

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 1989

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Interpretation

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libraries and all other institutions \$34
students (five-year limit) \$12
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$3.50 extra; elsewhere \$4 extra by surface mail (8 weeks or longer) or \$7.50 by air.
Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by the U.S. Postal Service or a financial institution located within the U.S.

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INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

The Concerns of Odysseus: An Introduction to the *Odyssey*

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In the proemium to the *Odyssey*, Homer asks his Muse to tell him about a versatile or wily man, who saw the cities of many men and learned their mind, and who also suffered much in his heart in his efforts to win both his own life and the homecoming of his comrades. Homer encourages us, then, to admire Odysseus as a man who used his wiliness and his other strengths both for himself, or to win his own life, and for others, or to bring his comrades safely home from Troy. Now it is true, as the proemium tells us, that Odysseus failed to save his comrades, while he alone survived. But the proemium also tells us that their deaths were not his fault, but if anyone's their own, since they were reckless or foolish enough to eat the forbidden cattle of the Sun.

This picture of Odysseus as a man who combined self-concern with a just concern for others is further developed, and even deepened in a sense, at the very beginning of the Muse's response to the proemium. There we see Odysseus in the company of the goddess Calypso, but as a captive, and with such a desire for his wife and home that, in Athena's words, "he yearns to die" (I 59). We are thus already prepared for the later disclosure that he had rejected Calypso's offer of unaging immortality if he would marry her (V 136; VII 257). In other words, however much Odysseus wanted to win his own life or survival, as the proemium suggests, he didn't want to live, not even as an immortal, if this meant abandoning and never seeing again his wife and home. In his longing to return home, then, his wishes for himself and his sense of duty to others are seen not merely as present in him together, but as united in a single desire. And the Muse's story as a whole is a story of how Odysseus was able to satisfy this just desire of his heart.

It is important to note, in this connection, that Odysseus required the help of the Olympian gods in order to escape Calypso's island and to return home. Later, he also relied upon the gods to help him defeat the suitors who were courting his wife against her will and who had usurped control of his household and his kingdom. This role of the gods, moreover, is not tangential to the plot of the *Odyssey*, but belongs at its very core. Practically at the beginning of the poem, Zeus addressed the assembled gods, defending them against men's accusation of their being responsible for evils. He used the example of Aegisthus, who had been warned by the gods of vengeance from Orestes if he should kill

Agamemnon, to show that men also, by their own recklessness, bring evils upon themselves beyond what is fated. Athena then raised the question of Odysseus, whose captivity on Calypso's island despite his sacrifices to the gods while he had been at Troy would seem to be evidence in support of men's original charge (cf. II 230–234; V 8–12). But Zeus replied that he had not forgotten Odysseus, and he told Athena, among other things, that they should now arrange for his homecoming, which Athena proceeded to do. Accordingly, the story of the *Odyssey* comes to light from the beginning in the context of Zeus' attempt to vindicate the gods' goodness or justice, or their claim to be the protectors of pious and just men. At the end of the poem, moreover, when Odysseus' father Laertes learned that his son had returned and taken vengeance upon the suitors, he expressed his joy in the following words: "Father Zeus," he said, "you are still gods on high Olympus, if the suitors have truly paid the price for their reckless arrogance" (XXIV 351–352). In other words, it is not merely the belief in the gods' justice, but the very trust in their existence as gods, that had been in question for Laertes as a consequence of his family's ordeals. And the culmination, in a sense, of the whole poem is Laertes' reaffirmation of the genuine existence of those gods without whose help Odysseus would not have succeeded in returning home or in reestablishing justice in his kingdom.

But Odysseus' story, of course, is not simply the story of a just and pious man restored to his rightful place with the help of the gods. The first thing, we recall, that Homer tells us about him is that he was wily, not that he was just, and when Zeus first spoke of him to Athena, he called him outstanding among mortals for his intelligence, as well as for his sacrifices to the gods. Odysseus' intelligence, moreover, while it may not have added to the justice of his heart, certainly did make him a better leader, one who was unusually able to carry out his just intention of helping his comrades and his family. It was Odysseus, after all, who finally succeeded in conquering Troy (XXII 230; cf. IV 269 ff.; XI 523 ff.). Again, on his journey home he was resourceful enough to keep himself and at least some of his comrades alive until they were destroyed through their own folly on the Island of the Sun. And his wiliness, together with his other excellences as a warrior, enabled him to succeed in freeing his household from the violence of Penelope's suitors and in restoring his own just kingship to Ithaca.

An important aspect of Odysseus' intelligence, and of his excellence as a comrade and a leader, is his skill at deception and disguise. Unlike Achilles, who once told him that he hated "like the gates of Hades" a man who concealed one thing in his mind and said another (*Iliad* IX 312–313), Odysseus was a consummate liar. And ignoble as his lack of scruple in this regard may have seemed to Achilles, it served to increase his value as a comrade. For it was, to repeat, a deceptive scheme of Odysseus, and not the straightforward valor of Achilles, that won the war for the Achaeans. Moreover, Odysseus' success in

saving his family and his kingdom from Penelope's suitors depended on his disguising himself as a beggar in his own home. To maintain this disguise, not only did he have to lie about his identity, which he seemed to do with some relish, but he also had to endure outrageous insults from the suitors. And his remarkable capacity for enduring insult could never have emerged had he not reflected deeply on the costliness, to those dear to him as well as to himself, of the apparently nobler insistence on always receiving due honor, an insistence that had led Achilles to the extremity of cursing his own fellow-soldiers and even of sending, albeit unwittingly, his own best friend to his death. Odysseus' superiority as a comrade and a leader rests in large measure, then, on his intelligent awareness of the deficiencies, from the perspective of a community's well-being, of the posture that Achilles had regarded as the noblest.

Odysseus was intelligent enough to know, among other things, not to rely on the gods by themselves to set things right among men. This is not to say, however, that he was impious, for the gods never promised to make human efforts superfluous. Indeed, it was Athena's own suggestion that Odysseus return to his household in the disguise of a beggar, and she later withheld her assistance in the battle against the suitors long enough to test his strength and valor (XXII 236–238). Odysseus, for his part, though he was quite capable of taking the initiative when he had to, acknowledged that the gods were the ones ultimately responsible for the punishment of the suitors. For instance, immediately after he had killed them, he told his old nurse Eurycleia that it was destiny from the gods and their own cruel deeds that had destroyed them (XXII 411–416). Far from being at odds, then, with true piety, Odysseus' intelligence seems to have made him an exemplary servant of the gods, one whose ingenious and manly efforts on his own behalf and on behalf of others helped bring about the fulfillment of the gods' just and beneficent designs.

This initial impression of the *Odyssey*, however, and especially this view of the gods as defenders of justice, must be supplemented or corrected by much evidence to the contrary from within the poem. Perhaps the most shocking example in this regard is the fate of the Phaeacians, who were severely punished by Poseidon, with Zeus's consent, for their very generosity in bringing Odysseus home. This punishment of Phaeacian generosity is so distressing to contemplate that the Muse breaks off her narrative just before telling of its final execution (XIII 128–187). Now the Phaeacians had, it is true, been warned of Poseidon's grudge against them for giving safe convoy to all men, and they also were told that he hated Odysseus in particular. But while these facts may raise questions about the Phaeacians' prudence, they seem only to add to the justice and nobility of their behavior, and thus help highlight the apparent injustice of their treatment at the hands of the gods.

Now Odysseus presumably knew nothing of the Phaeacians' fate. Yet he was well acquainted himself with the gods' failure to support justice, or at least to do so in a timely, consistent, and intelligible manner. To take the most

obvious example, he became the object of Poseidon's wrath merely for having blinded his son the Cyclops, or for an action that was surely just, if violence in defense against a cruel oppressor is ever just. This wrath of Poseidon, moreover, was a direct cause, unmentioned in the proemium, of the deaths of Odysseus' comrades, and it also led to the long delay in his own homecoming (IX 526–636; cf. XI 112–120). For it was nearly ten years before any of the other Olympians opposed Poseidon's will by trying to help Odysseus to return home. Even previously, moreover, when he was first setting out from Troy, and above all when he was trapped in the Cyclops' cave, he received no help from the gods (cf. however IX 339), not even from Athena, who had been his patroness throughout the war (III 218–222). To be sure, Athena had her reasons for not helping him. She was angry at the entire Achaean army, since some of the soldiers had acted unjustly toward her in the aftermath of their victory at Troy (III 130–136; V 108–109; I 326–327). But there is no indication that Odysseus had any share in these actions, and Athena's failure to accuse him of any wrongdoing, when he later reproached her for her long absence (XIII 316–319, 339–343), strongly suggests that he was innocent. Now we readers of the *Odyssey* may fail to appreciate the weight of this long, and nearly total, breach between Odysseus and the Olympians, since Zeus's daughter, the Muse, chooses to begin her tale precisely at the moment of its healing, when the gods finally began to arrange for Odysseus' homecoming. But Odysseus himself first experienced this breach as one that, for all he knew, might never end, and he had many years to reflect on the gods' absence and their apparent injustice towards him.

This fuller picture of the gods' problematic relationship to justice, and of Odysseus' harsh experience in that regard, prepares us to see and to appreciate an additional dimension to Odysseus' intelligence. For he was intelligent enough to reflect upon the evidence of the gods' unreliability as supporters of justice. He not only registered such evidence, as it forced itself upon him, but he made it his business to weigh it, and to examine how far divine support for justice might extend. Early in the course of his homecoming, for instance, he went out of his way to make trial of the Cyclopes in order to learn, as he told his comrades, "whether they are overbearing, savage, and unjust, or whether they love strangers and have a god-fearing mind" (IX 175–176). And to test whether the Cyclopes were just and god-fearing was also, and above all, to test the gods, to test whether they were the kind of beings to have inspired pious fear among them by punishing their injustices. So eager was Odysseus to answer this question that he put his own life, and the lives of twelve of his best comrades, deliberately at risk. For with little more than a sword and a supply of strong wine to protect him, he chose to wait for the Cyclops Polyphemus in his cave, despite his comrades' plea and despite his own foreboding that the man would be, as indeed he was, a mighty savage who respected neither just judgments nor laws (IX 213–215). Polyphemus, of course, rejected with scorn Od-

Odysseus' request for hospitality, as well as his appeal in the name of Zeus the avenger of suppliants and strangers. And when he then proceeded to kill and devour two of Odysseus' comrades, the prayers of Odysseus and his remaining men for help from Zeus went unanswered. It is true that later, after blinding the Cyclops and escaping from his cave, Odysseus called out to him that Zeus and the other gods had taken vengeance on him for his cruel deeds (IX 475–479). But it is unlikely that Odysseus fully believed these words even as he said them. And at all events, this encounter with Polyphemus, which led to the long embroilment with Poseidon, must have deepened Odysseus' distrust of Zeus and the other gods as defenders of justice.

Odysseus' efforts to return home safely, in the face of seemingly unjust opposition from the gods, helped teach him something else about the gods, namely that despite their reputation as being omnipotent, their power, both individually and collectively, was quite limited. Hermes, for instance, once gave him a drug whose nature was such as to render the goddess Circe powerless against him (X 281–324). And as for the Olympian gods, Poseidon was unable to prevent Odysseus' homecoming, while on the other hand, the explicit reason that Athena gave to him for not acting sooner to help bring him home was her fear of Poseidon (XIII 341–343). Odysseus knew from Calypso, moreover, that even Zeus had consented to the deaths of all his comrades who had killed, but under most extenuating circumstances, the cattle of the Sun, out of apparent fear of Helios' threat that otherwise he would take his sunlight down to Hades (XII 377–390; IX 526–536; regarding the limits to Helios' power, consider XI 109; XII 128, 323, 374–376). Finally, Odysseus knew that all the gods together would have been powerless to prevent his homecoming if his men hadn't opened the bag of winds that he had been given by Aeolus (X 69 and context). Odysseus was indeed mistaken, as he soon learned, to reveal to the pious Aeolus that he didn't believe in the gods' omnipotence (X 72–79; compare X 27 and 79 with X 68). But he was nevertheless intelligent and well-advised not to believe in it in fact.

During Athena's absence, Odysseus was of course compelled to rely on his own resourcefulness in order to survive (cf. IX 420–423). Yet even after Athena and Zeus had resumed their activity on his behalf, and on behalf of justice in Ithaca, he did not give up his habit of prudent distrust and self-reliance. When Calypso told him, for instance, that he could finally go home, his first reaction was to suspect a trick and to require her to swear that she wasn't planning to hurt him (V 173–179). Soon afterwards, when his raft was being battered by Poseidon, the goddess Leucothea gave him a veil with which, she said, he should swim to shore. Yet Odysseus refused to abandon his raft or to rely on the goddess' veil until the continuing storm would leave him with no alternative (V 356–364). And as for Athena in particular, he never wholly relied on her promises once he was back on Ithaca. Although she promised, for instance, that she would ensure his success against the suitors, and then defend

him against their angry relatives, Odysseus was prudent enough to make plans without her and to act on them (XIII 392–396; XX 36–55; XVI 281–297; XXI 226–241; XXIII 117–140). It is true that when he first returned to Ithaca he told her that her warning about the enemies in his household had saved his life, and he added that he would fight against three hundred men with her at his side (XXIII 383–391). But his thanking her for her warning was mere flattery, since he was already on his guard against the suitors, in part from having been warned previously by the souls of Teiresias and Agamemnon. His talk about three hundred men, then, may also be presumed to have been flattery, designed to keep him in her good graces and thus get whatever help he could from her. Indeed, Odysseus' success in deceiving Athena through his flattery, and in outwitting her more generally, despite her fame among the gods for shrewdness and sagacity, is a significant aspect of his outstanding intelligence. His deception of Athena even suggests that in some important respects, such as the knowledge of their own concealed thoughts, mortals can be wiser than the gods (XIII 296–299; cf. 299–302 and 318–323).

Odysseus' awareness that the gods were not always able, and in some cases not even willing, to defend the cause of justice seems to have had a further consequence than merely teaching him to be more independent of them. It also seems to have helped weaken his own attachment to justice, and to have strengthened his own tendency to unscrupulous behavior. Here I am not referring merely to the guile that he used against enemies like Polyphemus or the suitors of Penelope. For in addition to such deviousness, which was apparently necessary for the sake of justice or a common good, Odysseus was also capable of being remarkably selfish. Indeed, he seems to have been already somewhat selfish even before the war at Troy, as we see from the fact that Agamemnon had a hard time persuading him to go there (XXIV 119). But after the war, and after his harsh experiences with Athena and the other gods, there were occasions when Odysseus seriously neglected his own comrades, even going so far as deliberately to subject them to an increased risk of death in order to lessen the risk for himself.

Now before giving evidence in support of this last claim, I must first take a step back and respond to an objection that might well arise in connection with it. For one might suppose that a good man would not act selfishly under any circumstances—no matter what, in particular, the gods did or didn't do—and that if Odysseus was in fact so selfish as I claim, he is unworthy of our serious attention. If I am right, however, Homer did give serious attention to such a man. And I think we can begin to see his reasons for doing so if we remind ourselves of Achilles, a man as dedicated as any among the Achaeans to the life of virtue (cf. *Iliad* XI 783–784). For even Achilles, as we learn from the *Iliad*, was once tempted by the kind of selfishness I am here attributing to Odysseus. To understand this temptation, let us first recall that Achilles' fate, as it was foretold to him by his mother, was either to live a short but glorious

life, if he fought at Troy, or a long but inglorious one at home. Now Achilles' dedication to virtue is evident from the fact that he went to Troy, despite his foreknowledge of an early death, and that he fought without apparent hesitation for more than nine years. But there came a moment when he quit the fighting, and was tempted to do so for good, and it is this moment that I want to dwell on.

After Agamemnon committed the outrage of robbing him of his mistress Briseis, and when no one in the army intervened on his behalf, Achilles withdrew from the fighting and prayed to Zeus for vengeance against Agamemnon and the rest of the army. Now Zeus, as we know, granted Achilles' prayer, but he was a bit slow in making it clear to Achilles that he had done so. After a while, he did turn the tide of battle against the Achaeans, but he had waited long enough so that darkness fell before the Trojans could win a decisive victory. Now during this time of fear among the Achaeans, but while Zeus' response to Achilles' prayer was still somewhat unclear, Odysseus came to Achilles on an embassy to offer lavish gifts from Agamemnon if he would rejoin the fighting. Achilles refused this offer, as we might have expected, but some of the reasons that he gave for doing so are surprising, and they reveal the new temptations that he was facing. What he said, in the first place, was that there is no thanks for always fighting without respite against the enemy. He added that the one who fights most receives an equal portion as the one who stays behind, that the bad man and the good man are held in equal honor, and, most importantly, that death comes equally to the idle man and the one who does much (*Iliad* IX 316–320). In the light of the insult that he had suffered from Agamemnon and the army, and even more, in the light of Zeus' failure to give clear support to his claims as a man of virtue, Achilles became more powerfully aware of his own impending death, and he was no longer convinced that it made any difference, in the end, whether or not one had lived virtuously. Achilles also told Odysseus that he received no advantage from having always risked his life in war, and he compared his fighting on behalf of Menelaus and Agamemnon to the activity of a mother bird who gives her food to her chicks, while things go badly for her herself. Now it may be true, as Achilles went on to acknowledge, that he could still look forward to immortal glory as his reward for remaining in the war. But with his new doubts about virtue, and his heightened awareness of impending death, he was no longer convinced that even lasting glory would be a sufficient compensation for the loss of his life. And what he had previously regarded as the life of virtue he now spoke of as a throwing away of his own life, in the interests of others, rather than enjoying that life, or living it, for himself.

Achilles did, to be sure, tell Odysseus to warn the army of his intention to leave the war, and in the end, of course, he did not yield to the temptation to do so. For despite his anger at the Achaean army for its failure to support him against Agamemnon's violence, he still cared for his fellow soldiers, and he

could not bring himself to abandon them in their distress. Moreover, that very distress finally convinced him that Zeus had answered his prayer for vengeance, thus restoring his conviction that men of virtue are not forgotten by the gods (*Iliad* XVI 236–238; cf. I 411–412). But even in Achilles' case, we see that the dedication to virtue and nobility was bound up with a hope for rewards, indeed for rewards so great as to be a consolation in the face of death. As a result, this dedication could be shaken, and was shaken, once Achilles lost his confidence that the gods were sufficiently concerned with virtue to provide those great rewards. So if Odysseus yielded, as I claim he did, to the temptations of selfish self-protectiveness, these temptations were at least not wholly unknown to Achilles. Accordingly, and in the light of the *Odyssey's* harsher suggestions about the gods' justice, there is some reason to pay attention to Odysseus' selfishness. And all the more is this the case once we learn from the *Odyssey* what Achilles' soul told Odysseus in Hades. For by saying that he would rather be a hireling to a poor man on earth than rule over all the dead (XI 488–491), Achilles' soul suggested, at any rate, that he might have been better advised to leave the war, and to abandon his Achaean comrades, in order to prolong his own life.

To return now to Odysseus, perhaps the most striking evidence of his selfish concern for his own survival, and of his being at least neglectful of his men, is his behavior at the land of the Lastrygonians. There he allowed eleven of his twelve ships to anchor in the harbor, while keeping his own at a distance, and moreover, the scouts that he sent out were apparently chosen from the main body of ships (cf. X 117). As a result, when the Lastrygonian king unexpectedly killed one of the scouts, and the other two fled toward the ships, Odysseus and his crew were able to escape safely while the Lastrygonians were occupied with the men in the harbor, all of whom they killed. It is only by ignoring this incident, or by limiting his attention to the men from Odysseus' own ship, that Homer is able to suggest, in the proemium, that Odysseus was not responsible for the deaths of his comrades. And even in the case of these shipmates, the proemium is wrong in suggesting that Odysseus did all he might have done to save them. In particular, he did not share with them the explicit warning from the soul of Tiresias and Circe against eating the sheep or cattle of the Sun, even though, according to the prophecy, it was the comrades who were sure to die if the flocks were harmed (XI 104–115; XII 127–141, 261–276). Evidently, his fear of his men's despair in the aftermath, in case they should fail to heed an explicit warning, prevented him from sharing the full prophecy with them. And it is at least plausible that what he most feared was not the danger to them, but the danger to himself, and to his own prospects of returning home, in case they should become too despondent, after failing to heed the full prophecy, to keep trying to return home themselves. Odysseus did indeed try to protect his comrades by having them swear an oath not to harm the forbidden flocks, but then later, at a time when extreme hunger was tempt-

ing them to break that oath, he went off by himself to an isolated part of the island. And although the reason he alleged for going off alone was to pray for help from the gods, it is at least equally likely that he wanted to give the men a chance to break their oath, as he feared they would do at all events, without first threatening or committing any violence against him. Indeed, in his story to the Phaeacians, he even spoke of himself as having “escaped from his comrades” on that occasion (XII 335). His going off alone, then, is especially strong evidence of his selfishness in allowing fear for his own safety to outweigh his concern for his comrades.

Odysseus’ selfishness is evident not only in his treatment of his comrades, but also in relation to his wife and family, for he was unfaithful to Penelope, even to the extent of being inconstant in his desire for home. He remained willingly with the goddess Circe for an entire year, and did not resume his journey home until his comrades finally begged him to do so (X 466–486). There was a time, moreover, when he was glad to be staying with Calypso (V 153). We don’t know how long this period lasted, since the Muse begins her story well after it was over, but at all events, these dalliances with Circe and Calypso are both instances of disloyalty to his wife and family. And Odysseus’ selfishness, towards his family as well as his comrades, allows us to see added significance to Homer’s words in the proemium that he was “seeking to win his own life and the homecoming of his comrades.” For we now see the conflict between these two desires, and the suggestion even arises that what Odysseus wanted above all was not the homecoming that he sought along with his comrades, but rather the preservation of his own life, a life that need not be lived, at least not entirely, at home.

This last suggestion, however, is emphatically contradicted by Odysseus’ rejection of Calypso’s offer of immortality. By rejecting this offer he seems to have shown, in a most powerful way, that there was something more important to him than his own life or survival. Now this does not necessarily mean that he was acting unselfishly. Still, the question must arise, at this point, of why a man so selfish as we have seen Odysseus to be should have turned down immortality with a goddess and chosen instead to live and die with his aging wife. Was he simply rejecting the tedium of life with Calypso in favor of the pleasures, however short-lived, that he could hope to enjoy at home? Or did that very tedium with Calypso remind him of the wrongness, as well as the emptiness, of living only for himself, and thereby deepen his desire for home and give him the strength to resist her beguiling offer?

This question can be answered, I think, through indirect evidence, which shows that the Odysseus who returned from Calypso’s island was not the kind of man who would choose to subordinate all considerations of honor or duty to his self-interest. For after leaving Calypso and coming to the land of the Phaeacians, he told his hosts the story of his life since Troy, including in particular the crucial fact of Poseidon’s anger against him, even though the Phaeacian

king had revealed that Poseidon was already threatening to punish them for giving safe convoy to all men (VIII 564–571). Despite the urgency and depth of Odysseus' wish to return home, then, he put his homecoming in jeopardy rather than allow his hosts to be ignorant of the special risk they would run in giving convoy to him. Now it is true that he presumably expected, and rightly, as it turns out, that the generous and naive Phaeacians would not withdraw the offer they had already given to take him home. But he could not have been sure of this. Indeed, it appears that the influential queen Arete even hinted, after hearing of Poseidon's anger against Odysseus, that they should detain him at least for a while (XI 339 and context). It must, then, have been something deeper than mere calculation that led him to take the risk of being so truthful, and it stands to reason that this deeper sense of honor was also at work in his resistance to Calypso's offer. In this connection, it may also be relevant to note Odysseus' response to the Phaeacian bard Demodocus' song about the binding of Ares and Aphrodite. This song ridiculed the two of them for being caught in the act of adultery, and exposed together before the male gods, by Aphrodite's husband Hephaestus. But Hermes' aside to Apollo—that he wished he could be caught in still tighter bonds, and exposed before all the goddesses, as well as the gods, if only he might sleep beside golden Aphrodite—points to the song's truer meaning, which is to celebrate this act of illicit love and to ridicule the powerless cuckold Hephaestus. Now Odysseus enjoyed this song, to be sure, but he did not praise it, as he praised Demodocus' singing about the sad fate of the Achaeans, or even as he praised the two young Phaeacians who threw a ball back and forth as they leapt and danced (VIII 367–369, 370–384, 487–498; cf. 250–253). And his failure, in this case, to give the praise that the Phaeacian king was so evidently eager to receive (cf. VIII 235–255) suggests, among other things, some genuine respect on his part for the laws of marriage.

Even before he left Calypso, in fact, Odysseus was far from being simply or consistently selfish. For example, when nearly half of his men failed to return from Circe's house, he insisted on going back to try to rescue them, and he even added to his danger by going off alone, without compelling the one returning member of the original party to accompany him. Later, moreover, after Circe had told him that Scylla would kill six of his comrades, and that there was no defense against her, since she was an immortal, he nevertheless armed himself, and stood conspicuously in the front of his ship, in order to try to protect his men against her. So while Odysseus would sometimes put his men at additional risk in order to protect his own life, there were also times when he did the opposite. Indeed, on the two occasions I have just cited, the risks that he took on his men's behalf seem even to have been imprudent or irresponsible in a commander. For when he went off alone, to try to rescue the men who had disappeared on Circe's island, he was risking not only his own life, but also, and more than he had to, the lives of the remaining men, who probably could not have made it home without him. And his making himself such a conspic-

uous target for Scylla is open to the same objection. Now we have to wonder how a man who could be so selfishly self-protective could also have taken such great, and even irresponsible, risks on behalf of his men. And with regard to the incident on Circe's island, which follows immediately after he had allowed the great majority of his men to be killed by the Lastrygonians, the suspicion arises that what clouded his judgment was partly the desire to persuade himself that he was not a selfish coward (cf. *Iliad* XI 408 ff.). But however we interpret Odysseus' complexity, the simple fact remains that he was acting, on both these occasions, primarily out of concern for his men, or out of his sense of what he owed to them in justice (cf. XII 245–259).

Another sign of Odysseus' attachment to justice is his anger, above all his anger against the suitors of Penelope and their accomplices. Anger is so characteristic of him, in fact, that a word for anger is at the root of his name, a name he had received from his maternal grandfather Autolycus as a reminder of Autolycus' own anger against many men and women throughout the world (XIX 406–409). And whatever the relation may be in general between anger and the concern for justice, Odysseus' anger on Ithaca was rooted largely in his sense of justice, or his sense, in particular, that his household belonged to him by right. Hence he became most angry not at the suitors themselves, although they of course were the greatest threat to him, but at his own disloyal servants, and especially those among his serving-women who had slept with the suitors. He was so pained, in fact, at seeing these women go off with the suitors, at a time when the need to preserve his disguise still required him to let them be, that he had to remind himself, in all seriousness, that he had endured worse in the Cyclops' cave (XX 6–21; cf. XXII 164–177). The concern for justice, moreover, helped nourish his anger against the suitors themselves, as is perhaps most clearly evident when he rejoiced, on the morning of the battle, at an omen from Zeus, in the belief that "he had punished the sinners" (XX 120–121).

That Odysseus' anger was nourished by a concern for justice does not mean, to be sure, that it was always just. For instance, after all the other suitors had been killed, their soothsayer Leiodes clasped him by the knees and begged for his life, saying that he had never spoken or acted wantonly with any of the serving-women, and that he had tried to stop the other suitors from doing so. The Muse herself confirms this claim, by telling us that Leiodes was the one man among the suitors who hated their wantonness and that he was indignant at them all (XXI 146–147). Odysseus, however, was unmoved by Leiodes' plea. He killed him at once, after replying, with an angry look, that as a soothsayer among the suitors Leiodes must have often prayed for him never to return home, and for Penelope to marry him instead and to bear him children (XXII 310–329). Yet is it reasonable or just for a husband who has been absent from home for twenty years, and missing without a trace for ten of them—in part, moreover, because of his own dalliance—to kill a harmless man on these grounds? Now Odysseus' cruelty on at least this occasion suggests a certain

shallowness in his concern for justice, and this is hardly a surprising suggestion, given what we know of his selfish behavior on other occasions. But the fact remains that the concern for justice was present in him, strengthening both his attachment to his home and his anger against those who would deny him what he regarded as his rightful place there.

Odysseus, then, while caring less for justice than it had appeared at first, was nonetheless more attached to it than it might have seemed from a merely second look. Moreover, and in keeping with this, his distrust of the gods' justice was also less complete than it may have seemed at a second glance. This is clear, for instance, from the omen that he asked for and received from Zeus, which made him believe, on the morning of his battle against the suitors, that he had already punished the sinners (cf. XXI 413–415). But a still more revealing instance of his hope for divine justice occurs when he first arrived on Ithaca, after his conveyance home by the Phaeacians. Athena had disguised the land's appearance so that he failed to recognize it, and for a moment he thought that the Phaeacians had deceived him and taken him elsewhere. In his distress, he spoke aloud to himself, accusing the Phaeacians of injustice, and he added, "May Zeus the god of suppliants punish them, he who also watches over other men and punishes whoever transgresses" (XIII 209–216). Now this prayer may seem surprisingly naive for Odysseus, but the apparent anomaly can be explained, I think, in terms of what are, for him, the somewhat anomalous circumstances. The usually cagey and self-protective Odysseus had just taken the considerable risk of telling the Phaeacians about Poseidon's anger against him, and this generous frankness on his own part led him to believe that he deserved an equally generous response from them, despite the risks to themselves. When it appeared, however, that they had deceived him, he had no one to turn to but Zeus in order to even the score. And since, moreover, it was his own justice or generosity that had apparently gotten him into this trouble, he felt entitled to ask Zeus to intervene (cf. XIV 401–408). In other words, his hope for justice from the gods was rooted primarily in his own attachment to justice, which contributed, as he then imagined, to his need for divine intervention and which also allowed him to believe that he deserved it. And at least on this occasion, his belief that he deserved divine help allowed him to hope for it, despite whatever experience had led him in the past to be distrustful of Zeus' support for justice.

Odysseus' belief that he deserved generosity from the Phaeacians in return for his own generosity toward them suggests that his concern for justice was not simply divorced from self-concern. Indeed, we see as much from the mere fact that his hope to punish the suitors was also, and not so incidentally, a hope to recover for himself his own household and his kingdom (cf. I 40–41). But the connection between Odysseus' concern for justice and his self-concern comes more fully to light if we examine a passage in which he expressed a hope still deeper than the hope to resume his life on Ithaca. He spoke of this

hope, even though he seems not to have been fully conscious of its presence, in a remark to Nausicaa immediately after his arrival at the land of the Phaeacians. His words to her were as follows: “a divinity has now thrown me ashore here, so that here too, I suppose, I might suffer evil. For I do not think that it will cease, but the gods will still bring many [evils] to pass before then” (VI 172–174; cf. XXIII 286–287). Despite his claim, then, that he did not expect his troubles to cease, he ended this statement by saying that he still had many evils to endure “before then.” He thus suggested, in other words, that he was indeed looking forward to an ultimate release from evils (cf. IV 33–35, 561–569). Apparently, his journey to Hades, where the soul of Achilles had told him how miserable it was to be dead, did not destroy in him the hope that he would somehow be spared the final evils that await other men. Perhaps he thought of himself as another Heracles, whom he met in Hades only in the form of a phantom, since Heracles himself, as Odysseus told the Phaeacians, “rejoices in festivities among the immortal gods” (XI 601–603). Odysseus, like Heracles, was one of the select few to descend to Hades during his lifetime, and so it is not implausible that he might have hoped for a fate as rare and as blessed as the one he believed that Heracles already enjoyed. But there is also, I think, a deeper root of his hope for a release from evils, and this deeper root emerges when we consider the context of his remark to Nausicaa. Odysseus had recently left Calypso’s island, where he had again rejected, for one last time, her offer of unaging immortality. He had just completed, then, his greatest act of renunciation, his renunciation of the desire to save his own life. And this act of renunciation, in my view, is the immediate source of his hope for a release from evils. For it helped assure him that he was, fundamentally, a just man. As a result, he believed that he deserved a release from evils, and since he believed that he deserved it, he was able to look forward to it with hope, just as he was also able to believe in gods who would fulfill that hope. To be sure, Odysseus has been so miserable with Calypso that he may not have regarded his rejection of the offer to be her immortal husband as a clear sacrifice of his own pleasure or profit. Still, his renunciation of immortality must surely have strengthened his belief in his willingness to sacrifice, and hence in his worthiness of care from the gods. But here arises a difficulty. For however great a sacrifice he believed that he had made, or that he would have been willing to make, it was not greater than, or even so great as, the reward that he hoped for in return. There is no evidence, at any rate, that he ever dreamed of renouncing a good that would compare with an ultimate release from evils. And since the gain that he looked forward to in the end was greater than any loss, what he regarded as sacrifice in the name of justice can also be seen—and I would even say, seen best—not as sacrifice, but primarily as a means to this hoped-for end.

The self-concern that was bound up with Odysseus’ attachment to justice was not necessarily, of course, an enlightened self-concern, and the behavior connected with his pious hopes was not necessarily always prudent. For not to

repeat what has already been indicated, his confident hope that the gods would support what he regarded as his just cause on Ithaca seems to have led to several uncharacteristic blunders in his plot against the suitors. For instance, he was so moved, as it seems, by Athena's shining presence while he and Telemachus were secretly removing weapons from the main hall of the palace that he forgot his own plan of leaving two sets of arms available for them to fight with (XIX 31–44; cf. XVI 295–297 and context). Now this mistake was not a fatal one, as it turned out, but it was serious, since the need to send Telemachus, in the midst of battle, to get armor from the storeroom, along with Telemachus' negligence in leaving the storeroom door ajar, allowed some of the suitors to get armor for themselves. As a result, Odysseus was for a moment extremely frightened, and the ensuing battle was much more difficult for him than it would otherwise have been (XXII 95–159). Another serious error on Odysseus' part is his allowing Telemachus to go directly home, alone and in the daytime, from Eumaeus' hut in the country, where he had gone at first after his visit to Nestor and Menelaus. For as Odysseus knew, the suitors had already tried to kill Telemachus on his voyage back to Ithaca, and he had also heard from Eumaeus that their attempt to keep Telemachus' return a secret from the suitors had failed (XVI 464–469; cf. 130–134, 328–337). Now Odysseus' lack of caution, in this instance, is not explicitly tied to his hopes from the gods, but it does presuppose a trust in the strength of justice that seems unreasonable in the absence of just gods. To be sure, the suitors did not try again to kill Telemachus, either on his way home from the country or afterwards, for they were unwilling to do so without a sign of Zeus's approval, and they received no such sign. Zeus may even have sent an omen, on the day after Telemachus had arrived safely at the palace, signifying his disapproval of an attack on him. Yet the fact remains that the suitors were at least considering another attempt to kill him. Antinous, one of their leaders, had proposed to ambush and kill him on his way home from the country, and he had given strong arguments, from the suitors' point of view, in favor of his proposal (XVI 363–406; XX 241–247). Moreover, it is hard to see how Telemachus could have escaped such an ambush. Accordingly, the mere fact of his survival does not mean that Odysseus' trustfulness had been well-advised.

And yet—it will be said—Telemachus did survive, just as Odysseus won the battle against the suitors, and though the gods' role in securing these outcomes may have been relatively small, it was nevertheless sufficient for the occasions. So while these instances do raise doubts about Odysseus' prudence, they by no means prove that he was seriously unwise in the degree of his reliance on the gods and their justice. The more important question, at any rate, concerns the wisdom of his deeper hope for a release from evils. Now Homer's Muse never tells us explicitly whether he did or did not receive this ultimate reward, but even if ignorance about the gods and the afterlife were to frustrate one's wish for certainty that he did receive it, the mature Odysseus might still

appear as a kind of model of wisdom or of human wisdom. For quite apart from his cunning and versatility, the Odysseus who returned home from Calypso's island seems to have learned the secret of a good human life, a life of contentment with his fate and of whole-hearted communion with his wife and family.

This impression, however, of Odysseus as a wise man contented with his fate and at one with his family is called into question by several jarring details, details which also raise the old question about the depth of his justice or concern for others. The most conspicuous of these details occurs in the final scene of the whole poem. In this last scene Odysseus was so caught up in the heat of battle against the relatives of the defeated suitors that he failed to heed Athena's call to stop pursuing his victory over them, and he thus almost lost the opportunity to make a lasting peace for his kingdom. It required a thunderbolt from Zeus, and a further threat from Athena, to persuade him to act sensibly on his own behalf and that of his kingdom. To be sure, he rejoiced when he finally did obey Athena, but his delay in doing so makes us wonder whether Odysseus the warrior would ever become fully reconciled to the life of peace and prosperity that was ahead of him at home (XXIV 485–486). Questions about Odysseus' future life at home also arise in connection with his puzzling decision to test his father Laertes by mocking him and by not revealing his own identity when he first approached him (XXIV 235–240). It is true that he broke down and embraced Laertes lovingly once he saw how much he still grieved for him. But the cruelty of his initial approach suggests, nonetheless, a lack of depth to his love, and it raises doubts about whether he could ever become fully at home with his father. I might also mention, in this regard, the remarkably grudging exhortation that he gave to his son Telemachus just before their final battle against the suitors' relatives. Although the competitiveness between Odysseus and his son on this occasion was relatively mild, and even gave delight to the old Laertes, it suggests the possibility of more serious discord in the future, and it makes us wonder again how well Odysseus was going to age (XXIV 505–515).

A further indication that Odysseus did not return home in a frame of mind that would lead him to find contentment there occurs at a moment of particularly high emotion, just after Penelope has finally recognized him with certainty and they have embraced one another in a long and tearful reunion. After they had ceased weeping, Odysseus said to Penelope that they still had troubles ahead of them, and that the soul of Teiresias had foretold to him in Hades that he would have to accomplish a great or measureless task even after his return home. Odysseus did not, however, go into the details of the prophecy, but instead he asked Penelope to go to bed with him. Penelope replied that his bed was ready whenever he wished, but she also asked him first to tell her in more detail about his future ordeal. Odysseus in response, though he did of course grant his wife's request, began by expressing some mild irritation at it (XXIII

264 ff.). And it is surprising that he would show this irritation at what was surely a reasonable request from the wife he loved. But whatever the reasons for it, his irritation, or his failure to appreciate the immediacy of her need for assurance that he would eventually return home again to stay (cf. XXIII 286–287), betrays considerable insensitivity to Penelope’s feelings, and it casts a shadow over the poem’s promise of a happy marriage in the future.

Odysseus’ homecoming, it now appears, was not the beginning of a life of wise and just contentment in harmony with his family. Indeed, one may even suspect that the long journey still ahead of him may not have been so entirely unwelcome to him as he told Penelope that it was. (Compare XXIII 267 with XI 121, and consider, especially in the light of I 3, Odysseus’ small addition to the prophecy as he had reported it to the Phaeacians. Also compare XII 160 with XII 49.) Yet there is no reason to believe that further travel could ever supply the contentment he was not going to find at home. In particular, there is no reason to believe that further travel alone could ever resolve any remaining doubts about the extent of the gods’ support for justice—and such doubts may well have been still alive in him, helping to make him uncertain how fully to give himself to his life at home. But to find the contentment that he was still lacking at the time of his homecoming, Odysseus would have required even more than such knowledge about the gods. What he needed, above all, is wisdom in the largest sense. Moreover, wisdom in this large sense had been a more or less conscious object of his quest all along, as Homer indicates, I believe, in the proemium, where he tells us that Odysseus was “seeking to win his own life.” Previously, to be sure, I have treated this phrase as if it were merely equivalent to the quest for survival, a quest that Odysseus had renounced, or rather seemed to renounce, in his rejection of Calypso’s offer of immortality. Yet elsewhere in Homer the word translated as “to win” always means to acquire something one does not yet possess, rather than to preserve something one already has. And so by saying that Odysseus was seeking to win his own life, or his own soul, Homer seems to mean, above all, that he was seeking to win it for the first time, to win it, in other words, *as his own*, or to win it for himself. This attainment of one’s own life is the core, I think, of what Homer means by wisdom, and the desire for such wisdom was Odysseus’ ultimate desire. Now it is beyond the scope of this paper to try to characterize more fully what such wisdom might be, other than to suggest that it would have enabled Odysseus to live contentedly, at home or even elsewhere. But at all events, Odysseus failed, it seems to me, to attain this wisdom, and he would continue to fail, despite his evident concern for his own life, and even, in a sense, because of it. For the shallowness of his concern for justice, or the ease with which he persuaded himself that he was fundamentally just, closed him off from access to true self-knowledge, and all the more from the attainment of his true life. By contrast, Homer, who was wise, seeks to nourish the concern for justice in us his listeners, most massively by focusing his or his Muse’s story,

not on Odysseus' travels, but on his edifying punishment of the suitors. And Homer points to the kinship between the simple concern for justice and wisdom at its highest by addresssing the *Odyssey* to the just and pious swineherd Eumaeus, the only character in the poem to whom he or his Muse ever speaks directly as "you" (XIV 55, 165, 360, etc.). By encouraging our concern for justice, as he addresses the questions regarding justice that Odysseus' story necessarily raises, Homer points the way toward the life of wisdom that even Odysseus failed to attain.