

Storytelling in homer's odyssey

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Tall Tales Things need not have happened to be true. Tales and adventures are the shadow truths that will endure when mere facts are dust and ashes and forgotten. --Neil Gaiman The escapades of wily Odysseus are ingrained into the hearts of countless children. The bedtime story of one man's journey home and the obstacles he faces along the way forever lives on in youthful imagination. Alas, a problem arises when mythology-loving children grow up. Vocabulary and comprehension matures slowly over time, and, at some point, the youth is ready to delve into the feast that is Homer's unabridged poetry.

As the reader devours book after book of *The Odyssey*, he or she finds comforting familiarity in the stories, the characters, and the monsters, but something is not quite right. While hearing of Odysseus' adventures as a child, the action was spoken from the steady voice of a omnipresent narrator, but in Homer's work, the poet often speaks through Odysseus as a storyteller recounting his glorious past. This is when the disillusioned youth comes to a devastating conclusion: Odysseus is a liar. Homer distances himself as the poet from the more fantastic tales that the reader recognizes from youth: the Lotus eaters, the Laestrygonians, the Cyclops, Scylla and Charybdis, Circe, Aeolus and the winds. All these wondrous tales are told from the deceitful, crafty mouth of Odysseus. To the Phaeacians, he is a illustrious adventurer ready for derring-do at all times. To the knowing Athena, he claims to be a Cretan fugitive.

And to Eumaeus and Telemachus, he in all his craftiness asserts that he is (while still a Cretan) a beggar who fought alongside the great Odysseus on the Trojan shore. Odysseus adopts these facades for different motives, but

the response to his stories are unanimously positive. Through his stories, Odysseus does not sacrifice his integrity, rather he gains honor. When the eager reader reaches Book IX, he or she reaches some of the most familiar events in Homer's lore. Homer, through Odysseus' account to the Phaeacians, crafts some of the most thrilling action in the poem. Daring escapes, clever plans, and terrifying beasts are woven into a tapestry of wonder and enchantment. Yet for the great storyteller that he is, Odysseus is hesitant to relate his tale.

“ But now you wish to know my cause for sorrow / and thereby give me cause for more” (Homer 158). As exaggerated as the following account is, Odysseus seems to be truthful about his grief. Whether or not his men perished as he claims is not certain, but death was the end to their stories nonetheless. Odysseus honors the memory of these men by spinning a yarn so great that his men become immortal in his story. This does not, however, mean that he wishes to present his shipmates as faultless. He freely lays blame on the crew for releasing King Aeolus' winds. By doing this, Odysseus proves his skill as a raconteur by showing man's greedy nature and the consequences that are a result.

Odysseus' goal is not to raise himself up as the greatest of heroes either. He freely admits to his follies and to the deaths that heavy his heart with guilt. Odysseus confesses to his own human weaknesses saying, “ Now, being a man, I could not help consenting” (189), when tempted by Circe to forgo his return home to Ithaca, putting his men in danger in the process. He even tells how one of his men, Eurylochus, blamed Odysseus for the death of his

shipmates at the hands of the Cyclops, “ That daring man! They died for his foolishness! ” (190). He willingly admits to being overpowered by lust in the case of Circe, but he also tells of his tactical genius concerning the Sirens. Odysseus’ story is not a matter of boastfulness, rather a matter of honor, his own and that of his fallen comrades. Clearly, the Phaeacians are satisfied with the narrative, “ He ended it, and no one stirred or sighed / in the shadowy hall, spellbound as they all were” (241).

So impressed by the story and empathetic to Odysseus’ losses, in fact, that King Alcinous almost immediately loads his ship and has a Phaeacian crew sail him back to Ithaca. The Phaeacians are so entertained and enamored by Odysseus’ eloquence that they believe any word that flows from his lips, no matter how ludicrous. Odysseus does not set out to deceive his hosts, quite the opposite. When King Alcinous asks him to relate his travels, he does not want facts, he wants a story. After incurring the wrath of Poseidon one last time, Odysseus awakens on an Ithaca that he does not recognize thanks to Athena’s deviousness. When confronted by the goddess in disguise, Odysseus “..

. answered her / with ready speech--not that he told the truth, / but, just as she did, held back what he knew, / weighing within himself at every step / what he made up to serve his turn” (250). After claiming to be a Cretan fleeing his homeland after murdering a courier, Athena reveals herself to her favorite Odysseus. Then, surprisingly, she does not chastise him for lying, instead she praises him for his gift of deception, “ Whoever gets around you must be sharp / and guileful as a snake; even a god / might bow to you in

ways of dissimulation. You! You chameleon! ” (251). Athena is not condoning Odysseus deceit, she is commending him. This prioritization of wit and cleverness over straight honesty is harder for modern readers to fully grasp than it would have been for the Greeks hearing the lovely recitation.

Using the guise of a Cretan once more (fittingly because as the famous Cretan Epimenides once said, “ All Cretans are liars,”) Odysseus tests the swineherd's, Eumaeus', loyalty and hospitality. Odysseus hints that Eumaeus' master may be closer than he expects (263). In direct contrast to the Phaeacians response, Eumaeus does not let himself believe the words of the stranger, how ever silver-tongued he may be. Eumaeus responds to the hidden Odysseus' message of hope with pessimism concerning lonely Penelope, old Laertes, and absent Telemachus. In the manner of Greek hospitality, Odysseus and Eumaeus share a meal, wine, and stories, and while Eumaeus' origin may not be as mythic as Odysseus, who is to say it is factual? His background is shared gracefully enough that even the esteemed Odysseus complements Eumaeus' skill, “ That was a fine story, and well told, / not a word out of place, not a pointless word” (275). When Telemachus returns, Odysseus carries on his charade. In the guise of a old beggar, Odysseus tests Telemachus' valor saying, “ If my heart were as young as yours, if I were / son to Odysseus, or the man himself, / I'd rather have my head cut from my shoulders / then to suffer the pestilence that is the suitors” (304).

In rebuttal to this harsh insult, Telemachus explains that Odysseus left him too young to prevent the suitors from swarming to Penelope. It is then that

Athena deems it time to reveal Odysseus' true form. This revelation and reunion is not only touching, but it also fills Telemachus with a pride and hunger to face the suitors. Odysseus disguised himself on Ithaca for almost four days before enacting revenge on the suitors who dishonor his home. Why would he wait so long? Why not burst through the doors right away and start cutting down men one by one? Odysseus never claims to be the strongest, the boldest, or even the bravest, but everyone knows that Odysseus is the wiliest. It is Odysseus, the master tactician and master of disguise, not a rage-filled berserker that reclaims his throne. It is safe to assume that Odysseus' stories are not factual, but that in no way justifies the statement, " Odysseus is a liar.

" His purpose in the story to the Phaecians is not to recount his travels verbatim, rather he only wishes to convey the bravery of his men and the sadness in his heart. By the end of his tale, the hall is silent with grief. His reason for acting as a Cretan outlaw is not treachery, but an exercise in his great skill. He hides himself to his friends and family not out of malice, but so his intellectual stratagem banishes the suitors to Hades, not brute strength. Odysseus's slyness and wit are to be admired, not admonished. When he announces his identity to the Phaecians, he does not cite his brute strength or skill in warfare as his gifts. He exclaims proudly, " I am Laertes' son, Odysseus / Men hold me formidable for guile in peace and war: / this fame has gone abroad to the sky's rim" (158).

While heroes such as Achilles and Heracles establish their place in legend and eternity among Elysian fields with force and passion, Odysseus forever

immortalized himself in the epics of the Ancients and the storybooks of children because of he is a “ man of twists and turns” who knows how to tell a good story. Works Cited Gaiman, Neil. The Sandman Vol. 3: Dream Country. New York, New York: DC Comics, 1991. Homer. The Odyssey. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. Garden City, New York: Doubleday ; Company, 1992.