

The Winnowing Oar: Odysseus' Final Journey
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St. John's College, Santa Fe, September 21, 2016

Abstract

In book 11 of the *Odyssey*, in the underworld, Teiresias describes to Odysseus a final journey that he must take to propitiate Poseidon when his labors on Ithaka are concluded. Teiresias tells Odysseus he must walk inland with an oar until a wayfarer mistakes the oar for a winnowing fan. There, Teiresias says, Odysseus must build a shrine to Poseidon and plant the oar as a dedication. In this talk, I will explore various interpretations of this puzzling description of Odysseus' final journey.

Paper

In book 11 of the *Odyssey*, called the *Nekuia*, the book of the dead, Odysseus goes to the underworld in order to question the ghost of Teiresias. Teiresias describes a final journey that Odysseus must make after he kills the suitors:

But after you have killed these suitors in your own palace,
either by treachery, or openly with the sharp bronze,
then you must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey
until you come where there are men living who know nothing
of the sea, and who eat food that is not mixed with salt, who never
have known ships whose cheeks are painted purple, who never
have known well-shaped oars, which act for ships as wings do.
And I will tell you a very clear proof, and you cannot miss it.
When, as you walk, some other wayfarer happens to meet you,
and says you carry a winnow-fan on your bright shoulder,
then you must plant your well-shaped oar in the ground, and render
ceremonious sacrifice to the lord Poseidon. (Lattimore, 11. 119 – 130)

The most obvious intent of this journey will be the propitiation of Poseidon.ⁱ While Athena and Zeus love Odysseus 'terribly' (1. 265), Poseidon's anger over the blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus remains a menace to the 'long, peaceful life' that Teiresias next prophesies Odysseus could enjoy.

Poseidon, we learn later, did not intend to prevent Odysseus' homecoming, but the god wanted Odysseus to suffer more than he did, and arrive at Ithaka without treasure. In book 13, after Odysseus has been ferried safely to Ithaka by the Phaeacians, Poseidon complains to Zeus about the potential loss of status he will incur with respect to his thwarted intentions for a more difficult homecoming for Odysseus. Poseidon says:

Father Zeus, no longer among the gods immortal
Shall I be honored, when there are mortals who do me no honor,
the Phaiakians, and yet these are of my own blood. See now,
I had said to myself Odysseus would come home only after
much suffering. I had not indeed taken his homecoming

altogether away, since first you nodded your head and assented to it. But they carried him, asleep in the fast ship, over the sea, and set him down in Ithaka, and gave him numberless gifts, as bronze, and gold abundant, and woven clothing, more than Odysseus could ever have taken from Troy, even if he had come home ungrieved and with his fair share of the plunder. (Lattimore 13. 128 -139)

Having been thwarted with respect to his intention for Odysseus, Poseidon's wrath now turns to the Phaeacians. Poseidon takes Zeus' suggestion that he teach the Phaeacians a memorable lesson by turning the returning ship to stone in sight of the Phaeacian harbor. Odysseus is safe... for now. The fate of the Phaeacian ship has the intended effect. Alcinous recalls that his father prophesied that Poseidon would cover the Phaeacian city with a mountain of rocks after turning a ship to stone, and the Phaeacians immediately begin fervent propitiations to the god.

The forgotten prophecy suggests that the Phaeacians have let their diligence lapse with respect to Poseidon – Alcinous only belatedly recalls the prophecy that Poseidon would one day be angry with them because of their indiscriminate offers of convoy. Yet Odysseus told the Phaeacians the story of the blinding of the Cyclops, a story which included Polyphemus' declaration that he is the son of the "glorious earthshaker" (9.518). Nonetheless, the Phaeacians did not recognize that they were risking Poseidon's wrath in showering Polyphemus' mutilator with gifts and giving him convoy.

Odysseus' propitiation of Poseidon on his final journey will, similarly, attempt to compensate for any lost honor (τιμή) that the god may suffer over the ease of Odysseus' homecoming. But Odysseus' propitiation will lack the anxiety that characterizes the renewal of the Phaeacians' worship of the god. Teiresias mentions no future threat or calamity, and predicts a sleek old age for Odysseus once this final labor is complete.

The propitiation will permit Odysseus to render proper observances to all of the divinities. After describing the final journey, Teiresias orders Odysseus to return home and "render holy hecatombs to the immortal gods who hold the wide heaven, all of them in order" (Lattimore, 11.132-3). Odysseus' propitiation will restore Odysseus' own relationship with the pantheistic order and permit him in the future to perform the ceremonies of piety with Poseidon in his proper position of honor.

The task of the final journey is to establish a shrine to Poseidon in an inland region far from the sea. The propitiation will extend Poseidon's domain and his worship cult into a community whose inhabitants do not recognize the dedicatory oar as such, and who have never even seen the sea. What does this mean? Why is Odysseus' founding of an inland shrine with an unrecognized talisman an appropriate propitiation of the god of the sea?

Whatever oar Odysseus will take on this final journey, it will not be from the ship on which he left Troy. Lattimore (1965), Fagles (1996), and Mitchell (2013) all translate Teiresias' command as a reference to "your well-shaped oar." Yet the Greek could also mean "a well-shaped oar," and this must be its correct meaning, for all of the oars from Odysseus' ship were lost when Zeus destroyed it in the blast that kills the companions. At the end of book 12, we learn that Odysseus, the only survivor, washes up on Kalypso's isle with the aid of "two long timbers" (perimḗκεα doŭra), the only surviving pieces of the lost ship.

The last we hear of those ship's oars, they are associated with impiety, since the air around them is permeated with the odor of the cooking meat from the forbidden cattle of the Sun God on Thrinakia. Odysseus, who had been praying to the gods by himself, apart from his men, describes his return to the scene of the crime as follows: "as I was close to the oar-swept vessel, the pleasant savor of cooking meat came drifting around me, and I cried out my grief aloud to the gods immortal" (Lattimore, 9.368-9). The contrast between the pleasant odor of the meat, and Odysseus' grief highlights the distinction between the worldliness of the companions' human appetite and Odysseus' otherworldly concern with honoring the gods. Odysseus' words condemn the vessel and its oars, now tainted by the odor of impiety.

From the first 4 books of the *Odyssey*, the Telemachia, we have learned that the other surviving heroes from Troy, Nestor and Menelaus, are both very careful to render proper sacrifice to the gods. Yet neither of these two surviving heroes is "home" in the way Odysseus intends to be home. The anger-prone Nestor tells endless war stories about the glory days, to the chagrin of the youth of Pylos. In book 15 (191ff), Telemachus asks Nestor's son Pisistratus to conspire to let Telemachus skip a goodbye visit to Nestor, since the old man's clinging company is so tedious. Pisistratus immediately sees the sense of the request. "How overbearing his anger will be," Pisistratus rues, yet urges his new friend to sail immediately. Menelaus, on the other hand, whose memories might be somewhat more bitter, is drugged into mindless joviality by Helen.

Odysseus, as we have learned, is active, engaged, and responsive to mortals and immortals alike, and we must assume that this is indicative of the way he wishes to be "home." Odysseus must restore his good standing with Poseidon, but the way he is ordered to do it will require that an oar be mistaken for a winnow-fan. Does this have something to do with Odysseus' particular homecoming, his νόστος?

Teiresias describes the dedicatory oar as "well-made," from εὖ + ἀραρίσκω. The verb ἀραρίσκω means "to join" – so the adjective describes something crafted to be "well-joined." The fin and handle of the oar will have been "put together" by a craftsman who knows how to fit the joints to be strong and seamless. There are only two other uses of this adjective in the *Odyssey*. Elpenor's oar is also named as "well-made," as is the ax with the olive wood handle that Kalypso gives Odysseus to use as he builds his getaway raft. Certainly, the gods' tools would be well-joined. Perhaps

there are other well-joined oars in Odysseus' palace at Ithaka, or perhaps Odysseus himself will make the oar. Odysseus is well-skilled at joining – he is τέκτων, a *homo faber*, a 'maker-man,' able to control his environment through the use of tools.ⁱⁱ

Odysseus' talent as a craftsman is made clear in the two descriptions of his handiwork in the *Odyssey*: the construction of the raft in book 5, and Odysseus' own description of his construction of his marriage chamber and marriage bed in book 23. Homer uses ἀραρίσκω to describe how Odysseus "joins" the deck boards as he constructs the raft on which he will flee Kalypso's island (5.252). In this passage, Odysseus emerges from a night of extra-marital love-making with Kalypso in the innermost chamber of her cave (μυχός), then joins the planks of the raft well to make a sea-worthy vessel with which to return to his wife. In book 23, the joining, by contrast, consecrates the innermost bedroom of man and wife. Odysseus himself uses the verb ἀραρίσκω as he describes to Penelope how he "joined" the doors to their bedroom around the stump of the olive, before he constructed their marriage bed. In this passage, the well-joined doors seal off the marriage chamber (θάλαμος) from the rest of the house. These doors have also so far protected Penelope from the suitors, as she retires each night to the marriage chamber of Odysseus. The dedicatory oar, insofar as it too is well-joined, references Odysseus' prowess in both adventure and return, such that he can craft the tool of passage across Poseidon's domain to and from war.

The oar that Teiresias has in mind will have been made to row "ships whose cheeks are painted purple" (φοινικοπoreίοι). The Cyclops, Odysseus has already explained to the Phaeacians in book 9, have no such ships ("red-cheeked ships" - μιλτοπαρείοι) nor carpenters to build them (9.125). Although Poseidon is god of the sea, his son Polyphemos and the race of Cyclops have no knowledge of ship-building and the art of joining, and do not venture onto the sea. The people whom Odysseus will introduce to Poseidon-worship on the final journey will also have no direct knowledge of the craft that could take them into Poseidon's domain. Moreover, Teiresias does not instruct Odysseus to correct the wayfarer who thinks the oar is a winnow-fan, so the expansion of the Poseidon-cult apparently does not require that the new worshippers understand the oar as talismanic of Poseidon's actual domain.

Teiresias tells Odysseus that the wayfarer's mistake about the oar will be the "sign" (σημα) that he is in the correct place to perform the propitiation. Teiresias uses the word "sign" to denote a "signal" or "mark" by which Odysseus can recognize the sacred place. Yet the word can also be used to denote a grave-marker, as the shade of Elpenor has used it just 50 lines earlier.

Recall that Elpenor fell off the roof just as Odysseus and his companions left Circe's island for the underworld. Since the body of Elpenor was left unburied, he does not seem to have to drink the blood to speak to Odysseus in the underworld. He approaches even before Odysseus has spoken with Teiresias, and begs Odysseus to return to Aiaia, and

burn me there with all my armor that belongs to me, and heap up a grave mound (σῆμα) beside the beach of the gray sea, for an unhappy man, so that those to come will know of me. Do this for me, and on top of the grave mound plant the oar with which I rowed when I was alive and among my companions. (Lattimore, 11.74-8)

Here the oar on the tomb signifies the grave of a man who rowed. Such a sign would be an appropriate grave-marker for any of the companions, but the others will have no graves, for they have offended Helios in eating the cattle of the Sun God, and are lost at sea when Zeus (interestingly not Poseidon) blasts their ship after their departure from Thrinakia. The oar that Odysseus is to plant at the new shrine to Poseidon will also be a sign, but one that only Odysseus as its human founder will fully understand, as the local community will mistake it for a threshing tool.

How might Odysseus understand the significance of the winnowing oar? Given the proximity of Elpenor's request and Teiresias' instructions, perhaps Odysseus will understand the oar as a death-token of his lost companions. Perhaps the oar will signify his lament for the companions' human frailty, their inability to refrain from the flesh of the forbidden cattle, an inability which Homer and Poseidon describe at the very beginning of the *Odyssey* as the companions' characteristic "wild recklessness" (1.7, 34). This is a single word in Greek, a word that shares the root with the word ἄθῃ, a delusion about the cosmos that leads to ruin caused by the gods.

Odysseus himself is apparently free from this kind of cosmic folly. Yet it can be hard for a contemporary reader to appreciate this, for Odysseus' relationship with his men often strikes contemporary readers as merely instrumental. As Robert Hollander writes in his commentary on Dante's *Inferno* Canto 26, which I will return to below, "the companions are Ulysses' oars" (Hollander, 493). By this reading, the oar is, in a sense, any man who rowed for Odysseus, and it will be unnamed and unrecognized, just as the companions are.

Another possibility is that Odysseus will understand the transformation of the oar into winnow-fan as a transition from sea to land, or from war to peace. Teiresias has prophesied for him a long life into "sleek old age." Odysseus' life will be peaceful and prosperous, focused on animal husbandry, fruit trees, and the growing and harvest of grain. We don't know what form this death will take, but it will come not "on the sea" but "from the sea," as something foreign to Odysseus' pastoral life on Ithaka.

The *Odyssey* tells the tale of a man who figured out how to get home from war – not just back to his native place, as Nestor and Menelaus have also done, but home, at home, alive to the present, not haunted as so many veterans are. The poem shows us that homecoming in this fullest sense (νόστος) is not simply a transition from 'violent' war to 'non-violent' domestic life. Odysseus makes himself at home in a world that he understands to be full of forces beyond the power of humans to control. The transformation of "a well-made oar" into a winnow-fan is not simply

the transformation of a tool of the stormy sea into a tool of a peaceful agrarian life. Olson (1997) points out that the word Teiresias uses for winnow-fan is a *hapax legomenon*, a word that only appears once in surviving Greek literature, a composite of ἄλειψι (ears of corn) and λογός (destroyer). Homer's poem avoids the two names of this tool in daily use – πτόον and κρίναξ - in order to call attention to the way this agrarian tool destroys the objects on which it is used.

Odysseus is, similarly, a wrecker of men. By this reckoning, the Odysseus we get to know in the *Odyssey* may strike a reader as a strange figure to be charged with an evangelical function with respect to Poseidon. The final journey will have little in common with Odysseus' adventures on the way home from Troy. Odysseus has only to walk inland until the oar across his shoulders is mistaken for a winnow-fan. Yet Odysseus' survival to perform this final propitiation has come at considerable cost, if not to Odysseus, then certainly to others. Odysseus has broken the goddess Kalypso's heart, lost his own comrades, brought about the death of the sailors on the Phaeacian ship that bore Odysseus safely to Ithaka, and potentially led to the obliteration of the rest of the Phaeacians as well. Odysseus has mercilessly slaughtered the suitors and the maidservants who slept with them, including Eurynomos, characterized by Homer as a decent, god-fearing man. He has all but killed Irus, the local beggar.

For a reader who has never gone to war, it may be hard to accept that none of these actions have earned Odysseus the enmity of the gods. Rather, Odysseus is hated by Poseidon because he mutilated Poseidon's monstrous son Polyphemus in order to escape from the Cyclops' cave. Obviously, the contemporary code of universal morality condemns this. The only reason Odysseus was in the Cyclops' cave in the first place was because he was eager to acquire gifts and glory. Yet any concerns a contemporary reader has about the moral quality of Odysseus' motives will have to be set aside. In the Homeric context, gifts and glory constitute a warrior's honor, much as medals, decorations, and ceremony do today. Yet the markings of honor do not always go to the most worthy men. Indeed, there is much dispute in the classical literature about whether Odysseus deserves the honor he received at Troy, since he utilizes cunning in combat, and does not rely on naïve strength and physical power. Yet Odysseus' methods work. His stratagems at Troy won the war for his side. Lives were saved, as we would say in the American military context today. Homer's gods are not much concerned with the methods that mortals employ in the deadly business of war.

With respect to the gods, Homer lacks what we would call moral theism. Moral theism is the notion that the proper worship of the gods entails the wish for moral purity, serves as the basis for moral redemption, or requires repentance of sin. Worship of the Homeric pantheon is transactional, and, as we shall see, relational, but it is not based on any stable moral theism.

The idea that a character like Odysseus could successfully propitiate the angry Poseidon requires many contemporary readers to suspend something of their

theistic expectations. Against the backdrop of my own peaceful life context and relatively unchallenged theological commitments, much of what Odysseus does appears morally deficient. Odysseus himself, for example, in telling the tale to the Phaeacians, calls his boast to the mutilated child of Poseidon a “taunt” (κεπτόμιος). However savage the Cyclops were, they kept to themselves, and Odysseus only visited their island because he wanted to “find out about these people, and learn what they are” (Lattimore 9.174), in the hopes, as always, of gaining status in the form of gifts (dōra), honor (timē), and fame (kléoj). Such passages challenge a reader to ask herself: what do we really mean when we insist that the tenets of moral theism apply to soldiers at war?

Occasionally in translation, Homer is made to suggest that divinities engage in something like moral retributive justice. When Poseidon complains to Zeus that Odysseus has had an effortless landing on Ithaka, Zeus tell him “if any humans should insolently deny you your proper honors, of course you must feel free to punish them in whatever way that you want to” (Mitchell, 13.141-2). The Greek here for ‘punish,’ *tísij*, means something like “extract payment”. Yet it is not the primary offender Odysseus who is characterized as owing a debt to Poseidon, it is the secondary offenders the Phaeacians who owe this “payment” for their lapse in the diligence of their worship. Poseidon’s turning the ship to stone alerts the Phaeacians to their debt, which they attempt to pay by their fervent sacrifices. Poseidon does not pursue any principled retribution against Odysseus, in fact Poseidon is (presumably) placated at the very moment that Odysseus is free to undertake his machinations against the suitors. Poseidon does not “punish” in the morally theistic sense of giving mortals what they justly deserve. Rather, the word *tísij* implies a transactional lapse; the Phaeacians “owe” Poseidon something if the god is not to lose honor and status among his fellow immortals.

Homer’s narrative captures this through the technique of caesura in line 13.187. Caesura, or “cut,” is a sense break inserted in or after the 3rd of the 6 feet of a line of dactylic hexameter. In book 13, line 187, the 1st three feet are translated: “standing around the altar”, a phrase that finishes the description of the ceremonies of sacrifice that the Phaeacians diligently undertake after witnessing the ship turning to stone, and after Alcinous’ belated recollection of the prophecy about Poseidon’s wrath. That is the last we will hear of the Phaeacians. We do not find out if their propitiation succeeds. Homer’s narrative now turns to Odysseus and his attempt to slay the suitors. The final three feet of this line of dactylic hexameter shift the scene with: “But now great Odysseus awakened.” Homer intends us to view these separate scenes as simultaneous, so that Odysseus’ forthcoming stratagems on Ithaka are framed by the urgency with which the Phaeacians have learned that because of their good treatment of him, they are in danger of suffering Poseidon’s full punishment, which would obliterate their city and presumably themselves under a mountain of stone.

This narrative device of caesura draws attention to the fact that Odysseus will not have to “pay” Poseidon the price of the many sufferings the god intended for him.

Poseidon, it turns out, does not reckon his accounts that way. Poseidon's wrath is kindled for partisan reasons: when his own kindred are wronged or have done him wrong. He is angry that the Phaeacians did not keep him properly in mind, and he wants to take revenge on the man who mutilated his son. Poseidon's vengeance has tribal meaning, but not moral meaning. Those who expect gods to be moral will have trouble appreciating this curious feature of Homeric divine retribution. Homer's world is a theistic world, in that there are gods, and they take a personal interest in the affairs of mortals, but it is not a moral theism. Yet there is much to learn from this theistic tribalism, in particular the way it appears to reflect something timeless about the way warriors respond to violence.

To illustrate this contrast between the heroic model of the warrior and the Christian model of moral theism, let us return to Dante, the 14th century author of the *Commedia*. Dante knew of Homer's Odysseus not directly, but from references in Latin poetry. In his *Inferno*, Dante offers a retelling of the Odysseus story that is not willing to absolve Odysseus merely on the grounds that Homer lacked a context of moral theism. Dante's language illustrates that Dante understood that this context was absent in Homer's pagan world, and yet condemned Odysseus anyway.

Dante's Ulysses is guilty of irredeemable impiety. Dante's story overlaps with Homer's up until the departure from Circe's island, when Homer has Odysseus enter the underworld, but Dante has Ulysses abandon the homecoming in order to attempt a hubristic assault on the Mountain of Purgatory. Condemned to hell for his unrepentant false counsel, Ulysses speaks of the Christian God dismissively, as merely "another," a god with his own petty tribal reasons for wanting Ulysses destroyed.

Dante's account is true to Homer's in one respect: Homer's Odysseus does not show any hint of repentance or concern for redemption. Much has been made of the transition in Greek narrative from the 'shame culture' of Homeric times to the 'guilt culture' in place by the 5th century before the Christian era. E. R. Dodds (1951) points out that Homeric characters do not exhibit much anxiety about triggering *fqóvoç*, the "jealousy" of the gods, or, more theistically, their "righteous indignation." Dodds writes, "It is plain...from the uninhibited boasting in which Homeric man indulges that he does not take the dangers of *fqóvoç* very seriously: such scruples are foreign to a shame culture."ⁱⁱⁱ Yet Dante's Christian theism requires him to condemn this attitude categorically, and Dante places Ulysses in the 8th circle of hell, among the false counsellors.

Dante's Ulysses is driven by a love of experience that is also familiar to readers of Homer. Ulysses tells the pilgrim Dante: "not tenderness for a son, nor filial duty/ toward my aged father, nor the love I owed/ Penelope that would have made her glad/ could overcome the fervor that was mine to gain experience of the world and learn about man's vices, and his worth" (Hollander & Hollander, Canto 26. 94-99). This passage seems to reference the opening lines of the *Odyssey*: "Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of" (Lattimore, 1.3), as well as

Odysseus' misguided insistence upon landing on the Cyclops' island, to "go and find out about these people, and learn what they are...." Dante's language also references *The Aeneid* of Virgil, Dante the Pilgrim's beloved guide, who wrote his own epic hero, Aeneas, to exhibit filial piety as his most characteristic and reliable virtue.

Dante's treatment of Ulysses in *Inferno* has other interesting references to Homer's Odysseus that can help us see how foreign Homer's notion of propitiation is to a theistic understanding of redemption. In Canto 26, the shade of Ulysses uses the following language as he boasts to the pilgrim Dante how Ulysses exhorted his men to cross the straits of Hercules in search of the realm of Purgatory:

"O brothers," I said, "who, in the course of a hundred thousand perils, at last have reached the west, to such brief wakefulness of our senses as remains to us, do not deny yourselves the chance to know – following the sun – the world where no one lives. Consider how your souls were sown: you were not made to live like brutes or beasts, but to pursue virtue and knowledge"
(Hollander & Hollander, 26. 112 – 120)

Dante's passage has much in common with the opening of Homer's *Odyssey* book 10, where Odysseus' companions lie disheartened, having just landed on the shore of Circe's island after being unable to control their impulses with Aiolus' precious bag of winds. Odysseus exhorts his disconsolate men as follows: "Dear friends, for we do not know where the darkness is nor the sunrise, nor where the Sun who shines upon people rises, nor where he sets, then let us hasten our minds and think, whether there is any course left open to us..." (Lattimore, 10. 190-193). The overlap between this passage and Dante's continues, as Circe will turn the first group of Odysseus' men into pigs, a reference that Dante also intends us to get, with his "you were not made to live like brutes or beasts."

Dante focuses on the way Odysseus' insatiable curiosity and love of experience constitutes an irredeemable failure to grasp the nature of original sin. Although Homer condemns the companions and saves Odysseus, Dante insists that it is Odysseus himself who is damned. His comrades, and the hapless Phaeacians as well, could be reframed by Dante's theist paradigm as simple sinners who wholeheartedly repent of their impious follies once they learn of their consequences.

Homer's passage, by contrast, draws attention to the vice that Odysseus' companions exhibit with the bag of winds, the lack of control that Homer and Poseidon have noted. The companions' recklessness with the bag of winds is the reason Odysseus has to go to the underworld to talk to Teiresias, who will give Odysseus the instructions for the propitiation of Poseidon. Odysseus himself draws attention to the connection between the companions' fatigue at their oars and the current crisis that requires the intervention of Teiresias, calling his companions after their expulsion by Aiolus as "teíreto... eiresnj," (worn down by rowing –

10.78).^{iv} Thus Teiresias' name itself phonetically evokes the companions' inability to sustain themselves at the oars of Odysseus' ship.

Odysseus' exhortation here, "let us think, whether there is any course left open to us," has its own etymological reference to an important difference between Odysseus and his companions. The 'course' that Odysseus asks his companions to seek is the Greek word μήτις – 'cunning' or 'strategem', a word that has a homonym in the word μητις – the indefinite 'not anyone' that Odysseus counts on when he tells Polyphemus his name is οὔτις – 'nobody.' This is the trick that prevents Polyphemus from getting help from the other Cyclops after Odysseus has escaped and barricaded Polyphemus in his own cave. The sound of the word μήτις is thus associated with the action that triggered Poseidon's wrath. In book 12, Odysseus' companions will not find a stratagem, they will fall under Circe's spell. Odysseus, however, with the intervention of Hermes, will find an effective stratagem. Odysseus will be able to master Circe, while his comrades will have to suffer living "like brutes and beasts" until their leader can save them.

From Dante's perspective, it is precisely the lack of repentance that condemns Ulysses to hell. While this aspect of Dante's portrayal is true to form, in that Homer's Odysseus does not repent, Homer's world does not have a theistic context in which Odysseus could be condemned morally for this absence.

Since the tenets of moral theism don't apply, Odysseus' identity as propitiate on the final journey has to be understood in some other way. Many scholars speak of the anthropomorphic patron-client relationship between mortals and immortals in Homer's world. Odysseus is able to get home and slay the suitors because he is favored by Athena, and Odysseus is favored by Athena because he has the kinds of qualities that will enable him to get home and slay the suitors. Odysseus can utilize deception and cunning to attain his ends, and does not see these means as entailing scruple. In fact, this very freedom from scruple may be the key to Odysseus' piety, for deception and cunning require a certain type of self-discipline, and this self-discipline constitutes what Homer intends as Odysseus' salvific virtue, the capacity that distinguishes him from his reckless companions.

Nowhere is this more evident in Homer's epic than in the tale Odysseus tells of what happened on the island of Thrinakia, where only Odysseus has the self-control to refrain from touching the Cattle of the Sun. Olson (1997) explores the relationship Teiresias draws between the oar and a winnowing fan by connecting Teiresias' prophecy to the upcoming 'winnowing' that will happen to Odysseus' men in retribution for their offense of eating the cattle on Thrinakia.^v On Thrinakia, the 'pure' Odysseus is separated from the 'impure' chaff that his men represent in their reckless unwillingness to endure hunger rather than touch the sacred cattle. Olson notes that the name Thrinakia comes from qrinax, a common word for a winnowing shovel (literally "three-toothed" or "trident," which references the symbol of Poseidon). Olson reads the entire legend of the Cattle of the Sun as a winnowing test for the kind of self-control that Odysseus alone is capable of. Odysseus passes the

test himself, but cannot control his companions' desire for the forbidden food, because he has left them to go off to "pray to the gods" that they might show him a road (ὄδος) homeward, "but what they did," Odysseus says, "was to shed a sweet sleep on my eyelids" (Lattimore, 12.338).^{vi}

Throughout Homer, sacrifice is associated with the odor of the meat of oxen, cattle, sheep and rams, an odor that spreads out into the air, conveying honor to the god to whom it is dedicated. The meat of the different animals yields distinct odors, and these odors seem together to make up the completeness of propitiation. Teiresias, for example, tells Odysseus that the sacrifice to Poseidon on the final journey must consist of a ram, a bull, and a boar. The herds of Helios though, are sacrificially taboo, for Helios does not want to smell the odor of their flesh, since this god "delights" in watching these animals with his eyes (χαίρεσκον, 12.380).

Although Odysseus reports to the Phaeacians that Lampetia told Helios that "we" killed his cattle, Helios only asks Zeus to punish "the companions of Odysseus." Odysseus ordered his companions to swear to him before they left the ship that they would not touch the herds on Thrinakia, but once the food from the ship has run out, the men forsake their oath during Odysseus' pious absence and slaughter the animals. Although Helios has to be told that the animals have been killed, he somehow knows to absolve Odysseus, whose salvific self-control includes the ability to fast and pray when necessary, apparently without consequence to his strength and endurance.

Since the events on Thrinakia are narrated by Odysseus to the Phaeacians, a reader might be suspicious of Odysseus' self-portrayal of his singular purity, especially as it includes the actual conversation between Zeus and Helios. Odysseus, however, makes a point of telling the Phaeacians that he heard this dialogue narrated by Kalypso, who in turn heard it from Hermes. We are to understand the conversation between Kalypso and Hermes as having taken place during Hermes' visit, described in book 5, to convey the message to Kalypso that Zeus has decided Odysseus must finally get home. It was during this visit that Hermes presumably narrated to Kalypso the conversation between Helios and Zeus which led Zeus to administer a "just" punishment to Odysseus' comrades for killing the forbidden cattle of Helios on Thrinakia.^{vii}

Once Odysseus has lost his comrades, his choice for killing the suitors is no longer between "treachery, or openly with sharp bronze" as Teiresias told him. Now the suitors must be overcome only by treachery, or trickery, as Homer's word δόλος can also mean. And so Odysseus does overcome them this way, which brings us to the final scene of the *Odyssey*, in which the families of the suitors, seeking tribal vengeance for their sons' deaths, put on armor and march openly on Odysseus, Laertes, Telemachus and their small armed band of loyal supporters.

Here we have an event which Teiresias did not mention in his prophecy, perhaps because it is not left to Odysseus to find a way to accomplish it. At first it appears

that open warfare will break out. Laertes throws himself into the conflict, and exults at the way “My son and my son’s son are contending over their courage” (Lattimore, 24.515). With Athena’s help, Laertes throws the spear that kills the father of Antinous, who was, appropriately, the most vicious of the suitors. But as Odysseus and Telemachus throw themselves into the front line, Athena stops them. “Hold back,” she says, “from grievous war, so you can most swiftly come to a decision without blood.” When Odysseus is slow to withdraw, Zeus sends a warning thunderbolt. The epic closes with the phrase “And pledges for the days to come, sworn to by both sides, were settled by Pallas Athene, daughter of Zeus of the aegis” (Lattimore).

Because of the *deus ex machina* character of this passage, Athena’s role in this scene could be compared to the end of Aeschylus’ 5th century tragic series, the *Oresteia*, where Athena brings in judges to make a decision about Orestes, and then persuades the furies to transform into the kindly ones and bless the Areopagus. In Aeschylus’ play, the presence of the goddess accounts for Athens’ shift from the customs of tribal vengeance to the rule of law. Zeus’ and Athena’s motive for not permitting the battle between Odysseus and the families of the suitors can perhaps be similarly characterized at the end of the *Odyssey* in terms of the gods’ righteous concern with overcoming the tribal cycle of violence, a morally theist concern that appears anachronistic in light of my argument here.

Yet this is not the only way to interpret the *Odyssey*’s final passage. The other Homeric epic, *The Iliad*, ends with a similar stasis, as the hostilities of the Trojan War are interrupted for the “burial of Hector, breaker of horses,” which restores order to both the Achaian and the Trojan communities, similarly disrupted by Achilles’ berserk mutilation of Hector’s corpse. The end of *Iliad* book one offers another example, this time of hostility between the divinities, restored to stasis from the brink of violence by the quick words and obsequious capering of the impulsive god Hephaistos. Many Shakespearean tragedies, including *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Julius Caesar*, end with comments that draw attention to a cycle in human affairs in which a broken community acknowledges the restoration of intelligibility and stasis. This cycle need not be interpreted through a moral lens. Michel Foucault (1970) suggests that such a cycle is intrinsic to a human sociology, as a pre-moral model in which human beings emerge from conflict by “finding a solution that will – on one level at least, and for a time – appease their contradictions.”^{viii} If this is true of the *Odyssey*, perhaps there is a connection after all between Athena’s and Zeus’ abrupt ending of the hostilities and the contractual, not moral, piety I have attributed to Odysseus.

In book 23, after the slaying of the suitors, Odysseus repeats Teiresias’ instructions for the propitiation word-for-word, in the first conversation he has with Penelope after their reconciliation. The word-for-word repetition is a mnemonic technique of oral composition, but it also serves here to establish Odysseus’ piety with respect to the importance of this task of propitiating Poseidon. The epic could have ended without further reference to Teiresias’ mention of the final journey. The iteration

suggests that Odysseus' intention is to follow the instructions precisely, and further, to enlist his wife's support and understanding of the significance of this crucial task. This, I suggest, might be the most profound meaning of Odysseus' νόστος.

Odysseus' earnest piety takes additional meaning from the final passage, in which the conflict between Odysseus and the families of the slain suitors is resolved by divine intervention. The *Odyssey* ends with a divine mandate that the people of Ithaka live in peace. Odysseus' need to propitiate the one remaining hostile deity now emerges as an urgent prerequisite to his fulfilling his political potential as a wise and engaged combat veteran, capable of rendering due observances to a complex hierarchy of divinities. Odysseus, Homer suggests, will not permit the kind of lapse that exposes the religious and political immaturity of Poseidon's existing mortal kin, the Phaeacians. Perhaps it is Poseidon's frustration with the forgetfulness of those who should by their kinship be his most zealous celebrants that leads the god to wish that Odysseus extend the Poseidon-cult into the landlocked agrarian communities of what scholars assume was Arcadia, a name that calls to mind Virgil's eclogues, which are pastoral idylls of shepherds and wood nymphs. The pastoral pleasures certainly await Odysseus, once he has seen to it that his own religious observances will be acceptable to all the gods, even Poseidon, in their due pantheistic order.

ⁱ Hansen, William F. "Odysseus' Last Journey." *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*. No 24. 1977. 27 – 48.

ⁱⁱ Pucci, Pietro. *The Song of the Sirens: Essays on Homer*. Roman & Littlefield, 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dodds, E. R. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. University of California Press. 1951. 30.

^{iv} Dimock, G. E. Jr. "The Name of Odysseus." *The Hudson Review*. Vol. 9, No. 1. 1956. 11.

^v Olson, S. Douglas. "Odysseus' "Winnowing Shovel" (Homer. Od. 11. 119-37) and the Island of the Cattle of the Sun." *Illinois Classical Studies*. Vol. 22. 1997. 7-9

^{vi} It is worth noting here as a digression that Odysseus' landing on Ithaka is characterized by his being in a deep sleep.

^{vii} Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. Harvard, 1985. 129-30.

^{viii} Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*. Pantheon Books, 1970. 357.

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