

The *Odyssey* and ‘The World of the Hero’ A level component: Some suggestions on teaching with secondary literature

In my own experience teaching the *Odyssey* at university level, it is only a small fraction of students, even at this stage, that can process and engage with secondary literature, if left on their own devices. Unsurprisingly, it helps significantly to incorporate a very directed approach as part of my lectures in which I flag key points found in assigned secondary literature for students and offer a brief overview of the overall shape of the argument. In schools, teachers will have to process themselves a core of secondary literature, since it is now required for the new Classical Civilisation A level, and directly teach key aspects and ideas to students. Leaving engagement with secondary literature entirely to the students’ own initiative will quickly create a two-tier system in terms of exam results between schools who provide structured help on this front and those that don’t. In this context, the following is a very selective list of suggestions on key topics on the *Odyssey* that is aimed at both teachers and students; suggestions intended primarily for teachers are marked as TR (‘teacher resource’).

General companion volumes:

The most comprehensive and accessible general overview of issues and themes in the *Odyssey*:

- S. Saïd, 2011. *Homer and the Odyssey*. Oxford

[The prose is uncomplicated and accessible; chapters contain a sufficient dose of paraphrase of passages discussed so that students who are still grappling with the storyline itself will have some help; the analysis keeps an even keel and incorporates clear and short overviews of scholarship on particular issues. Chapters are however on the long side.]

More basic and much shorter companions:

- B. Graziosi, 2016. *Homer*. Oxford UP (highly recommended for students; short but very good on *Odyssey*, while it also provides a good introduction to Homer more generally, as well as the *Iliad* which is always a good point of comparison for the *Odyssey*)
- W. G. Thalmann, 1992. *The Odyssey: An Epic of Return*. Twayne Publishers (Useful companion volume with chapters on context and key issues, as well as chapters that offer a linear reading of the text and so appropriate as assigned reading for particular sub-sections of the poem [e.g. bks 1-4 or 5-8])
- J. Burgess, 2015. *Homer*. I. B. Tauris (Very good introduction more generally but also particularly strong and clear on oral poetry and tradition and their relation to the Homeric text [mostly **TR**])

- R. Fowler, ed. 2004. *Cambridge Companion to Homer*. Cambridge UP (Good range of chapters covering both Homeric poems, some of which are directly keyed to commonly examined 'topics' such as gender, religion, heroism, similes, speeches, etc)
- J. Griffin, 1980. *Homer*. Bristol Classical Press (earlier editions also by Oxford UP, and Duckworth) [a very brief introduction to Homer with a dedicated chapter on the *Odyssey*; useful as a first step]

Also useful:

- I. Morris & B. Powell, eds. 1997. *A New Companion to Homer*. Brill [much more specialised material so primarily **TR**; particularly good chapter by A. Ford 'Epic as genre', while all of part 4 in the volume on 'Homer's World' gives more depth to what Osborne's chapter in the Cambridge Companion (see above) covers in outline – also good chapter by Snodgrass on the relationship between archaic artistic depictions of Iliadic and Odyssean scenes and Homer's poems]
- M. Finkelberg, ed. 2011. *The Homer Encyclopaedia*. 3 vols. Chichester [an eye-wateringly expensive reference work but very useful if it can be sourced. Contains short and succinct articles on key topics, issues, persons, places, etc from both Homeric poems.]
- Epic in a broad comparative context incorporating non-Greek traditions: J. M. Foley, ed. *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Blackwell [mainly **TR**]

Further companions (mainly **TR; asterisked items are those most highly recommended):**

- Cohen, B. 1994. *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*. Oxford [Particular focus on gender in the *Odyssey* with more advanced and complex analysis]
- *Doherty, L. E., ed. 2009. *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Homer's Odyssey*. Oxford [all reprinted articles here are seminal, while all ancient text has been uniformly translated and Greek keywords transliterated for accessibility as much as possible]
- Emlyn Jones, C., L. Hardwick, and J. Purkis, eds. 1992. *Homer: Readings and Images*. London
- *Graziosi, B. & J. Haubold. 2005. *Homer: The Resonance of Epic*. London [not a traditional companion but a short, accessible monograph on central aspects of the poems; particularly good on how archaic audiences would have made sense of the poems]
- McAuslan, I. and P. Walcot, eds. 1998. *Homer. Greece and Rome Studies*. Oxford
- *Schein, S. ed. 1996. *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*. Princeton [all reprinted articles here are seminal, while all ancient text has been uniformly translated and Greek keywords transliterated for accessibility, as much as possible]

Specific topics

Oral tradition and poetics (TR):

- Foley, J. M. (1988) *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington
- Good treatments of this topic in the volumes mentioned above by Graziosi & Haubold 2005; Burgess 2015.
- See also articles on 'oral tradition', 'orally derived text', 'performance', etc. in *Homer Encyclopaedia* [see above]

Redefining heroic *kleos* in the *Odyssey*:

C. P. Segal, 1983. '*Kleos* and its ironies in the *Odyssey*', *Acta Classica* 52: 22-47; repr. In: C. P. Segal. 1994. *Singers, heroes and gods in the Odyssey*. Princeton; and In: Schein, S. ed. 1996. *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*. Princeton [TR]. The article looks at how the *Odyssey* changes and further develops a notion of heroic *kleos* [reputation] from the *Iliad* to encompass cunning, patience, endurance, disguise, besides the *Iliad*'s martial prowess and 'beautiful death'. The article also looks at how the poem's own storytelling in itself is seen as a form of *kleos* for Odysseus.

The last issue mentioned above (the epic poem as a form of *kleos* in and of itself, i.e. a poem that creates reputation for its own heroes) is a central issue in the *Odyssey* for various reasons. Odysseus not only listens to epic poems about himself (the three songs of Demodocus in book 8) but also becomes the main storyteller of his own adventures (and is frequently likened to an epic poet) in books 9-12. Several epic bards are featured in the poem and various characters reflect on epic songs about other characters that they hear while they also worry about their own future reputation. The *Odyssey*'s constant references to the other epic poems of the Epic Cycle and to the *Iliad* are very much part of this same self-consciousness and self-referential tendency of the poem (see e.g. in book 1 Telemachus' conversation with Penelope about Phemius' song and the genre of 'return songs'/*nostoi*, a recognisable epic sub-genre to which the *Odyssey* itself belongs; cf the way in which the three songs of Demodocus reflect on Odysseus and the poem itself). Very useful and accessible discussion in:

- Thalmann, 1992. *The Odyssey: An Epic of Return*. Twayne Publishers (chapter on 'Poetry in the *Odyssey*').
- A. Ford, 1992. *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*. Cornell UP [book-length treatment and mainly TR]

Disguise and recognition in the *Odyssey*

- Murnaghan. S. 1987. *Disguise and recognition in the Odyssey*. Princeton

The *Odyssey* as reflection on being a mortal:

- J. P. Vernant, 'The Refusal of Odysseus' In: Schein 1996

Civilisation and its opposite(s) in the *Odyssey*:

- Vidal-Naquet, P. (1986) 'Land and sacrifice in the *Odyssey*: a study of religious and mythical meanings', in *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*, trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak, Baltimore: 15-38; also repr. in S. Schein (1994) *Reading the Odyssey*. Princeton. – this is a key topic and article that leads to a broader understanding of why the poem is structured the way it is and what 'return' means for Odysseus.

The Polyphemus episode

- Vidal-Naquet (see above, esp. in terms of Polyphemus' barbarity) and Rutherford (see below, esp. in terms of Odysseus' characterisation and development in the poem) help unpack several aspects of the episode.
- Schein, S. (1970) 'Odysseus and Polyphemus in the *Odyssey*', *GRBS* 11 (1970) 73-83; repr. In: Schein, *Homeric Epic and Its reception: Interpretive Essays*. Oxford UP -- the Polyphemus episode seems to have been based on a pre-existing folk tale about the encounter between a clever man and an ogre-figure; the article shows how 'Homer' has changed aspects of the folktale to suit the aims of the *Odyssey*. In doing this the article highlights important thematic concerns of the poem.
- Those interested in the folkloric background and in ancient artistic depictions of the episode and their relation to the *Odyssey*: J. Burgess. 2001. *The Tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle*. Baltimore: ch 2. [mainly TR]

Penelope as character

- For students: mainly the relevant sections on Penelope and on gender in S. Said, 2011. *Homer and the Odyssey*. Oxford
- S. Murnaghan, 'Penelope's agnoia: Knowledge, power, and gender in the *Odyssey*'. [TR]

Gender

For students:

- mainly the overview in S. Said, 2011. *Homer and the Odyssey*. Oxford: 258-314.
- Useful if very general considerations in: Felson & Slatkin 'Gender and Homeric epic' in Fowler, *Cambridge Companion to Homer*

For teachers: Wohl, V. 1993. "Standing by the Stathmos: The Creation of Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*." *Arethusa* 26: 19–50 [on JSTOR and in university libraries; TR. The argument is complex but on a simpler level it can help teachers think about how the juxtaposition of different female characters within the poem creates various models of womanhood. The article is also useful as a reference treasure-trove for tracing useful passages for teaching this topic]

Development of Odysseus' character

- Rutherford, R.B. "The Philosophy of the *Odyssey*" *JHS* 106 (1986) 145-162 [also reprinted in Doherty, *Oxford Readings in Homer's Odyssey* (see above). Unpacks the ways in which Odysseus needs to change as a character in the poem to succeed. The ideas help understand key episodes like book 9 and Polyphemus. The way Odysseus' character develops in Rutherford's argument can also be

linked to the different divine forces between Ithaca and the other worlds, an argument developed by C. Segal [see reference under 'Gods']]

The figure of Odysseus in various ancient traditions and in modern reception [mainly TR but strong students will profit from Stanford and Hall]:

- W. B. Stanford. 1968. *The Ulysses Theme*. 2nd edn. Ann Arbor. [particularly useful for ancient reception]
- S. Montiglio. 2011. *From Villain to Hero: Odysseus in Ancient Thought*. Ann Arbor. [ancient reception]
- E. Hall, 2008. *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey*. London. [mainly 20th and 21st c. reception] open access and available to download here: <http://edithhall.co.uk/books>

Gods

- See relevant chapter in Said 2011
- E. Kearns 'The Gods in the Homeric Epics' in Fowler 2004, *Cambridge Companion*
- Mainly **TR**: Segal, C. (1992) 'Divine Justice in the *Odyssey*: Poseidon, Cyclops and Helios,' *AJP* 113: 3-29 [reprinted in: C. Segal 1994. *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey*. Ithaca, NY – a collection of seminal articles on the *Odyssey* by one of the poem's most important scholars of the 20th c)

Other archaic poems (poetic and cultural context for the *Odyssey*)

- *Iliad*: Besides reading the text itself, good starting point on themes and issues: S. Schein. 1984. *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*.
- Hesiod (both fully preserved poems are short and useful for comparisons on various topics, esp. as these poems show that conceptions of the gods and their role, of human morality, and of social and political organisation were not as uniform and monolithic as one would think from reading Homer alone) [good introduction to Hesiod: R. Lamberton 1988. *Hesiod*. Yale UP]:
 - *Theogony* [on the succession of divinities from the creation of the Universe to the current Olympian gods – so good for comparisons to the *Odyssey's* view of religion as well as for its view of mortals vs gods)
 - *Works and Days* [the general framework is that the poem offers advice from Hesiod to his brother Perses on how a mortal should live in the current human world of the Iron Age – so good for comparisons on human morality]
- Epic Cycle: the various epic poems survive only in fragments and in summaries offered by later authors. But they give a sense of the various other epic poems that circulated during the early stages of the Homeric poems' reception and other traditions with which archaic audiences were familiar. The fragments themselves and ancient summaries of the poems can be found translated in: M. L. West, 2003. *Greek Epic Fragments*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard UP (with useful introductions to each poem). Good, brief, affordable introduction to the whole body of texts: M. Davies, 1989. *The Greek Epic Cycle*. Bristol Classical Press.