



OVERVIEW OF THE *ODYSSEY*

ADAPTED FROM *CLASSICAL
MYTHOLOGY*, CH. 20

ENG 2040: Great Books

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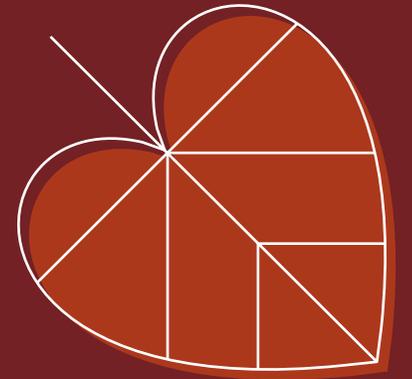
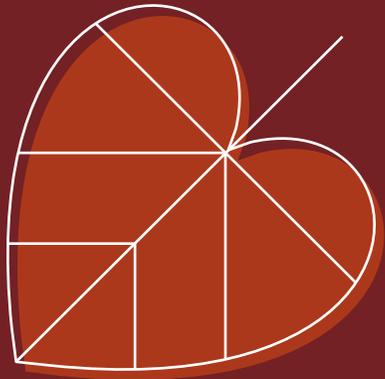
ODYSSEUS

The return of Odysseus after the Trojan War is one of the most well-known Greek sagas, mixing myth, folktale, and historical elements.

The adventures of Odysseus can be read as symbolic (his journey to the Underworld), connected with real places known to the Greeks as their trade and colonization expanded, or part of romantic legends set in imaginary places.

During the Trojan War, Odysseus was the wisest and wiliest of the Greek heroes, and in the *Odyssey*, usually escapes from danger through his intelligence and bravery; he is resourceful and aided by Athena while also the target of Poseidon's wrath.

He meets with many men, women, goddesses, and monsters, while he spends ten years journeying home to his faithful wife, Penelope, whom he left in Ithaca with their son, Telemachus.



The Odyssey



Homer

The poem begins in the middle of Odysseus's adventures, but we don't meet him until the opening of Book 5.

Books 1-4 relate the situation in Ithaca during his absence, as Penelope is besieged by suitors who want her hand in marriage and the kingdom.

In Book 5, Odysseus has been detained for seven years on Ogygia, the island of the nymph, Calypso, and after he sails away and his raft is wrecked, he tells his rescuers the events preceding his arrival on Ogygia.

The poem then continues with his return to Ithaca, his revenge on the suitors, and his reunion with Penelope.

THE CICONES AND LOTUS EATERS

- When Odysseus and his men first leave Troy, they sack the Thracian city of Ismarus, home of the Cicones, and are then driven southward by a storm to the land of the lotus eaters.
- The lotus eaters are friendly but dangerous—anyone who eats the fruit of the lotus forgets everything and wants only to stay eating the lotus fruit.
- Odysseus gets his men away, even those who ate the fruit, and they sail to the land of the Cyclopes.





THE CYCLOPES & POLYPHEMUS

- The Cyclopes were one-eyed giants, herdsman, each living in his own cave.
- One of them, Polyphemus, is the son of Poseidon; Odysseus and twelve of his men enter the cave and ransack the rich provisions stored there.
- When Polyphemus returns, he seals the cave with a huge stone, and over the course of the next two nights, eats six of Odysseus's men.
- Odysseus gets Polyphemus drunk, tells him his name is Nobody (Outis), and after the giant falls asleep, drives a wooden stake into his eye; Polyphemus cries out to the other Cyclopes for help, saying that "Nobody is killing me," and so they assume he is fine.
- The next morning Odysseus and his remaining men escape; as they sail off, Odysseus shouts out his real name, and Polyphemus prays for his father, Poseidon, to curse his journey home.

AEOLUS AND THE LAESTRYONIANS



- Odysseus reunites with the rest of his fleet, and they reach the floating island of Aeolus, keeper of the winds, who entertains Odysseus and his men.
- Upon parting, Aeolus gives Odysseus a leather bag containing all the winds and instructs him on which one to release to reach home.
- When they nearly reach Ithaca, Odysseus falls asleep and his men open the bag, believing it contains gold; the winds rush out and blow the ship back to Aeolus, who refuses to help any further since Odysseus must be hated by the gods.
- When Odysseus's fleet sails to the land of the Laestrygonians, they sink all his ships and eat the crews, except Odysseus's own ship—all a result of Polyphemus's curse.

CIRCE

- When Odysseus reaches the island of Aeaea, home of the witch/goddess Circe, daughter of Helios, he sends half of his men to meet the ruler of the island; after eating her food without invitation, Circe turns them into swine/pigs.
- Odysseus is aided by Hermes before he rescues his men, telling him to eat the herb *moly* as an antidote to Circe's magic; when she fails to turn him into a pig, Circe recognizes Odysseus and takes him as a lover (and turns his men back into humans).
- Odysseus stays with Circe for a year (they have a son, Telegonus), then at the urging of his men, requests Circe to send him on his way home; she tells him that first he must go to the Underworld and learn from the prophet Tiresias how to get home.





THE *NEKUIA*

- Book 11 tells of Odysseus's experiences in the Underworld and is generally referred to as the Book of the Dead or the *Nekuia*, the name of the rite by which ghosts were summoned and questioned.
- The journey to and return from the Underworld represents a conquest of death and the most formidable struggle a hero must face to achieve all that a mortal can achieve.
- He meets with Tiresias, who foretells the disasters that still await Odysseus on his journey home and upon his arrival (the suitors), and then meets with many other notable ghosts from the Trojan war: Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles, who says that "he would rather be a slave to a poor man on earth than be king over all the souls of the dead."

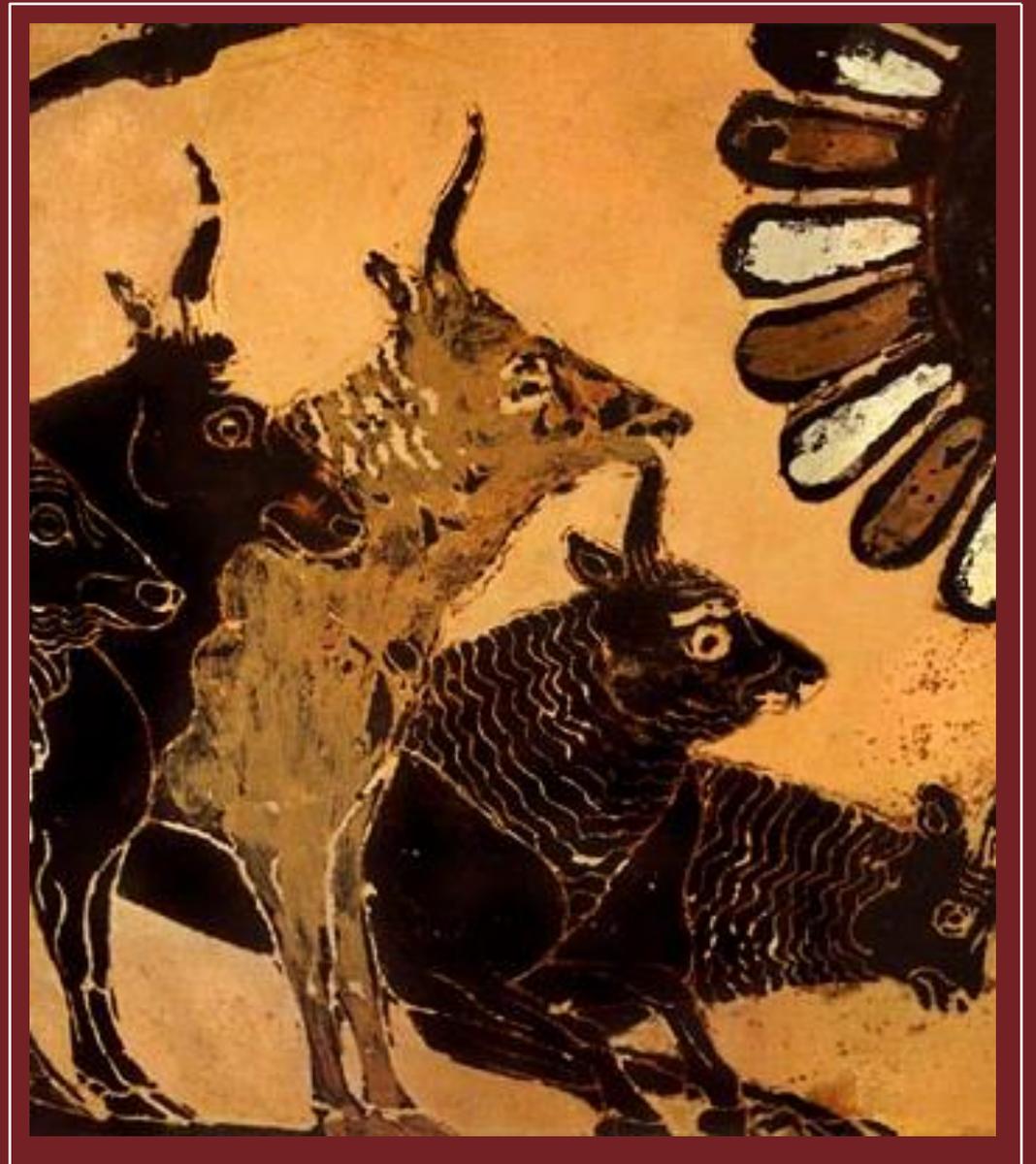
THE SIRENS, CHARYBDIS, AND SCYLLA

- After briefly returning to Circe, who warns him of the portending dangers, Odysseus and his men must safely sail past three threats:
- The Sirens: birdlike with women's heads, they tempt sailors to their doom with their voices—Odysseus stops up his men's ears with wax and ties himself to the mast so he can hear their song without threat and to gain further knowledge.
- To avoid two wandering rocks (Planctae), Odysseus chooses to sail between two high cliffs inhabited by two monsters—Charybdis (a sucking whirlpool) and Scylla (a monster with twelve feet and a girdle of six dogs' heads)—he sails closer to Scylla, who snatches up and eats six of Odysseus's men.



THE CATTLE OF THE SUN & CALYPSO

- Circe warned Odysseus that if he landed on the island of Thrinacia, where Helios (the Sun) pastured his herd of cattle, that they should not touch a single animal.
- As usual, Odysseus falls asleep and his men lack restraint, killing and eating some of the cattle; as punishment, Zeus raises a storm and destroys Odysseus's men and ship with a thunderbolt.
- Odysseus drifts on the wreckage until he lands on Ogygia and spends the next seven years with Calypso, daughter of Atlas, who loves him and offers to make him immortal, but he insists on not forgetting Penelope and Zeus orders her to release him; she helps him build a raft so he can sail away.

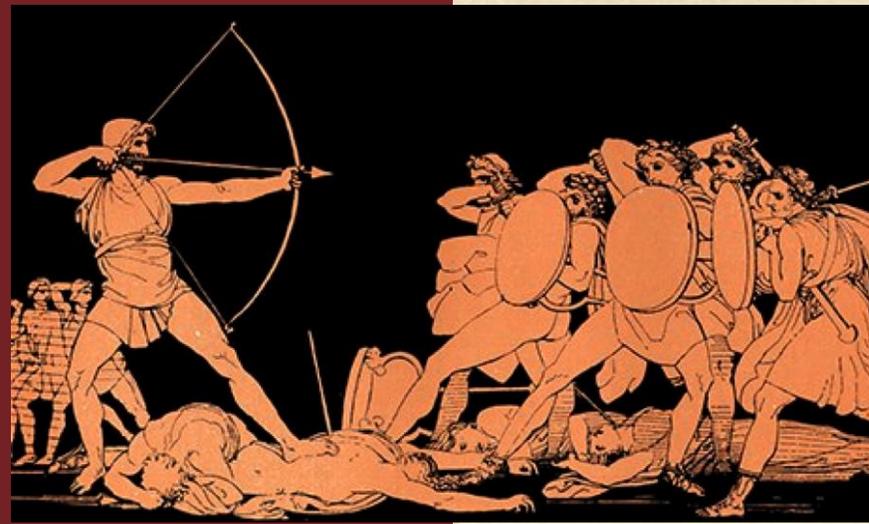




THE PHAEACIANS

- Poseidon, determined to keep Odysseus from returning home, wrecks him on the island of the Phaeacians, who warmly entertain him and help him reach home on one of their ships (while Odysseus deeply sleeps).
- Angry at the Phaeacians for helping Odysseus, Poseidon turns the ship and crew to stone when they return to their own island.

ITHACA



- Odysseus returns home in the disguise of a beggar to scope out the situation with the suitors for Penelope's hand—Penelope's hands have been putting them off for four years by weaving and unweaving a shroud for Laertes, Odysseus's father.
- Penelope sets up a contest for the suitors—whichever strings Odysseus's great bow and shoots an arrow straight through a row of twelve axe heads will win her hand.
- None of the suitors can string the bow, Odysseus accomplishes the challenge, and then kills all the suitors with the help of his son, Telemachus, and they hang twelve slave women who had been the lovers of the suitors.
- Odysseus is reunited with Penelope, who now recognizes him, and Athena puts an end to any further conflict when the suitors' relatives come seeking revenge.



THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE *ODYSSEY*

- The *Odyssey* is perhaps one of the richest examples of the persistent mythological theme of the legendary Quest with Odysseus as the archetypal Hero.
- In Odysseus's personal quest, he surmounts all obstacles on his journey home, punishes the wicked, and regains his wife, son, and kingdom.
- Homer's epic can be read as a story of travel and adventure, a tale of abiding love that ends happily with the just triumph of good over evil, or it can reveal profound insights about relationships between men and women, the gods and fate, and the meaning of human existence.
- The word "odyssey" has become synonymous with a journey and a quest, and in the final books of the poem, we gain a resonant understanding of "homecoming."

