

### **GREEKS BEARING TEXTS; OR, WHOSE ODYSSEY IS IT ANYWAY?**

Did you ever want to be a hero? As a child did you ever fantasize about being the Lone Ranger? Or a knight in shining armor? Perhaps your taste ran more towards Superman and Batman.

Do you remember the disappointment when you discovered that you would never be one? That heroes were fiction and that real life “just isn’t like that?” Do you remember all the other childish expectations you had for your adulthood that you surrendered as you discovered the limits of your ability?

If so, you are not alone. From time immemorial, individuals have shared these dreams and disappointments and it is to you that the *Odyssey* is dedicated. Homer would like you to know that you were not mistaken as a child: You can be a hero. Indeed, you must be a hero for there is no other way. The *Odyssey* will show you how.

On its face, the *Odyssey* is the story of Odysseus’ return to Ithaca from Troy, a 10-year journey through hell and high water (literally), a fantastic adventure populated with gods and monsters. Indeed, its title says as much. After all, what is the “The *Odyssey*” if not “The Mythical Voyage of Odysseus”?

This impression of the poem’s content has influenced the way the poem’s structure is understood. For example, the first four books, the “Telemachia,” are often seen as a rather long, and perhaps unnecessary, introduction; the “main story” is considered to begin with Odysseus and Calypso. Similarly, the climactic action at Ithaca appears as simply another adventure, albeit the hero’s final labor. From this viewpoint, suitors and Scylla are not fundamentally different; they are just different villains in different locales.

Yet it is precisely this casual treatment of Ithaca that is the poet’s greatest tool and our casual reaction his greatest triumph. Homer has made Ithaca part and parcel of a hero’s universe. The good and evil there are indistinguishable from the good and evil in the most exotic places. The tribulations there are no different than the tribulations at the ends of the earth. And the “secret” to success is the same everywhere.

Homer adds to this casual identification by making the story of Ithaca implicitly similar to that of the most well-known epic of all — the story of Troy. Both are protracted sieges laid in pursuit of a woman. At Ithaca it is the suitors in pursuit of Penelope while at Troy it is the Achaeans in pursuit of Helen. And both are brought to an end by the same hero using the same device. Odysseus breaches the defenses of Troy “disguised” as a Wooden Horse while he breaches the defenses of the suitors disguised as a beggar.

By interweaving the story at home with the story abroad, Homer raises the domestic to the level of the heroic and opens to “ordinary” people the possibility of being like the great hero Odysseus. We may never battle in epic wars, we may never journey to Hades and back, we may never lie with goddesses, but we are all at home. We have struggled to maintain our proper places. We have had domestic crises and know of others’ too. The *Odyssey* shows us that the opportunity for heroism is with us all the time. The question is: Can we rise to it?

Odysseus himself clearly does; that’s why he’s a hero. If we could be like him,

then we could be heroes too. Fortunately for us, Odysseus is essentially human. He does not rely on magic or divine power. He is who he is because he has reason, perseverance and piety. Take away his physical strength, take away his martial ability — take away anything but his mind — and you know that he will figure a way out of any spot. That is what the interlude of the “mythical voyage” serves to prove. Whether he’s at a physical disadvantage as with Polyphemus, a magical disadvantage as with Circe, or a divine disadvantage as with Calypso, Odysseus never gives up and he always wins. He is Homer’s Captain Kirk.

Odysseus is a hero of the mind (which is why Athena is his patron). In this respect all humans have the same raw materials that he has. What makes him different — and what inspires us — is that what we can never fully carry off, Odysseus manages with ease, perfectly. He is the consummate adult, the man’s man. (“Odysseus has got to do what Odysseus has got to do.”) He is what we wanted to grow up to be but never did. And in reality, never could.

But lest we try to escape our own heroic obligations by attributing Odysseus’ success to his divinity or other supernatural agency, Homer demonstrates that a mere mortal can be a domestic hero, can be like Odysseus. For that is what Telemachus does! He comes in a “boy, dreaming”, wondering what his father would do in his (domestic!) shoes [1.142, Fitzgerald] and he goes out a man-at-arms, vying with his father in courage in the defense of his house [24.533, Fitzgerald].

This is what gives the epic its meaning and allure. The episode at Ithaca is not just another adventure; it is the adventure. (Which should not surprise us since it takes up 15 of the 24 books.) It is Telemachus that the story is about and it is his coming of age that the plot revolves around. The important “odyssey” is his voyage into manhood, his learning to master himself and his household, his becoming like his father.

And if Telemachus, completely human and raised without a father, can do it, anyone can. Indeed everyone must, as Telemachus must, as Odysseus must, if he is to achieve his proper place. There was no alternative for Odysseus; there was no alternative for Telemachus; there is no alternative for you.

In the *Odyssey*, the reader and Telemachus are classmates, each learning from Odysseus’ example. To paraphrase Athena:

You’ll never be fainthearted or a fool, if you have  
Odysseus’ spirit; he finished what he cared to say, and what  
he took in hand he brought to pass.[2.282, Fitzgerald]

In short, Homer has pulled an Odysseus on us: by disguising a difficult lesson of life as a fabulous tale of adventure he knew we could not but help invite it into our hearts, where it silently does its work.