Heroics, Home, and Heartbreak: The Centrality of Human Misery in the *Odyssey*

The *Odyssey* is, first and foremost, about a man who suffers. The most famous part of the poem, after all, is the four-book journey of the protagonist across treacherous waters and through various trials. But his suffering is not limited to his physical trials on the sea — when we first meet him on Calypso's island, he's crying a river (or perhaps, an ocean), and even after returning home he suffers abuse after abuse by the suitors as they wander through his halls.

This paper focuses on Odysseus' identity as a "man of suffering." An understanding of suffering in the *Odyssey* helps us comprehend not only Odysseus' near-universal appeal but also what makes him exceptional among the poem's characters; that is, what makes him a hero. This examination also gives anthropological insight to how Homer[1] and his audience viewed how suffering works on a communal level. I take a twofold approach: first I will offer some reflections on his character based on a close examination of the language used to describe him, and then I will elaborate further upon how his suffering is tied to his house, the οἶκος, in order to offer one view of how his suffering plays a role in the larger web of characters and in the entire poem.

[1] "Homer" as used in this paper refers to whatever creative mind (or minds) was behind the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, used if nothing else as convenience to stand in for the whole of these poems' oral tradition (cf. John Miles Foley, "Formulas, metre and type-scenes," In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, Edited by Robert Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 117-38.

The bulk of scholarly discussion on Odysseus' character is devoted to his identity as "the wily one,"[2] the clever man of tricks and twists, and this is rightfully the case — several of his epithets, such as πολύμητις ("clever")[3] refer to these qualities, and several key scenes of the poem feature Odysseus outwitting brutish opponents. But to over-examine him in this light, I fear, downplays other crucial aspects of his character. Crafty Odysseus is a bane to all who cross him, but just as he inflicts pain upon others, pain is also inflicted on him: this parallel is exemplified in another epithet, πολύτλας (long-suffering). He "suffers many pains down his spirit," as Homer says in the proem (1.4). Suffering has two faces with Odysseus: he is an active inflictor of suffering, yet also receives both physical pains as well as the emotional torments of homesickness.

Odysseus' name is missing from the proem. In fact, it is not mentioned until 1.21 several lines later. While it is entirely possible that the subject of this poem was so well known that he needed no introduction, the absence is still striking (Achilles, after all, is named in the first line of the *Iliad*). Where we may expect a name, we receive two words, spaced out in the first line: "ἄνδρα" and the epithet "πολύτροπον." Homeric epithets convey an "essential idea," as Albert Lord notes, and so give insight to the poem's themes and construction.[4] The word

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[2] See Michael Silk, "The *Odyssey* and its Explorations," In R. Fowler, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 31-44; Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, Translated by Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).
[3] All translations are my own.
[4] Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 30. Some circles of Homeric studies have previously argued that Homer's choice of epithet is dictated entirely, or nearly so, by meter. This interpretation is falling out of favor in recent important scholarship. For a response to this in favor of a more literary and

“πολύτροπος” is exceedingly rare, occurring at only one other place in the poem. Its presence in the introductory line, therefore, merits close attention, as it is a part of our introduction to our hero.

“ἄνδρα πολύτροπον” at its roots means “the much-turn man.” The word πολύτροπος provides no grammatical indication of agency but rather includes both active and passive ideas. Through this ambiguity, Homer accomplishes a description of the unnamed hero that is exactingly precise: the “man,” ἄνδρα, whom we know to be Odysseus, is both the “turner” and the “one turned.” The word in this way initiates a tension between active and passive speech, a tension maintained through the successive lines of the proem with a smattering of verbs in all three grammatical voices. Odysseus turns and twists his way out of tough situations, such as in the cave of Polyphemus, and he is the one being turned, so to speak, when he is forced by Poseidon to wander the sea for a decade. Here, with the word πολύτροπον, we see displayed in full force this duality of Odysseus’ character. Because πολύτροπον stands in place of a name, it stands in for Odysseus’ whole identity, and it also serves to make him a sort of universal figure: he is an anonymous ἄνδρα identified by his suffering, and what human being hasn’t suffered? This word in the first line, then, captures the whole essence of Odysseus’ character to such a degree that a name is irrelevant. The resultant anonymity and morphological ambiguity of Homer’s man creates the sense that the man whom

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traditional reading of Homer’s choices which sees them as aiding in the narrative’s construction, see Foley, “Formulas” and Gregory Nagy, *Homeric Questions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

he sings is, through the suffering he endures, an archetype of man.

Homer may delay the initial invocation of Odysseus' name; however, he does not underestimate its importance. We see in our hero's name similar, though now more nuanced, dynamics to those we just observed in πολύτροπον. Odysseus' old nurse Eurycleia recognizes him by his old hunting scar, emphasizing once more that suffering borne is central to his character's identity. This scar then prompts a flashback in which we learn that Odysseus' maternal grandfather, Autolycus, derived his name from the verb ὀδύσασθαι, meaning "to rage at" or "to curse." But this verb is a deponent from the middle voice. Émile Benveniste notes that the middle voice describes "an act in which the subject is affected by the process and is himself situated within the process" (quoted in Clay, *Wrath of Athena*, 62). ὀδύσασθαι is middle, though it translates as active, but overtones of the middle remain in the deponent form. Furthermore, the -εὺς suffix denotes an active agent (cf. βασιλεὺς). Where "πολύτροπον" evokes ambiguity of agent, the name Ὀδυσσεὺς, on the other hand, is explicitly active in both its morphology and etymology. Action is highlighted in his name, but the ambiguity, through its etymology, is preserved (though differently nuanced). He doles out suffering, and as a result he himself suffers: action is primary, passivity secondary. In the same way that the word πολύτροπον in the introduction emphasizes the centrality of suffering in Odysseus' character, the root word of Odysseus' name builds further on this understanding. In both instances, the core of his identity is founded the suffering he endures throughout his life.

Now, we shall turn from the initial part of our examination concerned with names and epithets, and take a

wider approach. Odysseus' suffering originates from more than the annoyances of being lost at sea or stranded on a desert island for so long. It has a more specific and much nobler origin, namely, his absence from his οἶκος. The poem's genre is important to bear in mind here. Among his "psychodynamics of orality," Ong notes that "[b]ecause of its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups."[5] Ong's observations help us understand precisely why Odysseus' suffering revolves around the οἶκος, given the critical nature of community in oral society like the one of which Homer sings. Therefore, an investigation of the suffering of one character — in this essay Odysseus — necessitates an understanding of the suffering experienced by the members of his "group," that is, his household, the οἶκος. The geography of the *Odyssey* abounds with islands; to examine characters in isolation, however, as though they were islands would be to ignore the intricate social topography of its ancient oral culture. An understanding of the communal experience of suffering is therefore necessary if we are to understand the individual suffering of the central character. Examining just one character alone would be anthropologically dishonest. Odysseus cannot be understood apart from the house to which he strives to return. With this in mind, we should find it no surprise that we see Odysseus, deprived as he is of his οἶκος, weeping on Calypso's

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[5] Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 74.

shores: the physical pain of his journey has turned into the emotional anguish of homesickness.

I will in a moment address Odysseus' tears on Calypso's island, but first, let us examine the οἶκος for which he weeps, and then those tears will make much more sense. An anthropological, οἶκος-centered approach will be key to understanding how suffering operates on a communal level in the poem.

Homer's protagonists, members of the royal house of Ithaca, experience a shared suffering, and this shared experience of pain manifests differently for each. The κλέος of the house is dependent on its central male war hero ruler, but other members do possess their own glory (as exemplified by a number of singular possessive pronouns with κλέος in their speeches); this connection makes their glory nearly indistinguishable from his. The poet introduces us to their suffering from lack of κλέος even before we meet the exile himself, highlighting the centrality of their struggles to the narrative in addition to his. The nature of each character's suffering stems from their relation to this missing household figure and the void left in the marital bond on which the οἶκος depends.

The prudent Queen of Ithaca lays out the equation for how suffering operates in the οἶκος in the absence of its king. From Book 1, her grief is obvious: she silences the bard Phemius, saying that his heroic return songs bring her heart πένθος ἄλαστον, "unbearable sorrow" (1.342). The return homecoming of the Greek hero from war is intimately tied to his heroic glory, as he brings that glory to his household. Her unbearable sorrow therefore comes from this deprivation of wartime glory of which Phemius sings. The queen later lays out

this relationship between a household's glory, or κλέος, and its grief when lacking that glory in Book 18 when she says: εἰ κεῖνός γ᾽ ἐλθὼν τὸν ἐμὸν βἰον ἀμφιπολεύοι, / μεῖζόν κε κλέος εἴη ἐμὸν καὶ κάλλιον οὕτως. / νῦν δ᾽ ἄχομαι: τόσα γάρ μοι ἐπέσσευεν κακὰ δαίμων, "If only that man would return and care for my life, my glory would be thus greater and more beautiful. But now I grieve: for a spirit put such great bad things moving in me" (18.254-6). From this we can see Penelope's reason for delaying the marriage her suitors seek: to marry is to deny that Odysseus will ever return. The wife is stuck in the unfortunate position of upholding her absent husband's glory or else losing her own. Her role is critical, but far from central. The prospect of re-marriage, which she calls στυγερὸς, "hateful" (18.272), means that the Ithacan household will remain forever without its king and, ergo, without κλέος, and so the whole fate of the kingdom and its glory rests on the queen's shoulders and on her husband's return. The concept of κλέος as antithetical to suffering is reinforced by the disguised king in the following book, as he attempts to comfort her: ἦ γάρ σευ κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἱκάνει (19.108), "for your glory reaches the wide sky." Implied here is that the husband believes bolstering her κλέος will relieve her ἄχος, or grief. The lesser the κλέος, the more ἄχος brought upon the household: this is the simple formula Penelope lays out.

Telemachus too embodies this dynamic. Beginning in Book 1, the boy acknowledges the fact that this disparity comes from Odysseus' absence, noting that his father would have received great glory (κλέος, 1.240) if he were dead at Troy, but now Telemachus only "grieves" (ἀκαχοίμην, 1.236). The young prince is thus conscious of the origin of woe for him and his οἶκος as well, and his formulation is similar to his mother's. Over the

ensuing books of the *Telemachy*, he is afforded an opportunity to learn what a true οἶκος looks like, and to begin restoration of Ithakan κλέος as the young prince makes a roadtrip to his father's old war companions. The cautious prince, in introducing himself to old King Nestor the horseman, says as much: πατρὸς ἐμοῦ κλέος εὐρὺ μετέρχομαι, ἤν που ἀκούσω, / δίου Ὀδυσσῆος ταλασίφρονος ("I am going after the wide glory of my father, godly stout-hearted Odysseus, if I will hear of it anywhere," 3.83-4). He will later, at Sparta, be recognized as his father's son by Menelaus, thus granting participation in Odysseus's heroic glory by association. The search for κλέος to restore the dignity of the household is at the *Telemachy*'s heart and demonstrates Telemachus' own search for glory to relieve the pains the suitors place on him.

A final member of the household bears mentioning here, though he in fact holds his home separately from Odysseus' family. Eumaeus, our loyal swineherd, also fits into Penelope's prescription for the inverse relationship between κλέος and suffering as he situates himself particularly in relation to the others who mourn Odysseus' absence: ὣς ὁ μὲν ἔνθ᾽ ἀπόλωλε, φίλοισι δὲ κήδε᾽ ὀπίσσω / πᾶσιν, ἐμοὶ δὲ μάλιστα, τετεύχαται ("as he's been brought to ruin there, he's wrought burdens back here for all his loved ones, and for me most of all," 14.137-8). Eumaeus too is pained by the master's absence; he does, after all, have to keep up with the ravenous appetite of the sauntering suitors. Recognizing the suffering endured by the swineherd expands our vision of the οἶκος's community past blood relations and to the palace's slave workforce as well, which includes the servants in the house, most prominently Eurycleia, another abuse-sufferer of the overbearing men. These servants are no

less affected than the family: Eumaeus even claims to be pained μάλιστα by the king's absence.

An understanding of κλέος's operation in the home, seen through the prudent queen, her thoughtful son, and the loyal swineherd, helps us to understand Odysseus' seven-year plight on Ogygia. On this island he is in a sense invisible, or hidden. Derived from καλύπτειν, Calypso's name can be interpreted both as "the hidden one" as well as "one who hides." This "hiding" takes Odysseus away from the world of mortals, and thus also from the world of (physical) pain and woe that so filled his life. Here, although he has escaped the death suffered by many of his comrades-in-arms and all his crew, "he is already (and ahead of time) like someone blotted out from human memory… he no longer has fame; vanished, obliterated, he has disappeared without glory, *akleiōs.*"[6] While near-godlike life on Calypso's island may seem a welcome respite from the harsh sea, this isolation leaves him without κλέος, and therefore deprived of the source of a hero's pride. He may become immortal; however, giving up dying for the Greeks also means giving up a hero's glory. Although leaving Ogygia means more physical pains on the sea, it is also the only path to relieving his emotional anguish at his separation from the οἶκος and its glory. κλέος calls to our hero, dignifying the struggle.

Odysseus' pains and toils return to him quickly after this re-acceptance of his journey, and he is almost immediately shipwrecked, saved only by Ino. During his ensuing time spent

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[6] Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The refusal of Odysseus," In *Reading the* Odyssey*: Selected Interpretive Essays*, edited by Seth L. Schein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 187.

on the Phaeacia, Odysseus yet again gains respite from his labors, but this time in ways that address the underlying cause, so to speak, of his suffering: we have observed that his painful homeward longing has its roots in lack of κλἑος, and on Phaeacia, he is at last able to begin rebuilding this κλἑος by singing the four-book song of his own deeds. κλἑος carries deep connotations of hearing, and in Alcinous' halls, Odysseus, no longer hidden by Calypso, makes his glory heard once more. He finds himself in the unusual position of being "the reciter of his own *kleos.*"[7] Phaeacia is in this way the beginning of Odysseus' restoration of heroic glory.

We should also note that this singing about, and resultant relief of, suffering occur in the context of the guest-friend bond ξενἰα. The answer to the hallmark question by the host, "τἰς πὀθεν εἰς ἀνδρῶν; πὀθι τοι πὀλις ἠδὲ τοκῆες;" (1.170, 10.325, 14.187, 15.264, 19.105, and 24.298) almost always has to do with suffering, and host-guest pairs often commiserate about their woes: Telemachus tells Athena Mentor of his father's long absence, Menelaus narrates his own difficult νὀστος for the Ithacan prince, Penelope addresses Odysseus as "ξεῖνε" ("guest-friend") a full nine times in their exchange of woes, Eumaeus tells his disguised master the story of his kidnapping, and Odysseus weaves tales of fake journeys for various and sundry members of his household. The fact that such stories continually occur in the context of ξενἰα suggests that the Greeks viewed the intimacy of that relationship as one in which the sufferings of one's life may be related upon meeting, and also reveals

[7] Charles Segal, "*Kleos* and its ironies in the *Odyssey*," In *Reading the* Odyssey*: Selected Interpretive Essays*, edited by Seth L. Schein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 204.

generally about Homer's characters what we have already observed about Odysseus in particular: Suffering and trials are central to their identities. The answer to "who are you among men?" almost always entails a story of suffering.

A final key element at the royal house of Phaeacia comes in the form of another epithet, πολύτλας, "much-enduring" or "much-suffering." Homer applies this word to our hero a total of 11 times while on the island. This emphasis on endurance highlights Odysseus' suffering in a particular way: he has suffered as someone with the gut to endure suffering, rather than fall away at it. This characteristic places him in a class separate from his fellow shipmates and the suitors that gobble up his house. These men wither away in the face of pain, in their recklessness, their ἀτασθαλίῃσιν, as Zeus forebodes on mortals' behavior in Book 1: σφῇσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ὑπὲρ μόρον ἄλγε᾽ ἔχουσιν ("They have pains beyond their allotment due to their recklessness," 1.33-4). Forms of this word are applied to the suitors and sailors alike: Odysseus has his men swear right before their fatal meal μή πού τις ἀτασθαλίῃσι κακῇσιν / ἢ βοῦν ἠέ τι μῆλον ἀποκτάνῃ ("That no one in his wicked recklessness / Kill cattle or sheep," 12.300-1) and Telemachus describes the suitors as possessing ἀτάσθαλον ὕβριν ("reckless pride," 16.86). Endurance is an attribute of heroes; but recklessness, ἀτασθαλίη, is the undoing of those without this crucial trait. πολύτροπος Odysseus has a universal appeal, because everyone suffers; πολύτλας Odysseus is a hero above the rest, because not everyone can endure as a hero does. Odysseus is much enduring, and so endures on to his triumph.

The visceral theme of suffering pervades all books of the *Odyssey* and is crucial to the poem's construction of character and heroics. Suffering is cast as a universal experience, but it is

the ability to endure which separates heroes from the many, οἱ πολλοί. On an anthropological level, suffering is also a communal experience, as shown both by the state of the Ithacan οἶκος as well as suffering's centrality in the bond of ξενία. When one member of the οἶκος loses glory, the whole house suffers with him, and the whole house must fight and endure to regain this κλέος. Glory, when gone, grants grief, and this grief becomes a stark parting point, with one of two options: recklessness, or endurance. The resultant suffering, when avoided, destroys us; but embraced and endured, it leads along the path to victory. The *Odyssey*'s conception of the hero is the "much-enduring" one and it is through this endurance both that Odysseus retakes his house and that the poem and its universality endure even to our time.

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