

## Synopses of *The Odyssey*

### Book 1

#### **Athena Inspires the Prince**

Homer opens *The Odyssey* with an invocation to the Muse of epic poetry and asks for her guidance in telling the story of a man who has experienced many twists and turns of fate and has suffered many hardships. Odysseus, the reader is told, is the only Greek survivor of the Trojan War who has not yet returned home or died trying. He is being held captive on the island Ogygia by the "bewitching nymph" (1.17) Calypso who wants him for her husband. Odysseus has incurred the wrath of Poseidon, god of the sea, by blinding his son Polyphemus the Cyclops. Meanwhile, Odysseus' wife, Penelope, is besieged by suitors at his home in Ithaca.

At a divine council on Mount Olympus, Athena pleads with her father, Zeus, to take pity on Odysseus and allow him to return home. She suggests that Zeus dispatch Hermes to liberate Odysseus from Calypso while Athena visits Ithaca to advise King Odysseus' son, Telemachus.

Disguised as Mentos, an old friend of Odysseus, Athena counsels Telemachus. She predicts that his father will return and insists that the prince must stand up to the suitors and seek more information about Odysseus.

### Book 2

#### **Telemachus Sets Sail**

When the assembly gathers the next day, wise old Aegypius points out that the group has not met in session since King Odysseus left for the Trojan War some 20 years before. He commends the citizen who was bold enough to call for the meeting. Encouraged, Telemachus effectively makes his case against the suitors and asks them to desist. Silence falls across the gathering as most of the men seem moved by the prince's plea.

Insolently, Antinous, the leading suitor, denies responsibility and puts the blame on that "queen of cunning," Penelope (2.95). He tells the legendary tale of the shroud that Penelope wove for the eventual funeral of Odysseus' father, Laertes, the former king now living on a farm where he grieves his son's absence.

Considering the attack on his mother, Telemachus remains surprisingly calm in his rebuttal. But he foreshadows later events by appealing to Zeus for assistance in vengeance. Dueling eagles suddenly swoop near the assembly, which the seer Halitherses interprets as a sign of Odysseus' return. Eurymachus, the other leading suitor, rudely interrupts the aging prophet and threatens Telemachus. Mentor speaks for Telemachus, but the assembly reaches no clear decision and dissolves. With the aid of Athena, who poses as Mentor and sometimes as Telemachus himself, the prince secretly prepares and sets sail for Pylos.

### Book 3

#### **King Nestor Remembers**

As Telemachus and Athena (still disguised as Mentor) arrive at Pylos, they come upon a huge ceremony in which some 4,500 people offer 81 bulls in sacrifice to Poseidon. Telemachus feels awkward and embarrassed by his youth and inexperience, but under Athena/Mentor's guidance, he makes a favorable impression on King Nestor, oldest of the Greek chieftains. Nestor's situation and, indeed, the whole state of affairs in Pylos stand in stark contrast to Odysseus' and Ithaca. Through these experiences in Pylos and with Athena's guidance, Telemachus learns how to comport himself as the son and heir to a great king.

Nestor talks of the old days and significantly elaborates on the story of Agamemnon's murder. He has little to offer regarding Odysseus, having last seen Ithaca's king shortly after the victory at Troy, but he suggests that Telemachus and Nestor's son Pisistratus proceed to Sparta to visit Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother, who may be of more help to the guests. Athena returns to the ship to instruct the crew before she leaves on other errands. After another sacrificial feast, Nestor provides a chariot and team of steeds for the two princes' journey to Sparta.

#### **Book 4**

### **The King and Queen of Sparta**

When they arrive at Sparta, Telemachus and Pisistratus are warmly welcomed. Telemachus is moved to tears by Menelaus' recollections of his friend Odysseus. The king and queen recall some of Odysseus' exploits at Troy but postpone serious talk until the next day. In the morning, Menelaus expresses outrage at the behavior of Penelope's suitors and encourages Telemachus by telling him that Odysseus is alive and a captive of Calypso.

Back in Ithaca, the suitors have discovered that Telemachus is gone and plan to ambush his ship on its return. Penelope is distraught to learn of her son's trip and the planned assassination but is soothed by a vision sent by Athena. Homer leaves the plot of Telemachus dangling as selected suitors board a vessel to set up the surprise attack.

#### **Book 5**

### **Odysseus-Nymph and Shipwreck**

The gods have gathered again on Olympus. Poseidon is notably absent, and Athena once more advocates Odysseus' case. Zeus agrees to send his son Hermes immediately to Ogygia in order to liberate the king of Ithaca from Calypso. Zeus advises Athena to help Telemachus return home unharmed, escaping the suitors' ambush.

On Ogygia, Calypso, aware that she must not cross Zeus, begrudgingly agrees to follow Hermes' directions. She provides a raft and supplies for Odysseus but no escort.

The hero himself is first seen weeping on a beach " . . . as always, / wrenching his heart with sobs and groans and anguish, / gazing out over the barren sea through blinding tears" (5.93-95). Odysseus wants to go home. At first understandably skeptical of Calypso's offer of freedom, he soon joins preparations for his departure.

Poseidon, returning from a visit to Ethiopia, spots Odysseus on the open sea, raises his trident, and sends a swamping storm that nearly drowns him. With the help of Athena and a sea nymph named Leucothea, Odysseus makes it ashore on the island of Scheria, home of the Phaeacians.

#### **Books 6-8**

### **The Princess and the Stranger; Phaeacia's Halls and Gardens; A Day for Songs and Contests**

King Alcinous and Queen Arete rule the seafaring Phaeacians on the island of Scheria. The morning after Odysseus' rugged landing, Athena (disguised as a friend) sends their daughter, Nausicaa, and some of her handmaidens to wash clothes near the spot where the beleaguered hero has collapsed.

Nausicaa is a classic nubile beauty and seems attracted to the wayfaring stranger. She tells him how to find the palace and endear himself to the queen, thus insuring his safe passage home. Odysseus follows her instructions and is received hospitably at the royal household. It is important to note that Odysseus refrains from assuming the position of a suppliant with Nausicaa, perhaps because she lacks any real power to help him, perhaps because dropping to his knees and hugging her legs might be embarrassingly intimate for the young maiden and cause her to take offense. He has no such reservations with Queen Arete and is granted mercy.

Odysseus eventually reveals his identity and welcomes the Phaeacians' offer to return him to Ithaca. First, however, he tells them of his wanderings.

### **Books 13 & 14**

## **Ithaca at Last; The Loyal Swineherd**

Odysseus' account of his wanderings is complete. The Phaeacians know the rest. They are silent for a few seconds until Alcinous speaks to assure Odysseus that he will be returned safely to his home and to insist on even more gifts for the guest. Odysseus will arrive in Ithaca with treasure surpassing his fair share from Troy, which has long since been lost. Consistent with their custom, the Phaeacians provide the wanderer safe passage home. This annoys Poseidon who complains to Zeus. The gods agree on Poseidon's vengeance against the Phaeacians.

Athena meets Odysseus on Ithaca and disguises him as an old beggar so that he can gain information without being recognized. He meets his loyal swineherd, Eumaeus, and is pleased with the man's hospitality as well as his devotion to his master, whom he does not recognize.

### **Book 18**

## **The Beggar-King at Ithaca**

As late afternoon turns to evening, another vagabond, named Irus, arrives. He is a portly buffoon who is a comic favorite of the suitors. At the urging of Antinous, Irus picks a fight with beggar/Odysseus, which he soon regrets. As tensions increase, Odysseus tries in vain to want Amphinomus, the best of the suitors, that trouble is coming and he should leave the group.

In preparation for the meeting with Odysseus, Athena makes Penelope look even more beautiful. The queen chastizes her son for permitting a fight and putting their guest at risk.

Odysseus rebukes Penelope's maidservant Melantho for her neglect of the queen. The impudent girl has been indulging in an illicit affair with Eurymachus, Penelope's smooth-talking suitor. Odysseus and Eurymachus have a confrontation.