



# Odysseus, Always and Today

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## ODYSSEUS, ALWAYS AND TODAY



« *Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage...* » This first verse of a sonnet of Joachim du Bellay (1522-1560), French poet, member of the Pléiade, is memorized by every 2<sup>nd</sup>-grader in French public schools. But most adults can sing it because of the more recent poet and singer-songwriter, Georges Brassens (1921-1981), black humor-tinged, anarchist –my late friend.

Ulysse is a French name, while Ulysses (*Ulixēs*) is the Latin version of Odysseus (Ὀδυσσεύς, Ὀλυττεύς), the legendary Greek king of Ithaca.

It may be best to begin tracing his actions throughout Homer's epic poem to see how he was initially cast unto the world of literature. Homer stood at the end of an epic-telling tradition, at the end of a tradition of poetry that is called oral poetry. Oral poetry was handed down from generation to generation, and dealt with traditional stories that were well known. Some of the stories existed in the late Bronze Age and were passed on by word of mouth. Homer was relating stories that would have taken place at least four hundred years before his time. The Trojan War was fought between the Greeks and Trojans, and acts as the backdrop for the action in Homer's "*The Iliad*". Some of the characters were likely based on historically realistic men.

Many of Homer's characters are decidedly one-dimensional and are seen only as instruments to precipitate victory in a long and drawn-out war.

Near the beginning of the poem, Odysseus is shown to be more diverse. He is the one to whom Athena goes when Agamemnon's plan to boost the morale of his army backfires and they happily begin to ready themselves to go home after more than nine years of fighting. Agamemnon has ended his speech by saying:

*Come then, do as I say, let us all be won over; let us run away with our ships  
to the beloved land of our fathers since no longer now shall we capture  
Troy of the wide ways.*

These words are supposed to encourage the Achaeans, but inadvertently cause a departure from the war. Agamemnon is the king and the men who make up the rank and file do not need to be told twice. But it was the will of Zeus that Troy should fall

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and for that reason, Athena goes directly to Odysseus and uses persuasion to elicit his help to stop the exodus. This marks the beginning of a long and diverse relationship between Odysseus and the goddess, which could be best described as a friendship. This connection between Athena and the King of Ithaca had far greater significance in the saga of Odysseus' life: "*The Odyssey*". Homer's second epic poem has him as a central character and focuses on many of the qualities he is first given in "*The Iliad*". He uses disguises, calls himself 'nobody' and his trickery is shown in full force in "*The Odyssey*". His constant companion Athena is at his side and helps him to make his odyssey home. His cunning is used to escape the Cyclops and to listen to the Sirens; to fool his wife and son; and to entrap the suitors. When he visits the Phaeacians, he tells the king: "*I am Odysseus, Laërtes' son. The whole world talks of my stratagems, and my fame has reached the heavens.*" His sagacity is also evident by how he patiently survives all the years away from home.

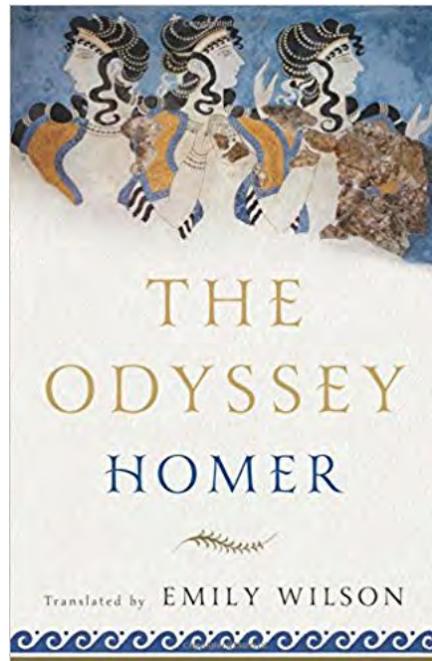
Odysseus was the husband of Penelope, father of Telemachus, son of Laërtes and Anticlea, and renowned for his intellectual brilliance, cunning intelligence, guile and versatility. He is most famous –i.e. his *Odyssey*- for his *nostos* (homecoming) which took him ten eventful years after the decade-long Trojan war.

During the age when "*The Odyssey*" was shaped (8<sup>th</sup> century BCE), the Greeks were, again –after years of invasions, rebellions, plagues, natural disasters- voyaging, establishing counters and colonies, trading and forgetting the defunct civilizations of Minoa and Mycenae.

Homer's *Iliad* sings the glorious exploits of godlike warriors in a legendary heroic age; "*The Odyssey*" is wary and tells of a weary man's fight for survival against threatening Others who never share his *Weltanschauung* or take his vital interests to heart. We feel a sense of social hostilities, deep divisions, and the mere possibility of dialogue keeps being out of reach.

The just published translation by Emily Wilson offers immediacy and naturalism over majestic formality.

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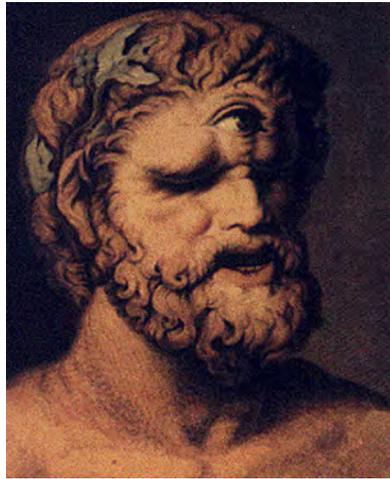


Emily Wilson is a classicist at the University of Pennsylvania: she preserves the musicality of Homer's poetry by opting for an iambic pentameter that is startling.

Odysseus devised the Trojan horse, delivering victory to the invading Greeks, but that was in *"The Iliad"*. ἄνδρας ('man') is *the Odyssey's* first word that evokes a stark nakedness, in which he will often be reduced in the story that unfolds. His craftiness must now be devoted to the efforts of grasping and apprehending what lurks within all those he meets: men and women, gods and goddesses, monsters and sorcerers. He tries to divine a core of shareable humanity that might show up if he says exactly the proper and right words –as he successfully does with the xenophobic Phaeacians, overcoming their suspicions, as they then invite him to tell his story, and –yes! – offer him aid. But there are Others who will not listen to his stories, whose sympathies do not engage, who pose an existential threat.

The sea itself, on which he and his men are forced to travel, is a treacherous alien element -even under the best of circumstances. And Odysseus is indeed faced with the worst of circumstances! He has made an implacable enemy of Poseidon, because of yet another inimical Other –Polyphemus- the cyclops - who happens to be Poseidon's son...

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At first Polyphemus seems, in his pastoral way of life, sufficiently *human* –unlike the ravenous six-headed monster Scylla or her man-slurping next-door neighbor, Charybdis – that Odysseus dares to approach the one-eyed giant as a fellow being. He and his men, Odysseus explains to Polyphemus, are not piratical outlaws but Greeks who fought victoriously under the glorious Agamemnon. He ends on a note of supplication. He appeals to the code the Greeks called *ξενία* from their word for “stranger,” which regulated how guests and hosts, especially when unknown to each other, ought to behave - an exaggerated etiquette meant to preempt the violence coiled within Other-anxiety:

*Now we beg you, here at your knees, to grant a gift, as is the norm for hosts and guests. Please sir, my lord: respect the gods. We are your suppliants, and Zeus is on our side, since he takes care of visitors, guest-friends, and those in need.*

Polyphemus explodes in contempt at Odysseus’s well-crafted words, declaring himself outside all norms that guide men and gods: “*I do the bidding of my own heart*” and he snatches up two of Odysseus’s men and makes them a quick and gory meal. Such abandon untouched by pity is quite a stark expression of an unbridgeable gulf... Many of Odysseus’s encounters are more subtly seductive, mingling exquisite

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pleasure with duplicity - on both sides. He's the lover of both the sorceress Circe, and of the nymph Calypso -who forces him to stay even after he's grown tired of her. But his erotic entanglement with these rare beauties never melts the frost of strangeness between them. Neither female has - neither can have - Odysseus's welfare in mind, because of an essential Otherness that prevents them from understanding, much less caring about, the man they use for their own ends.

And finally come the most unsettling encounters Odysseus must navigate: with the familiar, the *familial*, Other. Even when a warrior returns to the bosom of his family, his safety is by no means assured. What looks like intimacy may turn into enmity. A foe may await in disguise, ready to attack when the most seasoned of soldiers is unarmed and unsuspecting.

This is the message that the ghost of Agamemnon imparts to Odysseus when he ventures into Hades to ask for guidance on getting home. Odysseus learns that Agamemnon, at his own homecoming, died at the hands of his wife and her lover. Yes, Odysseus commiserates, disaster has again and again been visited on the house of Atreus (Agamemnon's father) by the women imported into the family. After all, Helen, Agamemnon's sister-in-law, was the one who provoked the whole bleeding mess of the war and its aftermath.

Agamemnon suggests that Odysseus is drawing too narrow a conclusion in confining the problem to Agamemnon's family. The truth is more general:

*At once he answered,  
So, you must never treat your wife too well.  
Do not let her know everything you know.*

Agamemnon reassures Odysseus that his wife, Penelope, will not kill him, but only because she is too sensible. Odysseus must not assume that Penelope - or any woman a man brings into his family - has his interests at heart. A few lines later, Agamemnon delivers his implacable conclusion: "*There is no trusting women any longer.*" Odysseus's own son, Telemachus - a baby when his father left for war 20 years earlier - strives to assert his manliness in part by silencing women, his patient mother in particular. "*Go in and do your work,*" he tells Penelope:

*Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves*

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*to do their chores as well. It is for men  
to talk, especially me. I am the master.*

By contrast, Odysseus refuses to renounce the possibility that Penelope will prove to be “*somebody like-minded*,” as he puts it to the Phaeacian princess in describing the ideal marriage:

*For nothing could be better than when two  
live in one house, their minds in harmony,  
husband and wife. Their enemies are jealous,  
their friends delighted, and they have great honor*

Honor represents the *sine qua non* of the hero. Conniving suitors can’t sabotage Odysseus’s hope that Penelope, a young bride when he left her, has matured into just such a soul mate. That hope is what inspires him to spurn Calypso’s offer of immortality - an extraordinary decision, even more so given his glimpse of the everlasting bleakness of Hades that awaits.



Dread of the alien is perceptible through “*The Odyssey*”, yet for its hero, canniness is not the only gift that is crucial to his happy homecoming. A deeper dimension of his much-praised intelligence - his gift for responding to like mindedness - proves

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essential. And it ensures his full stature as a hero, earning him an altogether different order of honor than the city-sacking warrior can claim.



In a recent *New Yorker* article Emily Wilson revisits her interpretation of Penelope, Odysseus' faithful wife from her groundbreaking versified translation of "The Odyssey".

Penelope spent twenty years in tearful isolation, waiting for her man to come home from war -and also, as it happens, from the cave and bed of two beautiful goddesses- while caring for her son and warding off the advances of her abusive suitors. At the same time, she manages to fool the suitors with her sneaky trick of weaving by day and unpicking her work at night, telling them that she can never marry until her project is finished. Moreover, she successfully needles her husband by pretending to have moved the bed that he constructed out of a still-living olive tree, a reminder that she has the power to hurt him by sleeping with another man. She's canny, she's strong-willed; she has grit; she has a vivid imagination; she's loyal; she's a competent, mostly single mother who shows deep love for her difficult, moody son, and she keeps a big and complex household running for two decades.

The sentimentalized reading of Penelope erases some facts about her social position that the original poem makes very clear. Whereas Odysseus has many choices, many

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identities, many places to go and people to be and to see, Penelope has only one choice, and it is defined exclusively by her marital status: she can wait for Odysseus, or marry someone else -and even this very limited choice is not open forever, since the abusive suitors can eventually force her hand. Worse even, her son Telemachus is telling Penelope, in Book One, to be silent after she asks the poet performing in her palace to sing a different tune. A.k.a. to '*shut up!*'

The silencing of female voices, and the dangers of female agency, are central problems in the *Odyssey*. Penelope's strictly constrained position is presented in some ways as necessary, since elite wives who act more freely may do scary things—like the half-divine Helen, who abandons her husband for another man, or her sister Clytemnestra, who helps her lover murder her husband. In Ithaca, Odysseus owns the house, the weapons, the wealth, the slaves, the farm, the orchard, and the seat in the council of men; Penelope does not even fully share the marriage bed, which her husband calls "*my bed.*" Penelope is, like her husband, highly intelligent; but her intelligence suggests caution and risk aversion. Her keen mind is not liberating; it keeps her stuck. By contrast, Odysseus' intelligence is defined as an ability to find a fix for any situation: he is *polymechanos*, the guy with a solution for everything, and an iron will. The poem sets up a sharp distinction between Odysseus' fantasy and Penelope's realism. *He* believes that, after twenty years away from home, *he* can return to being exactly the man he used to be, while *she* knows that, no matter how strong or smart or faithful she is, *she* can never be the same. In one of the most upsetting and beautiful passages of the poem, Penelope cries so desperately that her very being seems to dissolve.

Penelope experiences her marriage in terms of grief, abandonment, and the loss of identity—a loss that, disturbingly, Homer presents as a necessary and natural process, like the coming of spring on the mountain.

All this may make Penelope seem like an innocent victim, but she is also a woman of privilege, who colludes in, indeed insists on, the silencing of more vulnerable women.

Penelope clutches desperately at whatever shards of autonomy are available in her husband's house. After Odysseus slaughters her suitors, he tells Telemachus to kill the female slaves who have slept with them. In the poem's original language, Telemachus refers to them only with *hai*, the feminine article -"*those female people who . . . slept beside the suitors.*"

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In Emily Wilson's translation, she calls them "*these girls*," and conveys the scene in both its gruesome inhumanity and its pathos: "*their heads all in a row, / were strung up with the noose around their necks / to make their death an agony. They gasped, / feet twitching for a while, but not for long.*"

There is a vision of empowered femininity in the *Odyssey*, but it is conveyed not in the mortal world but in that of the Gods. The poem's plot is, of course, engineered by the wonderfully gender-fluid goddess Athena, who protects and saves her favorite human from the Sirens, goddesses and female monsters who try to entrap him or transform him or hide him or devour him or swallow him up, with their dangerous feminine wiles. The divine Calypso, Aphrodite, and Circe provide passionate models of female power—idealized fantasies of how much agency mortal women might have, if only social circumstances were completely different. Homer's great poem is a complex and truthful articulation of gender dynamics that continue to haunt us. "The *Odyssey*" traces deep male fears about female power, and it shows the terrible damage done to women, and perhaps also to men, by the androcentric social structures that keep us silent and constrained. Birds in Homer are the ultimate image of speech and of freedom. Athena repeatedly transforms herself into a bird of prey, whooshing up to the rooftops or surfing across the waves of the sea. The silenced slave girls are "*like doves or thrushes*," caught in a hunter's net. Penelope, meanwhile, is like a "*pale gray nightingale*" who "*sits among the leaves / that crowd the trees.*" She can't fly, but her warbling amounts to a "*symphony of sound.*"



## Odysseus after Homer

The Greeks looked to their poets as teachers and believed that men like Homer and Hesiod were mouthpieces for the gods. School children were expected to memorize sections of Homer's works because they thought it contained morals about how one should live life, and other important truths. The ancient Greeks cherished these early works and had great interest in what happened to some of their favorite characters. Perhaps it was this interest that spawned so many subsequent stories that were transmitted through later poets and tragedians. Of course, some of them found fault with Homer's perceptions of certain characters, e.g. Pindar.

Sophocles presents two rather different portrayals of Odysseus in his tragedies *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. *Ajax* is the earlier of the two and casts a more favorable light on him.

In the opening scene, Odysseus is with his familiar friend Athena. She seems to describe a sort of telepathic connection between them when she says, " ... *I felt your need and came on the path to guard and help you in your chase.*" They are presented as close in a spiritual way. Ajax has gone mad with the help of Athena and has killed the Greek flocks thinking they were his comrades. Ajax had attempted to murder Odysseus since he was awarded the arms of Achilles instead of him, but Athena protected him. Odysseus shows his usual practicality and desire to survive when he shrinks from her suggestion that he go into the tent of Ajax to see how crazy he has become. Odysseus realizes that Ajax is his enemy and that he would be in great danger if seen by him. Ajax feels wronged by his comrades and has specifically blamed the man whom he sees as responsible for the slight against his honor. Ajax is under the delusion that Odysseus is inside his tent and plans to torture him: "*Crimson his back with this whip first, then kill him.*"

Odysseus shows great sincerity when, instead of gloating with Athena over these events, he sees them as a tragedy - the tragedy of a fallen Greek warrior and hero, who can never live down this disgrace. He realizes that if Ajax can lose so much stature, anyone can. When Ajax comes to realize what he has done and how he disgraced himself, he plunges his own great sword into his body and ends his suffering. When a great man falls from grace, it is always a long drop down and many people suffer. Tecmessa, his wife, wonders if "*the dreadful goddess has bred this pain, perhaps for her favorite, Odysseus*". Ajax may have fallen in cow dung during

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Patroclus' funeral games, but there was never an indication that he and Odysseus were arch-enemies. Ajax, just like Achilles, felt he was slighted when he did not receive the prize of the arms. Ajax could have accepted the decision like the noble man he was and kept quiet; he could have acted like he did when he saw Odysseus in Hades, but he did not.



Key to exhibiting Odysseus' virtue and sensibility in this regard are the words that he speaks to Agamemnon: "*His greatness weighs more than my hate,*" and "*I hated him while it was fair to hate.*" To keep up a continual assault on the fallen hero would accomplish nothing – the words would be hollow. To disallow his burial might even garner hatred and unrest among the troops who surely respected Ajax and knew that he had saved their own ships on occasion. But the reason that Odysseus is quite sure that he is right about this is one he states in the beginning of the play:

*Yet I pity his wretchedness ... I think of him, yet also of myself; for I see the true state of all us that live -- we are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow.*

The last lines of the play reiterate these sentiments when the chorus says:

*What men have seen they know; but what shall come hereafter no man before the event can see, nor what end waits for him.*

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Sophocles characterized Odysseus quite favorably in this play, but as the years went by and he was near the end of his career, he gave a very different portrayal of him in his tragedy, *Philoctetes*. Why? One can only speculate on things that happened so long ago. The fifth century BCE was a time of intellectual upheaval for the Greeks and change was taking place in the political structure. Many people were questioning the old aristocracy and their power, and the assertion that *arete* was something rich people are born with. Men, who were called sophists came to Athens with the message that *arete* was a teachable thing and if they had money, anyone could be taught. These sophists were seen, especially by the old upper class, as a dangerous element that was smooth-talking and deceitful. A group who would end up causing havoc. In some ways, they were right and steps toward democracy were helped along by the introduction and innovations of men like Protagoras. Did Sophocles concentrate on some of Odysseus' well-known personality traits and turn him into a "*political man, of a type which may be recognizable to fifth-century audiences?*" Whatever the reason, Odysseus is a different man than the one seen in *Ajax*, but some of his original characteristics were still evident.

In the *Philoctetes*, Odysseus is portrayed as a combination of quintessential trickster and smooth-talking sophist, who has no compassion for Philoctetes whatsoever and no qualms about corrupting Achilles' son. At the end of the play, his deceitful tactics do not work. He loses whatever hold he had over Neoptolemus and does not get agreement from Philoctetes that he or his bow will go to Troy. Neoptolemus gave the bow back to its rightful owner and agreed to take him home. Its original owner then appears to give directions. Heracles tells his old friend Philoctetes that he must go to Troy with Achilles' son and fulfill the will of Zeus. Odysseus has no redeeming qualities in Sophocles' second representation of him, and this trend continues with Euripides' tragedies, where Odysseus always appears as a totally detestable character.

As example, Euripides gave Odysseus a major role in a lost play called *Palamedes*, a man known for his cleverness, and who ruined Odysseus' plan of avoiding going to the Trojan War. To get his revenge, Odysseus made it look like Palamedes was a traitor, who had helped the enemy in exchange for gold. Palamedes was found guilty with trumped-up evidence, and stoned to death because of Odysseus.

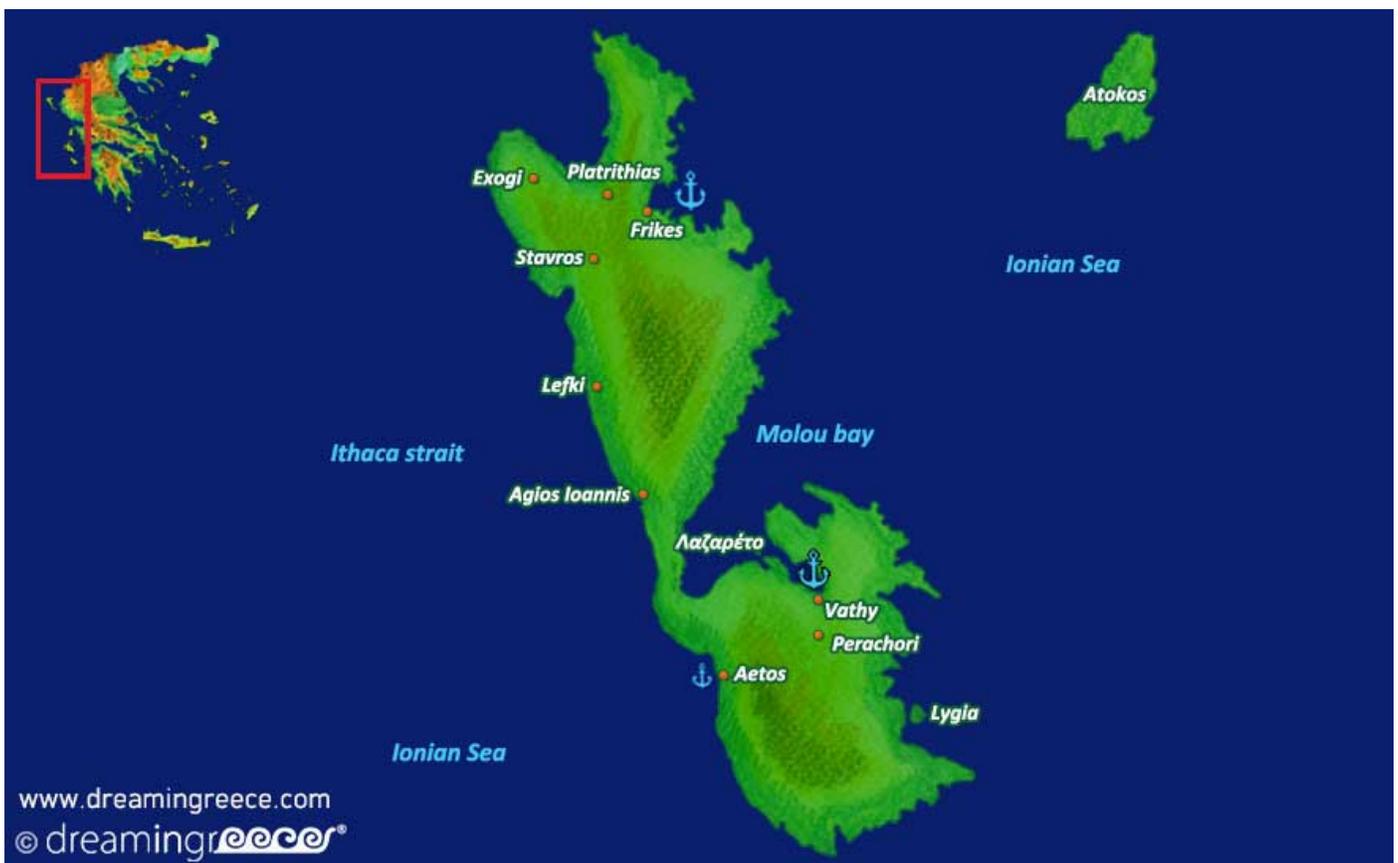
The Homeric Odysseus would likely have become the best of friends with a man as

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wily as himself, but Euripides seemed to thoroughly detest Odysseus.

Odysseus went through many transformations from the time of *"The Iliad"* to the fifth-century BCE, but in some ways, he did not change at all. He began as a man of words and he ended up the same way, even if the words seemed uncharacteristic of him at times. Odysseus may be looked at in a positive manner, or in a very negative light, but he was one of the only heroes to survive the Trojan War and he always worked for the Greek cause. Not many could (or can) say that.



But ultimately, Homer was a poet; poetry has too many similarities with music, because so much of both should do with rhythm. The way Homer creates the rhythm interplay of words and phrases feels perfect with, for instance, the 15<sup>th</sup> Quartet of Beethoven. There's struggle and resistance in both, and that's their power.



## Odysseus in Silicon Valley

The Stanford Humanities Center asks its very best Professors to be videotaped while presenting a most memorable, engaging, uniquely smart and challenging lecture.

In the series *Classes Without Quizzes, Stanford Reunion Homecoming 2015* Professor Richard Martin, the Antony and Isabelle Raubitschek Professor in Classics delivered this “*Odysseus in Silicon Valley: Archaic Hero for a Contemporary World*”, asking –and offering Homer’s own answers– “*What if the homecoming Odysseus woke up in Cupertino (CA) instead of Ithaca, and 3000 years after the Trojan War, rather than 20? What relevance would his character and story would have for our wired world.*”

It turns out the wily Greek warrior knew a lot more that we do: click on [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je9yWTykwHI&ab\\_channel=Stanford](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=je9yWTykwHI&ab_channel=Stanford), watch full screen, listen full sound, and ENJOY the next 50 minutes!

## Acknowledgements

This essay is a tribute to my sister Marie-Christine, the incredibly talented classicist, archeologist, passionate teacher of Greek and Latin, eminent lawyer, loving mother and wife, uniquely charming and beautiful, who illuminated and graced every moment of the life of the fortunate ones who knew and approached her. She left still in her prime, leaving us all feeling like blind Cyclopes, after having been slowly gnawed by cancer -while fighting it with strength, courage, humor and inextinguishable love for all.

I miss her so much...

I am also indebted to many Greek friends, e.g. Stylianos Nicolaidis, MD; Christina Ensign; and to many of my friends and patients who overwhelmed Emiko and I at each of our numerous visits (even during our brief honeymoon in Athens!) with their warm hospitality, their incredible feasts, their inextinguishable generosity.

The editing and formatting highlight the skills of Yves P. Huin. The sources –many copied *verbatim*- are dutifully referenced.



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