

Odysseus: Critical analysis

Throughout Homer's *The Odyssey* there is the motif of *xenia*, or *zenophilia*, the great ethical imperative, the obligation to entertain outsiders. It is the sacred Greek custom of hospitality. Mortals as well as gods have to adhere to it. Zeus, the most powerful of the Olympian gods, is the patron of this custom.

In Book 6, Princess Nausicaa, daughter of Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians, offers help and hospitality to Odysseus, who was washed ashore. "This man is an unfortunate wanderer who has strayed here, and we must look after him, since all strangers and beggars come under the protection of Zeus..." While Odysseus is enjoying the hospitality offered to him in the palace of Alcinous, he tells his hosts of his journey from Ogygia to Scherie. This offers (Homer) a clever way to cover past events, providing background information that bridges past to present, therefore allowing the action to progress and the characters evolve.

Odysseus' son Telemachus gives the goddess Athene the welcome that is traditional for guests and strangers. However, Athene comes in disguise, then "she assumed the appearance of a family friend, the Taphian chieftain Mentès" In return for his hospitality Athene gives him advice. She talks about his famous father, instilling in him a sense of pride. This gives him the courage to take action against the suitors, who are threatening to take over his home and pressuring his mother, Penelope, into marrying one of them. When Telemachus travels to Sparta, he is welcomed and entertained by Menelaus and Helen. Their memories of Odysseus and the stories of the Wooden Horse help to add more of the missing puzzle pieces to the picture of his father that is unfolding in Telemachus' mind.

Even the gods have to adhere to this sacred custom of hospitality - that of offering food, shelter, gifts and a means of transportation to help them on their journey. In Book 5 Zeus sends his son Hermes to order to Nymph Calypso to let Odysseus return home. Her hospitality has extended over seven years. She has fallen in love with Odysseus and wants to keep him on her island; as enticement promising him immortality and eternal youth. This serves as a test of Odysseus' loyalty to his wife Penelope, which he passes, still wanting to return home to Ithaca. Calypso has taken the term 'hospitality' to extremes; it is actually 'captivity'. Athene successfully pleads with her father Zeus to help Odysseus continue his journey home, and Zeus commands: "Hermes...as you are our usual Messenger, convey our final decision to that Nymph of the plaited tresses. The long-enduring Odysseus must now set out for home" . Calypso, following the custom of hospitality, welcomes Hermes and offers him food and refreshments. She has no choice but to set Odysseus free and help him on his way. Thus she obeys Zeus' command and fulfils her obligation to be a hospitable hostess. This not only reinforces a civilised custom, but also allows the plot to continue to unfold. After seven years of stagnation, Odysseus can resume his journey home to Ithaca and fulfil his destiny.

When the suitors abuse Penelope's hospitality, overextending their stay and displaying gross and disrespectful behaviour, they create chaos. They dare to break the rules of hospitality. The peaceful, orderly social structure of Odysseus' household breaks down. But when the suitors plot to kill Telemachus, they dare to challenge the gods. They act selfishly; out of greed to obtain wealth and power. They prove that they are immoral men, not worthy of divine protection, but worthy of divine punishment - death.

Even Odysseus, a favourite of the gods, is not spared: "I yearning to get back to Ithaca but harassed and kept in exile by Zeus and all the gods" . He has to face challenges along the way to prove his worth - worthy of his life, worthy of being King of Ithaca, but most of all worthy of the god's favour. Whoever goes against Zeus is punished; this applies to lesser gods as well as mortals. Whoever breaks the sacred rule of hospitality is also punished.

When the suitors, who not only abuse Penelope's hospitality, also mistreat the beggar (Odysseus in disguise) their destiny is sealed. Some suitors are appalled when the ruthless Antinous throws a chair at the beggar, however they take no action to stop him. This makes them just as guilty of the crime of breaking the custom of hospitality.

Just as the lesser gods and all mortals have to obey the commands of Zeus, so the servants in a household have to know their place, keep their position within the household. This ensures order, peace and harmony. It enforces respect and loyalty, which is rewarded. When Penelope's maids fraternise with the enemy, they

break the rules of loyalty and threaten the social structure. They are consequently punished with death. It is not only their changing sides for selfish reasons (to be in the good books, so to speak, with the future new masters), but also their immoral behaviour, sleeping with the enemy, that is being judged. Their disrespectful and immoral conduct seals their fate.

Penelope's conduct throughout her husband's twenty-year- absence is without reproach. She is the model of a loving mother, firm and fair mistress of the household and perfect hostess. She is also the long-suffering, yet forever hopeful, loyal wife, who fights off the obnoxious suitors. Her loyalty to her husband is rewarded with his safe return and the re-establishment of the social order of the Odysseus household and the kingdom of Ithaca. But it is up to the 'man', the master of the household, to take action, be the avenging protector by re-instating his wife's safety and honour, and re-establishing the household's peaceful structure. Thus he guarantees the survival of the household and the family. The disrespectful suitors and disloyal servants and maids are killed. Her son Telemachus, who has shown himself worthy of being Odysseus' son, is allowed to fight side by side against the suitors.

The suitors are warned that their conduct will end in death, that they will suffer the consequences of their actions. But they choose to ignore the divine warnings; they choose to dishonour the gods, as well as break the rules of social convention. "These men fell victim to the will of the gods and their own infamy. They paid respect to no one on earth who came near them - good or bad. And now their own transgressions have brought them to this ignominious death" . Mortals have to honour the gods, obey their will and abide by the social rules of conduct. Justice will prevail in the end. Whatever the deeds and actions, choices and mistakes - in the end there is a system of rewards and punishments that upholds the social and divine structure.

Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by E.V.Rieu (1991), Penguin Books, Book 6, p.91, ll 205-210
ibid, Book 1, p.6, ll 104/105.
ibid, Book 5, p.71, ll 28-30.
ibid, Book 23, p.353, ll 351-353.
Ibid, Book 22, p.340/341, ll 413-417