Study Guide

The Odyssey

Lecture 2
Rumors of Odysseus

Suggested Readings

- Homer, *The Odyssey*, trs. Robert Fagles, Books 2-4

Outline

0:00-11:00 —The Woman of Twists and Turns

- Penelope promises the suitors she will choose one of them to marry when she finishes weaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law, but she unravels the garment every night for 3 years.
- The suitors eventually discover her deception, but this reveals that Penelope, like her husband, is far more clever and cunning than the suitors.
- Rather than assuming it a vice that she neither dismisses the suitors nor accepts one, the display of Penelope's cunning encourages us to read her actions as a clever way to maintain authority in the absence of the king by distracting potential rivals into pursuing her hand instead of waging war. This also buys time for her son to grow and mature until Odysseus returns or Telemachus is ready to rule.

11:01-15:22 — Telemachus' Travels



- The *Odyssey* is a story of a journey home, but also a coming-of-age story for Telemachus. As he travels in search of his father, he cultivates the virtues of courage and leadership, and practical skills like diplomacy.
- Telemachus first sails to Pylos, a city where old king Nestor, a former comrade of Odysseus, reigns.
- Nestor tells Telemachus the story of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, who had to avenge his father's murder. This story is a potential model for Telemachus, who may have to avenge Odysseus if the king cannot defeat the suitors.
- Telemachus also must learn how to comport himself around the divine with Athena as his guide.

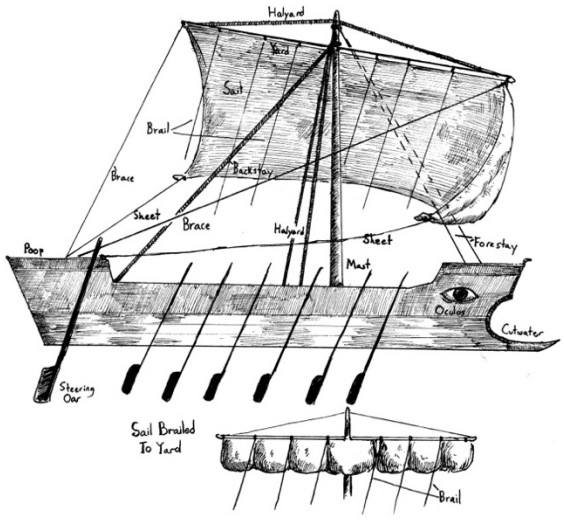
- Menelaus reveals to Telemachus that Odysseus is alive but imprisoned by Calypso. This is the first concrete news of his father and bolsters Telemachus' hopes.

15:23-25:36 — Menelaus and Helen

- Telemachus visits Helen and Menelaus who have been reunited after the Trojan War.
    - Helen spikes the wine served at the welcoming feast of Telemachus with a powerful drug that eliminates all pain, even the pain of losing your loved ones. This deception indicates trouble in the marriage.
    - Helen praises Odysseus and her own husband, claiming that she had come to regret running off with Paris.
    - Menelaus has a different view of Helen's actions during the war as he still views her as having been an enemy to her husband and the Greeks, even suspecting the wooden horse and trying to coax the warriors out of it so they would fail to take Troy.

Key Passages

Antinous, who found it in himself to say,
"So high and mighty, Telemachus-such unbridled rage!
Well now, fling your accusations at *us*?
Think to pin the blame on *us*? You think again.
It's not the suitors here who deserve the blame,
It's your own dear mother, the matchless queen of
cunning.
Look here. For three years now, getting on to four,
She's played it fast and loose with all our hearts,
building each man's hopes—
dangling promises, dropping hints to each—
but all the while with something else in mind.
This was her latest masterpiece of guile:
she set up a great loom in the royal halls
and she began to weave, and the weaving finespun,
the yarns endless, and she would lead us on: 'Young
men,
my suitors, now that King Odysseus is no more,
go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until
I can finish off this web . . .
so my weaving won't all fray and come to nothing.
This is a shroud for old lord Laertes, for that day
when the deadly fate that lays us out at last will take him down.
I dread the shame my countrywomen would heap upon me,
yes, if a man of such wealth should lie in state
without a shroud for cover.'"
— Book 2, lines 90-113



Discussion Questions

What are the key differences between Penelope and Helen? What virtues or vices does each exhibit?

What is Telemachus being educated to do? Are the lessons taught applicable to modern life?

What is Athena's role in the *Odyssey* so far? Why does she favor and aid the family of Odysseus?

Notes