

# The Odyssey: *Odysseus' Adventures*

Outline by John Protevi / Permission to reproduce granted for academic use  
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- I The Hero Myth
- II. Mythmaking
- III. The Island of the Phaikians
- IV. The Sirens

I The Hero Myth. Recap. Here we can't confuse "hero" as "moral exemplar" with "hero" as in "hero myth." The hero myth goes as follows:

1. A man who is somehow set apart from everyone else (superior strength; handsome; just; scar; hero's son; highly intelligent) yet mired in the everyday life of his society (which might nonetheless be in turmoil)
2. is called to do something special (build ark; go on journey; perform labor; fight war)
3. and thus engages in special or difficult tasks (tests, trials of strength, faith, wits) in order to acquire skills, learn lessons, and/or expiate past sins (often including a symbolic death & rebirth),
4. so that when he finally returns home (or arrives at a special place), he does so w/ greater knowledge/faith/humility. This change is often reflected in a name change, so that his re-integration into culture or household is at a higher level than before.

Thursday in seminar, we should have seen how the first three elements worked with Telemachus.

1. Mark: he is a great hero's son;
2. Call: he is called by Athena to voyage to foreign lands;
3. Trial: he must elude suitors, guide his crew, negotiate foreign courts, etc.

Now let's think about this pattern in terms of O. This won't apply to a page by page i.e. LINEAR reading of the text since the text is constructed out of flashbacks or references to the past. See chart.

1. Distinguishing Mark: You don't know yet what O's distinguishing mark is...so we'll save that and come back to it--watch for this as you read the final books of the *Odyssey*.
2. Call to adventure. Odysseus is called twice.
  - a. First he is called by Agamemnon to fight in Troy. He tries to avoid service by pretending to be mad (he sows the beach with salt). Agamemnon throws the infant Telemachus in his path and when O stops, they know he is not mad. (Here the trickster is tricked: a constant theme in all folklore: recall the morning after Jacob's wedding: he wakes up expecting the beautiful Rachel and instead finds Leah in his bed!) His first adventure then is the Trojan War: the Iliad details all the tests of strength, it is only in the *Odyssey* that we hear of his trickery: the famous horse!
  - b. After leaving Troy, why does he get called to a second set of trials/adventures? Two reasons: 1. Akhaians as a group didn't sacrifice to gods, which angered Athena so she made their homecoming difficult 2. O incurs wrath of Poseidon by blinding his son, Polyphemous. (O names himself to Poly. in desire to show off his cleverness. His hubris leads to punishment).

3. Trial: Second set of adventures. Books 5-12

Reconstructed time line:

Sacker of cities (point zero; Odysseus the warrior, the pirate)

Lotus Eaters (false home)

Cyclops (inhospitable primitive giants; loses some of his men; displays his hubris)

Aiolos (loses control of his men)

Laistrygones (inhospitable primitive giants; loses some of his men)

Circe (loses control of his crew; men are transformed; false home; loses Elpinor)

House of the Dead (death and rebirth)

Sirens (poetic challenge)

Skylla and Charbidis (sacrifices some of his men)

Oxen of the Sun God (loses all his men)

Calypso (false home)

Phaikians (false home)

In Book 5, narrator tells us of voyage from Calypso's island to land of the Phaiakans (another death and rebirth) and then in Book 13 his landing on Ithaca (yet another death and rebirth).

## II. Mythmaking

A. Preliminary question: is O just making up the story of his adventures to impress the Phaikians with his chastened maturity, his personal growth from sacker of cities to humble supplicant? All the narrator tells us is that he was alone on Calypso's island. We know how he got there only from Odysseus' mouth, and we know that the best way to tell when Odysseus is lying is to look for when his lips are moving!

B. Patterns. We can recognize several patterns in the adventures:

1. false homes

2. dangerous females

3. inhospitable primitive giants

4. loss of control of the crew

5. loss of the crew itself

6. death and rebirth (O washes up on shore: on Calypso's island and then of island of Phaikans).

C. Interpretations. We can see some of this as story of Greek culture versus primitives and versus nature. In examining myths, we can often find clues to the anxieties of the mythmakers: are we really that civilized, really that much more advanced than the cannibals? What do women want from men? Can commanders trust their underlings? What do I have to do to change? Isn't reconfiguring my bodily patterns and desire triggers akin to "dying" to my old body, my old life, and then being "reborn"?

## III. The Island of the Phaikians.

The island of the Phaikians is a crucial episode for several reasons. First, before he reaches land, we see one of a number of significant reverse similes in childlike position vis-à-vis land. Finally, he comes naked out of the water, suggesting that he is being reborn on this island where "the race the gods have nurtured" dwells.

All this marks this place, this episode as key in O's development. Many of the places he visited on his adventures (which we learn about retrospectively, in the flashback stories he tells the Phaeakians later) are either wildly uncivilized--like where the Cyclops live --no agriculture, no community-- or charmingly uncivilized--"charmed" magical places like Circe's and Kalypso's islands, where there's no need of agriculture (or men) because the household economy is enough to support life. Consequently, women can rule these islands; w/o men, no need of sexual hierarchy. All these societies are, in particular ways, less complex than society on Ithaka and function as contrasts.

Phaeakian society, meanwhile, also contrasts w/ Ithaka; but Scheria is almost hyper-civilized and as such is a utopia = "no where," Since there's no war, no need to create complex network of alliances w/outside peoples. That is, no need to marry outside their culture; marriages are endogamous, betw/familiars. On Ithaka, on the contrary, where war requires the creation of allies, marriages are exogamous, between strangers. Rather than manufacturing the items necessary for war, then, the Phaeakians excel at ship designing, building, and sailing; at agriculture, manual crafts, and weaving (always women's work). The king's palace is a marvel of architecture and decoration. Their kings noted for their intelligence and wisdom--not warrior skills: O has both; and although he will need to use his warrior skills to slay the suitors, in order to regain Penelope, he will need to hone his intelligence--

ability to observe and interpret--and his skills at negotiation with women. It is these skills of domestic communication that his stay w/the Phaeacians will allow him to develop.

Athletic contest: compare games for Patroclus. Athletics as training for war, but also as decadence of warriors gone soft, the playtime of the non-warrior Phaeacians.

O talking to Nausikaa \*\* key concept \*\* **LIKEMINDEDNESS** (already alluded to in the mirrored mourning that T, P, and O all engage in) The ruling family on Scheria = a model of likemindedness; that is, perceptive understanding and communication through respectful indirection. For example, Nausikaa need not mention marriage for her father to understand and grant her wishes to go wash their linens. Arete notices O in clothes she'd made and subtly inquires about the contradictions in his story of his arrival; Alkinoos hears O praise his daughter and defend her from blame, and he offers her to O but also tactfully offers him transport home should that be his preference. Alkinoos also sensitive to O's tears as he listens to the singer's tales of the Trojan war; the first time this happens, he tactfully shifts the activity from listening to athletic competition and the second time, he has the singer break off.

It is possible to see that through like-mindedness, Arete has won from her husband an influence beyond the household (traditional sphere for women's work and power). For example, it is she who resolves disputes between men. Moreover, her powerful role in the kingdom's affairs is clearly established since both Nausikaa and Athena tell O that he must win her approval if he wants to have his wish granted to return home. Not only does O know he must respond "tactically" ("The great tactician carefully replied") when Arete questions him about his clothes in order to win her approval, but he also seems to pay court to her in his story about his descent into the underworld by privileging his mother and the mothers of heroes, "daughters and wives of kings." Arete is the first to respond after his story of his descent to the underworld, and she reminds her other guests, that is, the Phaeacian aristocrats, to treat O w/respect and to give him more bountiful gifts.

Skill that O practicing w/Phaeacians, that of using words well, that is, not to manipulate (like w/Polyphemus "nobody") but to negotiate, as we have seen, and to sing his own song, to become a storyteller in turn. At Alkinoos's invitation, he takes over the role of Demodokos the minstrel and thereby confers fame upon himself in BKS 9-12. -----notion of self-referentiality as hallmark of literature. Since literature is made of words, we can often see within the texts we read, a self-consciousness and a privileging of words. In the *Odyssey*, then, which we know was made up by poets who enjoyed some status in Greek culture, there is a distinct value given to poets; indeed, probably more than they were given in real life. If you pay attention, you'll notice that everytime a minstrel sings, he's described as noble or as wise or as deserving of honor. For example, here in Scheria, and at this point, takes over the storytelling and at the end of the first part of his narration, Alkinoos makes this link explicit.

#### IV. The Sirens

Now, I want to invoke the Sirens. What is seductive about the topic of their song is that it is the same topic as epic poetry. What is desirable about their version is that it's superior to men's since they're not bound by history; and the promise is that by listening, the hearer becomes wiser than he was before. On one level, we could see the Sirens as doubles for the poets who created the *Odyssey*. On the part of these poets, then, we could say there is a certain self-consciousness about the dangerous seductiveness of their own stories. But why would epic poetry be dangerous? Problem w/imitation. Another problem is a concern for truth; are epic poems superior insights into truth or are they lies and deceit? - OK?

Why make the Sirens the focus of this anxiety about poetry? Two answers. First, it's a common human impulse to attribute to someone else--someone you consider your opposite-- those things you find most troubling about yourself. By making the female Sirens the source of epic poetry's danger, the male poets of the *Odyssey* express their concerns indirectly and in a way that points away from them/gets them off the hook. Moreover, since women throughout this poem are associated w/danger, there's a logic that underwrites locating the dangers of poetry w/women.

Second, the Sirens' threat, the reason O must resist their seductiveness is not bcs they'll murder him--which is the literal threat--but bcs if he stays w/them, he'll lose control of his story: not only will he not get home, but neither will he be the sole narrator of his story--in the way he has been w/the Phaeakians--nor would he necessarily have any story at all.

The reason he has a story of epic proportions is because he has adventures--he's Mr. Action Adventure Hero. But if he's just sitting around on the Sirens' island listening to them sing, then he's not having adventures, not producing material for stories, and not obviously telling any stories himself. Notice that when he's on Kalypso's island, where he stays for 7 years, he has no story--nothing is recounted about what he does there day after day--except we know he spends a lot of time weeping by the shore and longing for home: who does that sound like? --Penelope.

Another point I want to make about the Siren scene is that the danger they represent for O the storyteller is that their version of Troy would dominate; their version is superior and would supplant his version. So the Siren episode and others--such as Helen's story which completely contradicts her husband, Menelaus's in Bk 4 --show what they don't tell explicitly: that different narrators tell different stories which means that whatever narrator is dominant gets to instill his or her version as truth, knowledge, history. = Extraordinary power of language.

Songs women sing as they weave and spin cf. Circe Are Circe's songs like the Sirens' songs? why not? What kinds of songs would P sing while weaving and unweaving Laertes's shroud?