The Odyssey*: Introductory Lecture*

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I. The relation of the Odyssey to the Iliad
II. Some topics in the next four lectures
III. The structures of the Odyssey
IV. The Telemachy

I. The relation of the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad* is one of the perennial questions. Some options:

A. The *Odyssey* is so different is its tone, structure, and affect that it is by a different author. Even a female author, as Samuel Butler, noted Victorian critic and author, would have it, given the importance of and sympathetic nature of powerful females.

B. The *Odyssey* is pop culture trash, a grab bag of fireside stories with monsters and villains who get their just desserts by the rightful hero. A mere melodrama, unworthy of serious contemplation, much less comparison with the bitter tragedy and awful grandeur of the *Iliad*.

C. The *Odyssey*, in ending with the restoration of peace on Ithaka, is the mature work of an author who realizes the youthful jingoism of the *Iliad* is the sort of militaristic propaganda that has lead untold legions of young men to their death seeking the sort of "honor" generals have always relied upon to fool them.

D. The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* fit together to form a complex meditation on the basic values of Western Civilization, both the good and the bad, as brought together in the crucible of war. The good: marital love and reconciliation; household tranquility; filial piety; legitimate government AND the bad: piracy; vengeance; slavery; patriarchy. As with all great literature however, Homer gives us the problems and not a set of answers. The problems, of course, are the interweaving of these strands. Is government anything but institutionalized piracy, the "legitimacy" of its ruling class resting on its control of the means of violence? Doesn't household tranquility rest on the resignation of the slaves to their lot? What is filial piety but the son waiting his turn to be slavemaster and boss king/head pirate? Is marriage anything more than the father selling off his daughter to the highest bidder?

II. Topics we'll pursue in our lectures:

A. The structures of the *Odyssey*
B. The hero myth: the anointed one, the call to adventure, death and rebirth, the return
C. Hospitality: hosts, guests, travelers and pirates
D. Family structure: husband and wife, father and son
E. Gender and class intersections
F. Warrior vs. soldier; oikos vs polis
G. Poetry, narrative, mythmaking, etc.

III. The structures of the *Odyssey*
[NB: This reading is drawn from "The Structures of the *Odyssey*" by Stephen Tracy in *A New Companion to Homer*, ed. Morris and Powell.]

A. The 24 books of the *Odyssey* can be divided in many ways.

1. By central character: Books 1-4 concentrate on Telemachus, while the rest of the epic (5-24) concentrates on Odysseus, with book 12 the turning point, the turn from the journey out, away from Troy and to the ends of the earth, to the journey home to Ithaca.

2. By style of narrative: Books 1-4 and 13-24 are relatively realistic, notwithstanding the actions of Athena, while books 5-12 are the stuff of magic, a fairytale world of monsters, gods, and utopias, complete with the henceforth obligatory beautiful princess who wants our intrepid hero for a husband!

3. By parallel themes: XYZ / XYZ (refer to handout).

X. 1-4 Ithaca; Athena and T; inhospitable suitors; T's journey; Suitors' plot T's death
Y. 5-8 O journeys to Phaecia; contest w/ young men; latent marriage contest for princess; O's identity unknown
Z. 9-12 O identifies himself; sings; tells his adventures; wins Arete's support; journeys to underworld and meets mother/heroes of Troy
X. 13-16 Ithaca; Athena and O; Eumaios' exemplary hospitality; T's return; O and T plan suitors' death
Y. 17-20 O journeys to own palace; conflict w/ suitors; latent contest for queen; O's identity unknown
Z. 21-24 O identifies himself to suitors and becomes the bowman; wins confidence of queen; recounts adventures to Penelope; journeys to underworld and meets heroes of Troy; reconciles with father

B. The *Odyssey* is also structured by many doublings:

1. Female figures who first pose a threat and then help the hero: Calypso; Nausicaa/Arete; Circe; Eurykleia in bk 19; and Penelope in bks 19 and 21.
2. Character types: seductress Calypso/Circe; guide Mentor/Mentes; mother figures Antikleia and Eurykleia; the bards Phemios and Demodokos; the loyal servants Eumaios and Philoitios; the traitorous Melanthios and Melantho; and the leading suitors Antinoos and Eurymachos.
3. Major characters: Telemachus and Odysseus; Telemachus and Orestes; Odysseus and Agamemnon; Penelope and Helen; Penelope and Clytemnestra;

IV. The Telemachy: father and son; hospitality; the hero myth;

A. Telemachus has grown up w/o his father, a great hero, in a house lately overrun by suitors who are violating the expectations of hospitality. Does T have what it takes to become a hero himself? First he has to learn what a hero does, so he is called on by Athena to journey to Pylos and Sparta in search of news about father. There he learns about the heroic past from father substitutes, Nestor and Menelaus, men who fought w/ Odysseus at Troy. He learns who he is supposed to be by learning about his father.
B. The suitors and hospitality: The suitors violate *xenia* or hospitality, the expectation that strangers would be treated well, appropriate to their class: nobles received into the hall, given chance to bathe and feast, and then engaged in conversation; beggars given some food and perhaps even some employment. [NB: only men traveled freely: women were sent as brides or taken as slaves. Both were forms of death {they had to leave the only land they knew}, which we see symbolized in the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon or made literal in the fate of Cassandra.]
Xenia was important to Homeric civilization in many ways.

1. It was necessary in a system with relatively low interaction: local rulers dominating a self-sufficient land area (coincidence of political and economic borders); no cities; little trade. People who did find themselves on the road then had no commercial lodging available (money is not so important in this system: it is only for local taxes rather than trade across political/economic borders).
2. It created social bonds: you were supposed to remember who treated you well on the road and were absolutely obliged to do the same for your hosts or relatives/friends/subordinates of your hosts who turned up at your door.
3. It also created opportunities to waste excess. According to a theory I find convincing, societies are not organized to meet the subsistence needs of their members, but to find ever more extravagant ways to produce

and waste surplus. People are poor thus not because of natural scarcity, but because poverty is a useful way of spurring labor to produce surplus the rulers can waste in ever more clever and spectacular ways. (To return to Dr. Kellman's first lecture, Western civilization begins in the Fertile Crescent because the difficulty of producing excess there required a huge state exploitation machine, which then could waste it in temples and so forth.)

Now despite their violation of *xenia*, I think it's important not to make the suitors into absolute villains. Rather than making them unmitigated bad guys, and hence having the Odyssey sink into melodrama, into a simple-minded morality tale, the triumph of the noble Odysseus, let's try to see whether we can even have something of a tragedy of the suitors, strange as that may sound. After all, they are doing what they are supposed to be doing: finding a husband for Penelope and thereby guaranteeing a king to rule Ithaca. Their behavior may strike us as boorish, but they are only trying to force Penelope's and Telemachus' hands. Their tragedy comes from the conflict between what they have to do to fulfill the dictates of the social system within which they live and the private machinations of the gods. At the limit, it is only Athena's private and utterly idiosyncratic love of Odysseus that dooms them, not any violation of *xenia*, one could argue, for that violation is only a strategy to fulfill a greater good: securing a new king for their homeland despite the pathetic fantasies of a deluded and stubborn woman and her naive and blustering son.

C. The hero myth: Here we can't confuse "hero" as "moral exemplar" with "hero" as in "hero myth." The hero myth goes as follows: 1. Mark, 2. Call, 3. Trial, 4. Return

1. A man who is somehow set apart from everyone else (superior strength; handsome; just; scar; hero's son; highly intelligent; early remarkable episode in his life) 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.