice in the law of the Olympians.

12. Odysseus violates his own standards of prudence (1) when he loots the city of Ismarus and (2) during the encounter with Polyphemus, when he speaks his true name.

13. Odysseus seems to suffer a momentary moral blindness just after he kills Polyphemus. His boastful self-revelation is foolish and brings dire consequences. Odysseus is thus alerted to a weakness that can bring suffering to him and his men, and he thereafter behaves with special prudence.

14. In retribution for his act of blinding the Cyclops, Poseidon delays Odysseus's homecoming for ten years. The hero must descend into the Underworld to ask Tiresias's advice and eventually must accept the role of a nobody, deprived of identity as well as clothing.

15. Athene, the goddess of wisdom, is Odysseus's protector, and, acting as his mentor, restores order in Ithaca. Athene and Odysseus are an excellent match, as cunning, prudence, and general intelligence characterize both of them. The intimacy between this goddess and this hero who is not her son has no parallel in Greek myth.

16. Athena represents the arts of civic order. At the end of the poem, she and Zeus must step in to halt the bloodshed. Left to themselves, the mortals had no way of ending the violence, which was likely to continue through generations.

17. Post-Homeric traditions create many sequels to the *Odyssey* such as the narrative poem *Telegonia*, or *Alfred*, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses" (see Chapter 21).

18. Odysseus meets women/goddesses at almost every stage of his voyage. Circe and Calypso represent isolated cultural pockets where the Goddess still rules. Circe's feminine power threatens Odysseus's masculine identity until Hermes helps him; once they are equals, they can establish a partnership.

19. Both Circe and Calypso play double roles in the *Odyssey*. At first, each poses a threat to the hero, but subsequently she assists him. Each is, then, both the death-dealing goddess and also the helper-maiden. This quick (and apparently, to the outsider, unmotivated) shift of allegiance may symbolize a masculine/patriarchal perception of the female character, whether human or divine, as mercurial and potentially deadly.

20. The power of Circe/Calypso/the Great Goddess/the feminine principle is clear in Zeus's repeated dispatching of Hermes to rescue Odysseus from the powerful female.

21. As a representative of the Goddess as well as of Odysseus's anima, Circe—as archetypal helper-maiden—teaches Odysseus much of importance. She gives him directions to the realm of the chthonic goddess, the Underworld. She advises him about the female threats—Scylla, Charybdis, and the Sirens. And she warns him away from the sacred cattle of Helios. She thus enables Odysseus to complete his rite of passage and undergo symbolic death and rebirth.

22. Calypso represents another threat, the demands of unrestrained female sexuality.

23. Calypso offers to make Odysseus immortal, but he chooses to go home to his aging wife. The offer may echo the custom of sacrificing the consort of the Goddess, thus making him immortal in death. Also, it reflects the sense that a Greek hero cannot fulfill his destiny, cannot be a hero, in complete isolation from other human beings in society.

24. Odysseus's refusal sets him apart from other heroes who seek immortality; he chooses to remain an earthly human and accept the natural law of the life cycle expressed by the Great Goddess.

25. Circe, Calypso, and Penelope weave. Athene is the patron goddess of the weaving art. Odysseus weaves stories and, like Penelope's, his weaving is often a means of self-protection

and delay. The inclusion of Odysseus in the community of weavers implicates him in a world quite different from that of the masculine hero. He participates uniquely in the feminine mode of creative action.

26. He is reminiscent of early heroes such as Perseus and Heracles but exceeds them in his solitariness.

27. In the Underworld, Agamemnon warns Odysseus not to trust any wife; Odysseus, however, has full trust in Penelope, who is his partner in intelligence and resourcefulness; this is evident in her delaying tactics with the suitors and in the ruse about moving the marriage bed.

28. As a weaver, keeper of the secrets of the marriage bed, and guardian of an olive trunk sacred to Athene that symbolizes the Tree of Life, Penelope functions as a priestess of the Goddess; she embodies her husband's anima, which is rejoined with her animus; in this she is the hero's counterpart.

29. The homecoming concludes the Odyssey, but the story implies further travels to placate Poseidon.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Homer,
Odyssey

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Odysseus, Greek warrior of the siege of Troy

Laertes, his father

Anticleia, his mother

Athene

Achilles, the hero of the siege of Troy

Aegisthus, the lover of Clytemnestra and killer of her husband, Agamemnon

Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks at Troy

Orestes, the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon

Telemachus, the son of Odysseus

Polyphemus, the Cyclops, son of Poseidon

Circe, a sorceress; Odysseus's lover for a year

Calypso, a nymph; Odysseus's lover for seven years

Tiresias, the blind seer in Hades

Penelope, Odysseus's wife

Poseidon

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Homer (ninth century B.C.)

Apollodorus (c. 140 B.C.)

Dante Alighieri, Italian poet (1265–1321)

Alfred, Lord Tennyson, English poet (1809–1892)