

What do we learn of the concepts of Xenia and Justice within the first Four books of the Odyssey?

The subjects of both Xenia and Justice were important ones in ancient Greece, and to reflect just how seriously they were taken Homer makes a lot of references to them in "The Odyssey." The definition and customs of Xenia are strange concepts to a modern audience of the epic, however to a Greek listening to the story at the time the custom of Xenia would have been second nature. It involved the conduct between suppliants and their hosts, this conduct was taken very seriously as it was overseen by the head god Zeus. Its rules state that people should allow guests in when they come to the door requesting help, he must be fed and watered before being questioned. However not all the rules are directed towards the hosts the suppliants must also adhere to rules, this means they must respect the hosts house. It was thought that to disrespect your hosts was to disrespect the gods themselves and so it was heavily frowned upon by Greeks of the time, rich and poor alike.

There are examples of both bad and good Xenia in the first four books of the Odyssey. The story of Aegisthus in Book 1 shows extremely bad Xenia, he comes into the house of a respected man a leader of the Greeks and seduces his wife and disrespects his property. In this passage we not only get a view of what poor Xenia involves, we see the punishment that may be fitting when Xenia is utterly ignored as is the case here. The gods discuss the death of Aegisthus and see it as a suitable punishment for him to be killed for his indiscretions; Zeus says it is entirely his fault. In fact Athena says in response to her father's words **"Father of ours, Son of Cronos Aegisthus's end is just what he deserved. May all who act as he did share his fate!"** This shows how little sympathy the gods had for people who openly rejected the laws that they had set down, and which Zeus the head of the gods presided over.

Also in the first chapter Homer sets up a direct contrast between two opposites of Xenia, in the great hall of Odysseus. When Athena posing as Mentor comes into the hall Telemachus shows here the courtesy and good manners that is expected when a stranger enters somebody's home – **"Welcome friend, you can tell us what has brought you here when you have had some food."** Homer holds this up as the ideal form of Xenia, this is contrasted with the way the suitors treat the house of Odysseus this is eventually the downfall of them and is another example of what comes of those who flout the laws of the gods. By showing these two examples of Xenia in such close proximity Homer is reminding his readers of what their duties are as a host and what results will come from it, but also what the proper conduct of a guest should be which is expressed through Mentor and found sadly lacking in the suitors. Finally by making the guest a god even one that is disguised it shows how Telemachus is favored by the gods and the fact that the first thing he does is welcome the goddess even in human form gives the reader a large hint as to why he is blessed.

There are two other big examples of good Xenia within the first four chapters of the epic, and they are in the houses of Nestor and Menelaus. I believe it is no coincidence that Homer chose two of the biggest heroes in the mythical Greek world for Telemachus to

visit, he makes them such big heroes to make readers believe that they may be blessed because they show the proper deference to the gods and follow their rules. Indeed the first thing we see of Nestor is him making sacrifices to the gods when Telemachus arrives, this recurring motif of making “good” people having sacrifices to the gods when we first see them is a good technique employed by Homer. It signifies that the first thing a human should think of is the gods no matter how high or mighty they get, even the King of Sparta!

Nestor shows the proper courtesy that is expected and invites Telemachus straight into his home, in fact he even lets him make his libations and have some food before he asks- **“Is yours a trading venture; or are you sailing the seas recklessly, who risk their lives to ruin other people?”** It shows how seriously xenia was taken that someone would ask that question after they had invited someone to eat with them in their own home. Homer once again involves the highest authority in judging the Xenia of the place and it comes out favorable when Homer describes how **“the goddess was delighted at the good manners.”** Using another recurring feature of his writing Homer shows how the gods are pleased with good hospitality, and even honor Nestor by making a personal appearance!!

We find the house of Menelaus in happy spirits because of the weddings taking place at his palace and it is my belief that this is no coincidence. By showing a happy house Homer is once again reminding his readers what benefits are gained by following laws set by the gods, he shows this scene whilst Menelaus is having an argument with his servant about whether Telemachus should be let in. The result of the discussion means that the laws of Xenia are followed, by playing this out against the lavishness of the palace of Menelaus and the joy of the wedding he shows what results are gained from correctness.

Xenia then played a large part in Greek society and so is being developed as a major theme within the first four books of The Odyssey. But what other themes are being developed, justice is another strong one that can be picked out and although I have touched upon the subject earlier on, there is more to be said about it.

A recurring story concerning justice that is told in the story is that of Aegisthus and the way that Orestes son of the murdered Agamemnon takes revenge upon Aegisthus. It is mentioned as early on as Book 1 as it is discussed by the gods, the general consensus is that this eye for an eye idea of justice is accepted and even encouraged by the gods. There is added meaning to the case of Aegisthus because it is described how he failed to receive the counsel of Hermes, and shows how disrespecting the gods will not be tolerated. It seems that that is the way that most punishments are decided and not respecting immortals will land you in hot water. This has direct parallels with the impression that we are given of the suitors when we first meet them Athena herself describes them as **“an insolent mob”** and their final fate reflects a similar view of justice that is handed out by the gods to mortals who are not god fearing. Therefore in Aegisthus and the suitors we see similarities in there disrespect for the gods idea of justice and the rules of Xenia, and suitably they both have a gory ending. The tale of Odysseus himself does indeed fit in with this view of justice, because he annoyed the God Poseidon he was forced to roam the seas for 10 years even though he was a great hero. A harsh justice?

The story of Orestes is repeated by both Nestor and Menelaus and because Homer has already presented them as god fearing men, who follow the rules of Xenia and are therefore blessed with riches and big palaces we as readers almost instantly agree that there views on other things like justice are correct.

Although the concepts of Xenia and Justice that seemed common place in Greek times may seem a little strange to modern audiences it may not be so hard to understand. In fact I believe the rules of Xenia may be a positive thing that would benefit modern society; they would help to bring the community together, and create a sense of trust which is deeply lacking. In fact it is a bad reflection open society that we are so rapped up in our own world that we do not have time for others, let alone the sense of hospitality to allow them into our homes. Perhaps the idea of justice is inconvenient and undemocratic in a modern world, the gods allowing themselves to dispense justice is hardly fair, nor family members taking the law into their own hands.