

Examples of hospitality in the "odyssey" [hospitality theme essay]

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



In Homeric poem "The Odyssey," we are treated to an account of the story of Odysseus as he tries to make his way back to Ithaca after successfully aiding the Greeks in conquering the city of Troy. While the tale has various mythical and magical motifs in the form of Gods, Goddesses, nymphs, witches, and magic; one of the most interesting and a rather unusual aspect of the story was the astounding level of generosity shown to Odysseus through various parts of the story (Grabek, 96). In this essay, examples of hospitality in "The Odyssey" shall be explored.

It can be stated that if it were not for the multiple instances where Odysseus was accepting the generosity of various strangers, he would long ago have been able to reach home instead of being delayed for so long.

An examination of other forms of ancient Greek literature reveals that the concept of Greek hospitality (xenia) towards guests is firmly embedded in the belief that all guests are under the protection of the Gods. Zeus himself was said to be the benefactor of guests who entered the households of strangers in foreign lands and that to turn away a guest would be the same as insulting Zeus himself (Grabek, 96).

Other interpretations show the belief that guests are said to be tests sent by the Gods themselves and that various guests asking for shelter within households could be Gods in disguise (Grabek, 96).

One particular piece of Greek mythology supporting this claim is the story of Baucis and Philemon. In it, readers see a situation wherein Zeus tired of eating ambrosia on Olympus descended to the Phrygian countryside along

with Hermes to test the generosity of the people. Disguised as poor travelers, they knocked on hundreds of doors. However, they were always rebuffed, and the doors slammed into their faces.

It was only when they encountered the dilapidated cabin of Baucis and Philemon that they were accorded with the highest degree of courtesy from the unfortunate couple. The end of the story was the complete flooding of the Phrygian countryside with all that turned them away dying as a result, with Baucis and Philemon being honored for their generosity by being made into priests of a new temple on top of a hill that escaped the destruction of their neighbors.

As a result of similar tales, ancient Greek society at the time had a rather generous predisposition towards guests, often showing them the most fabulous hospitality that one can muster (Grabek, 96). It must be noted, though, that this hospitality is not the result of any ingrained cultural predilection towards generosity. Still, rather, it can be interpreted as being the result of fear towards the wrath of the Gods (Melisa et al., 1).

Another interesting factor to consider is the concept of the " guest-host relationship" in ancient Greek culture and how it plays a factor in the theme of hospitality in " The Odyssey" (Melisa et al., 1).

The concept of the guest-host relationship is firmly embedded in the method in which hospitality is given and how it is received. As stated earlier, it was shown that improper hospitality towards guests had the effect of dire

punishment. On the other hand, it was also revealed that proper generosity resulted in a significant number of blessings (Melisa et al., 1).

In this paper the ways how hospitality can be applied in "The odyssey." Three distinct parallels will be examined: Calypso's imprisonment of Odysseus vs. Circe's offering of hospitality and love; Alcinous/Phaeacians being helpful by trying to get Odysseus home vs. Poseidon's shipwreck and finally Penelope's hospital reception of Odysseus disguised as beggar vs. the suitor's bad treatment/mocking of him.

These three cases show the concept of the guest-host relationship and what the result of improper/proper hospitality in both cases was. It can be stated that while it was hospitality that enabled Odysseus to finally overcome various obstacles and get back home, the concept of hospitality firmly embedded in the guest-host relationship that caused several of his adventures and was one of the primary reasons behind him getting delayed.

In the first parallels, there are two distinct situations presented, namely the imprisonment of Odysseus and the reception shown to him by Circe. In the case of Calypso, Odysseus was found by the sea nymph after his ship was wrecked due to the fury of Poseidon. After which he spent seven years in the captivity of the sea nymph due to her falling madly in love with Odysseus and wanting him to become her mate. Under the guest-host relationship concept, Calypso is playing the part of an excellent host.

Even though her father is Poseidon, she still chose to aid Odysseus when she found him washed up on the shore of her island, Ogygia. In this case,

Calypso successfully fulfills the first aspect of the guest-host relationship in that she accepts a guest that has come to her home in need.

While Odysseus may be criticized in various texts due to his actions with Calypso wherein he did not attempt to immediately escape after getting better, the fact remains that Odysseus was fulfilling the second half of the guest-host relationship. He was adequately and respectfully receiving the gift of hospitality that was given.

For the ancient Greeks, the concept of hospitality does not just extend to how it was given but rather in the way it is received and the inherent consequences of the reception. For example, in the case of the island of Thrinacia, where Odysseus and his men were allowed to land by the God Apollo, various members of the crew violated the guest-host relationship by hunting the cattle of Apollo (Greek life, 1).

The result was the death of all crew members except Odysseus, who survived the resulting shipwreck. Thus, on the part of the host, violating the guest-host relationship by not being open and friendly to guests results in the wrath of the Gods descending upon him. However, the reverse is also true wherein guests that do not adhere to proper mannerisms behind the guest-host relationship will also receive some form of misfortune.

The consequences behind the reception of hospitality are one of the driving factors behind the reason why Odysseus had to stay with Calypso for seven years. He did not want to break the guest-host relationship by just leaving

when it was apparent that Calypso was in love with him, especially when taking into consideration the fact that she had saved his life.

In other words, it can be seen that for the Greeks, there is a specific code of conduct that must be done when it comes to hospitality or else there would be dire consequences (Greek life, 1). Homer further emphasizes this point in the case of Odysseus and Circe, in this particular part of the Odyssey, we are presented with the witch Circe who kept on turning all guests who came to her island into pigs.

In this case, instead of Odysseus himself being turned into a farm animal, he is warned by Hermes of what Circe was doing to his crew and informed him about taking the drug moly to prevent the effects of Circe's magic. The result was Odysseus brandishing his sword at Circe, threatening to kill her. The reason why Hermes helped Odysseus was that Circe was violating the code of conduct of hospitality, which even the Gods themselves must abide by.

Circe, powerful though she was, was not exempted from this rule and as such, was taught a lesson by the Gods to teach her to be more hospitable to guests. What is being implied here is that the rules regarding hospitality always have consequences no matter who you are. This particular concept will be more apparent later on as I elaborate more on the various parallels in this paper.

Unlike the previous parallel, where, in both cases, Odysseus had to spend a significant portion of time with both Circe and Calypso, Odysseus was able to get home through the Phaeacians' help. The basis of this story lies in

Poseidon's destruction of the raft of Odysseus and his subsequent shipwreck on the island of Phaeacians.

Once more, we can see the guest-host relationship wherein Nausicaa, the daughter of Alcinous, encounters Odysseus and encourages him to seek the hospitality of her father. Once again, we see the guest-host link at work wherein Odysseus is openly greeted by Alcinous and is treated rather well. Odysseus, on the other hand, similar to the cases of Calypso and Circe, once more plays the part of a guest who graciously receives the hospitality of Alcinous.

Unlike the cases involving Circe and Calypso, the culmination of the stay of Odysseus with the Phaeacians results in him being able to leave rather quickly for his home in Ithaca through their assistance. The reason behind this is connected to the concept of the guest-host relationship and the consequences behind the reception of hospitality. In the case of Circe and Calypso, both women did not want Odysseus to leave since they were both in love with him.

This presents a problem for Odysseus since he must also be receptive to the wishes of the host. As a result, his time in both cases gets extended beyond what he had initially planned for since he did not want to become an ungracious guest due to the possible repercussions this might bring him as a result of the guest-host concept.

While the Odyssey does take the concept of the guest-host relationship to an absolute extreme it does portray an accurate enough depiction of the idea

utilized in ancient Greek society (Shaw & Bloom, 41). Thus, it is also considered one of the examples of hospitality in "The Odyssey." It could be stated that the reason why Homer chose to depict the story of Odysseus in such a way was that he wanted to present his views regarding the system itself, which places an unnecessary burden on both the host and the guest (Shaw & Bloom, 41).

In the case of the Phaeacians, particularly Alcinous, after hearing the tale of the travels of Odysseus, it was the wish of the people present there to help him reach Ithaca. As a result, Odysseus complying once more with the concept of the guest-host relationship goes along with the wishes of the Phaeacians to help send him home.

In this particular case, it was the wish to help Odysseus by the Phaeacians that was the facilitating factor in enabling him to go home. It can be assumed that if the king wanted to keep Odysseus around instead of helping him go home, it can be expected that the time Odysseus spent away from home would have increased to a certain degree.

On the other half of this parallel is the case of Poseidon and Odysseus involving Poseidon's antagonist attitude towards Odysseus involving the shipwreck before Odysseus was able to reach the Phaeacians. It must be noted that as God of the sea, the various seas that Odysseus traversed were, in fact, part of the home of Poseidon.

When he blinded the Cyclops Polyphemus, who also happened to be a son of Poseidon, this constituted a violation on the part of Odysseus towards the

concept of the guest-host relationship, which inevitably caused him to be shipwrecked due to Poseidon's wrath. From this, it is further emphasized that violations of the guest-host link can and will result in an ignominious end.

The reason behind my emphasis on this particular concept can be seen in the parallelism involving Odysseus and the ill-tempered guests at this home.

In the conclusion of the *Odyssey*, we see Odysseus returning to Ithaca.

However, instead of immediately presenting himself to his wife, Athena first disguises him as a beggar for him to evaluate what has happened to his home while he was away. The result of this action is that when he entered the home looking for food and shelter, he was immediately accosted by the various suitors who were there berating him, mocking him, and otherwise treating him in a deplorable manner.

What must be taken into account in this situation is that Odysseus himself is the master of the household that the guests are in. Even though they are unaware of it, treating him in such a manner goes entirely against the guest-host relationship. Another factor to consider is that in several parts of the *Odyssey*, it is shown that Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, has often asked the various suitors to leave. However, most of them stayed despite her wishes and even abused their privilege while staying at her house.

This instance shows another violation of the guest-host relationship wherein the guests do not follow the wishes of the host. Throughout the story, it is evident that one of the reasons why Odysseus took so long to reach Ithaca

was because he adamantly tried to follow the guest-host relationship (Melisa et al., 1).

As mentioned earlier, violators of the guest-host relationship often wind up in an ignominious end. In this particular situation, all of the suitors at the house wound up dead. However, there is no punishment coming from the Gods for the actions of Odysseus. In fact, in some versions of the story, Athena herself intervenes to save Odysseus from the anger of the parents of the various suitors.

The reason behind this is the fact that the suitors themselves violated the guest-host relationship by not treating the host with respect and not following through with the host's wishes, as such, this justifies their slaying.

In the other half of the parallelism, Penelope treated Odysseus, who looked like a beggar with a great deal of kindness and compassion following the tenets of the guest-host relationship. Earlier it was mentioned that the concept of openly receiving guests was because the Greeks thought that guests were a form of the test from the Gods because they never knew if the person that they were treating was a God in disguise (Steward & Bloom, 187).

Similar to the story of Baucis and Philemon, the disguised person, in this case, was not a God but Odysseus, but it was also a test similar to the case of Baucis and Philemon (Steward & Bloom, 187). The result was that Penelope was able to receive the reward, her husband being alive and well.

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