The Odyssey

AUTHOR BIO

Full Name: Homer

Date of Birth: 7th or 8th century BC

Place of Death: 7th or 8th century BC

Date of Death: 7th or 8th century BC

Full Title: The Odyssey

Genre: Epic Poem

Setting: The Peloponnes 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

Protagonist: Odysseus

Antagonist: The suitors

Point of View: Third person omniscient

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

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)

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.

Related Historical Events: 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 Mycenaean 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.

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 OVERVIEW

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 the king 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 maid 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

**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.

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

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.

Laertes – Odysseus's father, who lives in poverty on a farm.
Anticleia – Odysseus's mother, who died of longing for her son.
Eurylochus – 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.

Eumachus – A rude and deceitful suitor.
Eumaeus – The loyal swineherd who helps Odysseus defeat the suitors.

Nestor – King of Pylos, commander in the Trojan War.
Nausicaa – A Phaeacian Princess, daughter of Alcinous.

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 Phaeacians' shore.

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.

Eolus – The god of wind.

Laestrygonians – Giant cannibals.

Antiphas – 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.
Chabrydis – 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.
Autolykos – Odysseus’s grandfather, with whom he got the hunting scar on his knee.
Ctesippus – A rude, violent suitor.
Philoctetes – The cowherd that helps Odysseus fight the suitors.
Eupithes – Antinous’s father.

### THEMES

In LitCharts each theme gets its own color and number. Our color-coded theme boxes make it easy to track where the themes occur throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, use the numbers instead.

1. **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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4 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 walling in grief for fear of death. Moreover, the grief caused by memory is in many instances a guide to right action. Telemachus's 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 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.

5 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 red text throughout the Summary & 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 birds 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.

BOOK 2

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.

• Speaker: Telemachus
• Mentioned or related characters: Antinous, Eurymachus, Ctesippus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Glory and Honor
• Theme Tracker code:

BOOK 3

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.

• Speaker: Athena
• Mentioned or related characters: Telemachus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice
• Theme Tracker code:

BOOK 4

What other tribute can we pay to wretched men than to cut a lock, let tears roll down our cheeks?

• Speaker: Pisistratus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Memory and Grief

QUOTES

The color-coded boxes under each quote below make it easy to track the themes related to each quote. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1

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.

• Speaker: Zeus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Glory and Honor
• Theme Tracker code:

BOOK 4

What other tribute can we pay to wretched men than to cut a lock, let tears roll down our cheeks?

• Speaker: Pisistratus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Memory and Grief

• Theme Tracker code:
BOOK 5
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 Nll of trouble!

• Speaker: Poseidon
• Mentioned or related characters: Odysseus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice
• Theme Tracker code:

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!

• Speaker: Odysseus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Glory and Honor
• Theme Tracker code:

BOOK 6
But here's an unlucky wanderer strayed our way, and we must tend him well. Every stranger and beggar comes from Zeus.

• Speaker: Nausicaa
• Mentioned or related characters: Odysseus, Zeus
• Related themes: Piety, Customs, and Justice
• Theme Tracker code:

A bad day for adultery! Slow outstrips the Swift.

• Mentioned or related characters: Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus
• Related themes: Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint

BOOK 7
Just as Phaeacian men excel the world at sailing, driving their swift ships on the open seas, so the women excel at all the arts of weaving. That is Athena's gift to them beyond all others – a genius for lovely work, and a fine mind too.

• Related themes: Glory and Honor
• Theme Tracker code:

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!'

• Speaker: Odysseus
• Related themes: Memory and Grief
• Theme Tracker code:

BOOK 8
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.

• Speaker: Odysseus
• Related themes: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint, Glory and Honor
• Theme Tracker code:

A bad day for adultery! Slow outstrips the Swift.

• Mentioned or related characters: Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus
• Related themes: Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint

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BOOK 9

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.

- **Speaker**: Odysseus
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Calypso, Circe
- **Related themes**: Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint, Memory and Grief, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code**: □ □ □ □ □

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!

- **Speaker**: Odysseus
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Zeus, Polyphemus
- **Related themes**: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint
- **Theme Tracker code**: 1 2 3 □ □

BOOK 10

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.

- **Speaker**: Circe
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Odysseus, Scylla
- **Related themes**: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code**: □ □ □ □ □

BOOK 11

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.

- **Speaker**: Tiresias
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Odysseus
- **Related themes**: Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code**: 1 2 3 □ □

BOOK 12

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!

- **Speaker**: Agamemnon
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Odysseus, Clytemnestra
- **Related themes**: Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint
- **Theme Tracker code**: □ □ □ □ □

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 scraps to keep alive – than rule down here over all the breathless dead.

- **Speaker**: Achilles
- **Mentioned or related characters**: Odysseus
- **Related themes**: Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code**: □ □ □ □ □

BOOK 13

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!

- **Speaker**: Athena
BOOK 14
Trust me, the blessed gods have no love for crime. They honor justice, honor the decent acts of men.

*Speaker:* Eumaeus

*Related themes:* Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Glory and Honor

*Theme Tracker code:*

inka.png

BOOK 15
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.

*Speaker:* Eumaeus

*Related themes:* Memory and Grief

*Theme Tracker code:*

inka.png

BOOK 16
Would I were young as you, to match their 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.

*Speaker:* Odysseus

*Related themes:* Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint

*Theme Tracker code:*

inka.png

BOOK 17
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 themes:* Odysseus, Melanthius

*Theme Tracker code:*

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BOOK 18
Our lives, our mood and mind as we pass across the earth turn as the days turn... I too seemed destined to be a man of fortune once and a wild wicked swath I cut, indulged my lust for violence staking all on my father and my brothers. Look at me now.
And so, I say: let no man ever be lawless all his life, just take in peace what gifts the gods will send.

- **Speaker:** Odysseus
- **Related themes:** Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code:**

  1 2 3 4 5

### BOOK 19

If man is cruel by nature, cruel in action, the mortal world will call down curses on his head.

- **Speaker:** Penelope
- **Related themes:** Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code:**

  1 2 3 4 5

### BOOK 21

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?

- **Speaker:** Penelope
- **Related or mentioned characters:** Antinous, Eurymachus
- **Related themes:** Piety, Customs, and Justice, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code:**

  2 3 4 5

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 or mentioned characters:** Odysseus
- **Related themes:** Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code:**

  1 2 3 4 5

### BOOK 22

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!

- **Speaker:** Odysseus
- **Related or mentioned characters:** Antinous, Eurymachus
- **Related themes:** Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code:**

  1 2 3 4 5

### BOOK 24

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.

- **Speaker:** Agamemnon
- **Related or mentioned characters:** Odysseus, Penelope
- **Related themes:** Piety, Customs, and Justice, Cunning, Disguise, and Self-Restraint, Memory and Grief, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code:**

  2 3 4 5

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.

- **Speaker:** Zeus
- **Related or mentioned characters:** Odysseus
- **Related themes:** Fate, the Gods, and Free Will, Piety, Customs, and Justice, Memory and Grief, Glory and Honor
- **Theme Tracker code:**

  1 2 3 4 5

### SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

The color-coded boxes under "Analysis & Themes" below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color...
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.

"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 grudge and agrees to send the messenger god Hermes to Ogygia to ensure Odysseus's release from captivity.

Meanwhile, Athena flies to Ithaca to speak to Odysseus's son Telemachus. Drows 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 Mentor, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.
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.

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 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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 predestine 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.
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?

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.

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 Mentor) 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?

Despite Telemaechus’s insecurity, his speech makes a good impression on the king; Nestor implies that Telemaechus’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 Telemaechus’s determination to restore honor to his household by defeating the suitors.

The best way to study, teach, and learn about books.

BOOK 3
When Telemaechus’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 Telemaechus 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.

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

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.

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.

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 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.

Menelaus displays piety when he

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 ca
ev 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 begins 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.

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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

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.

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 fear death, and wishes he had died a hero. But at that moment Poseidon spots him and grows angry at his good fortune, so he sends down a terrible storm. Odysseus 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.

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.

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.

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 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.
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 as a beggar. Athena makes him very beautiful. The girls are amazed at the transformation; they give him food and drink.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 appeals to her with honesty and openness. To be cunning, one must sometimes be honest.

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.

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 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.

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.
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.

The bard Demodocus describes how the wooden horse full of Achaeans 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.

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.

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.

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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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, and the men sailed for nine days, 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.

Odysseus begged Aeolus for help, but Aeolus believed that Odysseus’s misfortune proved that he was hated by the gods, and turned him a sack holding the winds. 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.

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 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.

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 cases 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.
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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 earwax in the men’s ears, and that they tie Odysseus to the mast if he insisted on hearing the Sirens’ songs.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.
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.

Odysseus-the-beggar left Egypt with a Phoenician companion, 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.

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 managed 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.

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 Pistratus. 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** 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.

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.

**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’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.

**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.

**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.

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.

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 to expect his family to stay exactly as it was for the twenty years of his absence.

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.

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.

**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 Iris is filled with fear. Odysseus decides to hurt him only slightly; he punches Iris on the neck and flings him outside. The suitors laugh and invite the stranger to eat at their table.

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.

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

**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.

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.

Penelope asks her maids to bathe the stranger, but he refuses such a luxury; instead, the nurse Eurykleia 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.

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.

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.

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 laughers. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.
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.

Eumaeus guards the side-door to the palace so that no suitors can escape. The goatherd Melantheius climbs through a secret passageway into Odysseus’s storeroom and brings weapons to some of the suitors. Eumaeus and Philoetius catch Melantheius 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.

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 beholds the women with a cable; then the three men take Melantheius 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.
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.

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.

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 oak, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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.

Athena appears at Zeus’s side and asks him if he wants the fighting to continue; he tells her that the townspeople 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 townspeople to stop fighting, and they flee in terror; Odysseus obeys the decree as well. Ithaca is finally at peace.

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.

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.