

Xenia in the odyssey essay



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The Importance of Xenia in The Odyssey and it's Consequences One of the most important themes in The Odyssey is the concept of xenia, which is the old Greek word for hospitality. In modern times, hospitality is something we rarely think of, and the first thing that comes to mind is the hotel industry, but in ancient Greece, xenia was not about hotels, or just about etiquette, it was a way of life with many benefits in a world that was still mostly savage. Xenia was more than just being polite to strangers. It was a set of rules and customs that defined the guest-host relationship between two individuals, two groups of people, or an individual and a group. Some basic rules of this relationship were that the guest could not insult the host, make demands, or refuse xenia. Additionally, the host could not insult the guest, fail to protect the guest, or fail to be as hospitable as possible. A certain level of trust would eventually have to be established.

This trust was reinforced by both fear of word getting out that the host had provided improper xenia, and fear of retribution by the gods, since one never knew when a traveller might actually be a god in disguise, come to test the level of your xenia. All travellers were seen as sent by Zeus and under his protection, so giving proper xenia was also a way of showing respect for the gods, especially Zeus. The Odyssey by Homer may be viewed as a study in the laws of hospitality and is full of examples of both good and bad xenia, where good xenia is rewarded and bad xenia is punished.

The idea of punishment and reward for how xenia is offered is seen throughout The Odyssey, examples being Odysseus' encounter with the cyclops Polyphemus on his return to Ithaka and the eventual revenge against

the suitors. The story relies so heavily on concepts of xenia that it can be argued that The Odyssey probably could not have been written without it in mind. Almost every encounter between characters gives us demonstrations of how xenia should, or shouldn't be carried out.

Good Xenia: Odysseus and Nausikaa

One of the best examples of good xenia in The Odyssey is that of Nausikaa, a princess on the island of the Phaiakians. Odysseus had been shipwrecked and took refuge under a bush for the night. Late the next morning, he woke up to the sound of girls screaming while at play with a ball they had accidentally kicked into a nearby stream. Seeing an opportunity for help, he decided to approach them. Emerging from the bushes, rough, ragged, crusted with dried seawater and covered only by an olive branch; he approached Nausikaa and her maids-in-waiting.

A natural reaction in this sort of situation would be to run and hide, which is what Nausikaa's maids-in-waiting did, but Nausikaa, remembering the obligations of xenia, as well as the dream Athena had sent her the night before, stood her ground and waited for Odysseus, to hear him out. After he spoke, she used what means she had available to her to offer good xenia to a guest on her father's island. She called back her maids and reminded them that " Strangers and beggars come from Zeus: a small gift, then, is friendly" (Homer 105).

She then directed her maids to take him to the river and bathe him, providing him with oils to rub onto his skin. She provided him with fresh clothing, taken from the laundry she'd washed in the river. She also offered

him food and drink. These are all examples of good xenia to a stranger. She took care of his needs and then, afterwards, she even offered a parting gift: information about how he could accomplish his task of getting home. She told him how best to approach her parents and how best to win them over, so he would have a good chance of receiving the help he needed to get home.

Odysseus, for his part, also kept up his side of the obligations of xenia. He calculated how best to seek her aid without insulting her, " In his swift reckoning, he thought it best to trust in words to please her and keep away; he might anger the girl, touching her knees" (Homer 103). Odysseus made requests but not aggressive demands, and gratefully accepted her gifts and advice. It's easy to see the result of good xenia here, in terms of how Odysseus profited by it.

He eventually encountered Nausikaa's parents, was well received, entertained, and was sent on his way in a Phaiakian boat to Ithaka, loaded down with treasures. Good Xenia: Odysseus and Eumaios Another example of good xenia in The Odyssey is Odysseus' reception by Eumaios, a swineherd on his estate in Ithaka. Even though Odysseus appeared to be a homeless, wandering beggar, he was still received well by Eumaios. He was immediately invited in for food and drink: " Come to the cabin. You're a wanderer too.

You must eat something, drink some wine, and tell me where you are from and the hard times you've seen" (Homer 248). Eumaios even arranged his own bed as a bench for Odysseus to sit down, reminding Odysseus that "...

rudeness to a stranger is not decency, poor though he may be..." (Homer 249). When evening came, Eumaios made a bed for Odysseus and even offered him his own cloak to keep him warm during the night. This level of courtesy towards a man, who, for all appearances, was nothing more than a beggar, shows Eumaios' dedication to proper xenia.

Odysseus continued to stay with Eumaios for multiple days, but at no point did Eumaios ever insist that he leave. He offered as much hospitality as he could to Odysseus, trusting in the customs of xenia that Odysseus would make no unreasonable demands or overstay his welcome. For his part, Odysseus made no demands of Eumaios and did not threaten or insult him, despite his humble offerings. In fact, Homer repeatedly indicates that Odysseus' was thankful for Eumaios' actions. Eumaios' hospitality, and later his help, enables Odysseus to reclaim his house and get rid of the suitors.

Because Eumaios treated Odysseus to good xenia, and proved his continuing loyalty to him during the conversations they had while Odysseus was in the disguise of a beggar, his life was spared when Odysseus slaughtered the servants who had turned against him and against his house. Bad Xenia: Odysseus and The Suitors One of the most obvious examples of bad xenia in The Odyssey is the treatment of Odysseus' house, and Odysseus himself, by the suitors who, in his absence, have come to his home seeking his wife's hand in marriage.

The fact that they came to his house, seeking Penelope's hand in marriage, isn't necessarily wrong since Odysseus had been gone for nearly 15 years when the suitors showed up. There had been no solid news of him, and no

one had any idea if he were alive or dead. But what makes their behavior bad xenia is the way they went about it. They imposed themselves on the household, eating all the livestock, consuming the wine, insulting their host, Telemakhos, and refused to leave when their presence and intentions toward Penelope were obviously not wanted.

Penelope tells the suitors in the hall, “ Others who go to court a gentlewoman, daughter of a rich house, if they are rivals, bring their own beeves and sheep along; her friends ought to be feasted, gifts are due to her; would any dare to live at her expense? ” (Homer 325) She also later reminds them, “ suitors indeed, you commandeered this house” (Homer 393). The suitors even made plans to kill Telemakhos, to get him out of the way so they could further their goal of obtaining Penelope’s hand and dividing the spoils of the house.

Since Odysseus was, in fact, still alive and master of his house, all of these offenses of xenia can be seen as bad xenia against Odysseus. Also, when Odysseus returned home, though in disguise, the suitors continued to show bad xenia. Antinoos was particularly vicious to him. As he made his rounds of the suitors’ tables, in the guise of a beggar asking for hand-outs, Antinoos threatened him with violence, mocked him by calling him a pest, and then threw a stool at his back that hit him.

These actions, along with further demonstrations of bad xenia on Antinoos’ part and from all the suitors in general, show us the exact opposite of what good xenia is. In the role of the guest, the suitors insulted their host by overstaying their welcome, by making unreasonable demands on the house

in terms of requirements, and by attempting to kill Telemakhos. In the role of the host, the suitors failed to provide proper xenia by insulting their guest, Odysseus, by injuring him instead of protecting him from harm, and by not being as hospitable as possible.

Their bad xenia was well rewarded, since Odysseus was home with the blessings of Zeus, who avenges bad xenia, and Athena, Odysseus' supporter. As Odysseus prepared to draw the first arrow, Zeus sent an omen signaling his approval, a loud thunderclap. Still playing up to his role, Odysseus proved himself by firing the arrow through the rings on the axe-heads, and eventually bringing an end to the suitors who had insulted his family and house. Antinoos, the most vicious of the suitors, was the first to fall. In the end, all of the suitors and the disloyal servants died.

Bad xenia met with a bad end. The Importance of Xenia in Greek Civilization
The custom of xenia was, to the Greeks, the mark of civilization in the late 12th century BC, a time when most of the world was still savage. This is evident by Odysseus' statement: " Now, by my life, mankind again! But who? Savages, are they, strangers to courtesy? Or gentle folk, who know and fear the gods? " (Homer 102). This was his reaction when he woke up on the island of Skheria and heard Nausikaa and her maids screaming while playing with their ball.

He wondered if the people of the island would show courtesy, or if they were savages that had no regard for xenia. This shows us that any place that did not practice xenia was considered uncivilized. Showing good xenia could also be a way of spreading fame for your house or country. When Odysseus is on

the island of the Phaiakians, as part of King Alkinoos entertainment (his xenia toward Odysseus) he presents the Phaiakian dancers, in the hope that Odysseus would, “ on his return tell his companions we excel the world in dance and song, as in our ships and running” (Homer 132).

Later, when Odysseus is in his own house posing as a beggar, he implores Antinoos to give him a bit of bread, telling him, “ Let me speak well of you as I pass on over the boundless earth” (Homer 324). In other words, he would tell others he met of Antinoos’ good xenia and raise his reputation and fame. Of course, that’s not what happened in that instance, but it’s still obvious that providing good xenia was beneficial to reputation and fame. Xenia was as important a part of Greek civilization as government, reinforced by religion and constantly producing beneficial results for all parties involved.

Conclusion The Odyssey, with all of its examples of both good and bad xenia, offers us a look into the world of the Greeks, and the importance this cultural element played in their daily lives. Throughout the story, bad xenia is punished and good xenia brings rewards to those who offer it. It was religious, it was beneficial, and it distinguished the Greeks from their barbarian neighbors. The Odyssey, as well as being an entertaining story, reinforced the ideals of consideration among the Greeks who heard it.