

# The insignificance of human power in the odyssey

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



When reading the works of Homer, we find that an ever-present theme in his poetry is the relative insignificance of mortals and their creations. Relative, that is, to the much grander scale of the natural world. Yet in Homeric terms the natural world is much different than the natural world we know, and the most important element in Homer's world is the role of the gods. In Homer's works, gods and their actions, though they may seem strange and irrational to us, are simply understood as a part of everyday life. In the Iliad, a theme that was presented showed the reader the impermanence of human life and that which it creates, especially in comparison with the gods and nature. In the Odyssey, rather than presenting a theme showing the insignificance of human life, Homer shows us the insignificance of human power.

An aspect of the poem that immensely reinforces the idea that humans have little power in this world is the journey that Odysseus makes to reach his home. However, the key elements that weave the message into his journey are presented in the poem even before we learn the details of his homeward voyage. In Book 4, King Menelaus of Sparta, a comrade of Odysseus in the Trojan War, tells Odysseus' son Telemachus the story of his own voyage home. Menelaus' journey home previews and parallels the theme of Odysseus' own voyage, that nature's laws supersede human will and power. It exposes this to the reader in several ways - the role of the elements in the journey home, the prevalence of disguise and natural symbols, and the outright superiority of divine will over human desires.

The journey of Menelaus, even before it is heard from his own mouth, is wrought full of misfortune caused by the elements, specifically the wind and the sea. For example, King Nestor tells Telemachus of a hurricane that split

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Menelaus' fleet in half and that " the wind and current swept them on toward Egypt" (3. 315-340). Not only is Menelaus' journey hindered by such violent and adverse weather, but it is stopped outright at one point by a total lack thereof. When Telemachus goes to Sparta to hear Menelaus' tale, it begins with the King marooned on an island off the coast of Egypt because there is " not a breath of the breezes ruffling out to sea" (4. 400-405). These problems with the elements foreshadow Odysseus' constant trouble at sea in his journey. For instance, after their encounter with the Cicones, Odysseus' fleet is driven off course by " a howling, demonic gale" (9. 70-85) that plants them on a random island from which they again set sail toward Ithaca, but just before arriving a " tide-rip" sets them off course once more, and the ships end up near the land of the Lotus-eaters due to " rough, deadly winds" (9. 85-95).

As is apparent, Odysseus' journey does indeed reflect what Menelaus' foreshadowed. Menelaus' story depicts men at the mercy of the elements, and reinforces the weakness of men when compared to the power of nature. This same message of nature overpowering man is found in Odysseus' story, and perhaps is depicted even more strongly than the previous examples when Aeolus presents Odysseus and his crew with a sack containing strong winds to aid them in their homeward travels. Essentially, Aeolus, a god, is giving humans power over the elements. Yet once the men are given control over nature to this degree, they still manage to succumb to its power by hastily opening the bag while their captain is asleep and they are within sight of Ithaca, and as a result are driven far back from their home once more (10. 30-60).

Menelaus' tale not only anticipates Odysseus' travels in terms of the misfortune caused by natural forces, but also in the message that those occurrences deliver. But perhaps even more importantly, it also previews the supremacy of gods over natural forces, affirming their role as the directors of the natural world, and in turn securing their role of power over mortals. In Menelaus' story, the Old Man of the Sea, Proteus, knows how to get around the problems that the King is having with the weather when he is marooned on the island (4. 530-545). Additionally, we see the gods' governance of nature when Menelaus pleases them with his sacrifice at the Nile and then is sent "a stiff following wind" that returns him to his native land (4. 655-660). His journey reveals that the gods are in control of nature, a supposition that is proven overwhelmingly true in Odysseus' trip home. In Odysseus' travels, we encounter several gods that prove this: Aeolus, a god who can place winds in a sack and send Odysseus homeward through control of the West Wind (10. 20-30). Circe, a nymph who sends Odysseus and his crew to the land of the dead on a "fresh following wind" (11. 5-15) and then upon his return sends him away again with the same "fresh following wind" (12. 155-165). And finally there is Calypso, another nymph, who upon releasing Odysseus from her island "summoned a wind to bear him onward" (5. 290-300). All of these examples follow up on the foreshadowing that came across in Menelaus' story.

The tale of Menelaus presents surprisingly accurate anticipation of Odysseus' journey. Not only are the actual events very similar, but the message they bring across is as well. In both cases, events show man struggling against nature and then show nature's strength being easily governed by the gods.

What is previewed in Book 4 is confirmed in the tale of the real odyssey, and this statement of the power of the natural world over mankind forwards the Odyssey's theme of nature's laws superseding human power.

Also contributing to this theme are the images of nature and disguise that Menelaus' journey anticipates in Odysseus' travels. A contrast between the desires of man and the natural world is made in Menelaus' tale when he attempts to capture Proteus. He and three of his comrades are dressed up as seals by Eidothea, the daughter of Proteus, in order to get close to Proteus and seize him (4. 490-510). This basically shows Menelaus circumventing his innate conflict with the natural world (since he is a human), and "becoming" part of the natural world by dressing up in his animal disguise and thus enabling him to approach the god and overtake him.

This episode is closely paralleled in Odysseus' excursion when he and his men land at the island of the Cyclopes. After he and his men blind the drunken Polyphemus, they use the flock of sheep in his cave as a disguise to escape by lashing themselves to their underbellies as Polyphemus lets the sheep out of the cave (9. 470-520). This has close ties to Menelaus' trick on Proteus, as once again we see men using the guise of the natural world, in this case the sheep, to escape difficulties they would otherwise have faced in dealing with gods.

What can be derived from these occurrences is that men can use images of nature to their advantage when dealing with gods, since the gods are generally at peace when in the natural world they control. Inversely, it can be assumed that the gods are not at rest and intrinsically in conflict with

humans, since they are not part of that natural world, or at least not in sync with the natural world that the gods have command over. Additionally, as Menelaus' account shows, gods deal with conflicted situations involving humans by introducing images of nature as well. When Menelaus and his men attack Proteus, he responds by shape shifting into a lion, then a serpent, a panther, a boar, a torrent of water, and then a tree, all images of nature (4. 510-520). This happening has its counterpart in Odysseus' story, too - when he and his crew land on Aeaea, the sorceress Circe turns his invading men into pigs (10. 250-270). These cases also forward the concept that humans are not a part of the natural world that includes gods and nature itself. This differentiation between the natural world and humans emphasizes the overall theme we find in Menelaus' and Odysseus' voyages, as well as the entire poem - that human will is overpowered by the laws of nature, especially by the controllers of nature: the gods.

That theme is fully confirmed by the final element we find previewed in Menelaus' story and furthered in Odysseus' journey: the vast superiority of divine will when compared to human desire. When Menelaus speaks of Proteus' prophecies regarding his comrades from Troy, he mentions the story of Ajax, who upon surviving the wrath of Athena boasted arrogantly, and as a result was drowned at the hands of Poseidon (4. 560-575). This is a perfect example of the tremendous power of the gods, and how human will pales in comparison. Countless examples are present in Menelaus' tale. He is marooned on the island near Egypt because he did not offer sacrifices to the gods prior to embarking on his homeward journey, and they punished him for it (4. 525-530). As hard as they would have tried, he and his men could

not have captured Proteus without a plan hatched by his daughter, the goddess Eidothea, who pitied Menelaus' situation (4. 405-475). The words of the god Proteus are essential for Menelaus' survival and eventual return home (4. 530-545), and part of what makes that return possible is another sacrifice to please the gods (4. 650-660). All of these examples not only show that the gods are far more powerful than men, but that their whims govern the lives of mortals. The proof of human insignificance in comparison to the power of the gods is indisputable.

The superiority of divine will shows itself in full effect when the story of Odysseus' journey is told. The examples of the whims of the gods shaping Odysseus' future are found over and over - from Poseidon making the hero's voyage a long and arduous one for blinding his son Polyphemus (9. 580-600) to Hermes protecting Odysseus from Circe's potions and sorcery with a magic root (10. 305-340), practically every major event in Odysseus' trip has a god behind it in one way or another. The path to the Kingdom of the Dead and instructions for safe passage there are revealed to Odysseus by Circe (10. 535-595), as well as further directions upon his return to Aeaea, regarding the tempting sirens, the monsters Scylla and Charybdis, and the Cattle of the Sun (12. 40-155). Odysseus ends up on Ogygia with Calypso because his crew kills and eats the god Helios' prized cattle, and Zeus punishes the crew with death and the destruction of their ship (12. 400-460). And Odysseus leaves Ogygia due to Athena's persuasion of Zeus, who arranges for not only his return to Ithaca, but the protection of Telemachus when returning from Sparta (5. 10-30). All of these parallel what was

foreshadowed by Menelaus' story, and verify the notion that divine will utterly controls human life and is far superior to human desires.

It is obvious that Menelaus' journey is meant to foreshadow Odysseus' voyage. In doing so, it exposes several key points, namely the importance of the power of the elements, disguise and symbols of nature, and the role of divine will in shaping human life. All of these ideas, which the stories of both voyages reinforce, contribute to the overall theme of the poem that nature's laws, set by the gods and elements, supersede the will of humans. Homer uses many significant messages to get this point across to his reader, and the role of the gods' whims in shaping the world of the Homeric hero is a point of intrigue that makes the *Odyssey* such a timeless classic.