

Odysseus in the underworld, part I:

[477] “And I said, ‘Achilles, son of Peleus, foremost champion of the Achaeans, I came to consult Teiresias, and see if he could advise me about my return home to Ithaca, for I have never yet been able to get near the Achaean land, nor to set foot in my own country, but have been in trouble all the time. As for you, Achilles, no one was ever yet so fortunate as you have been, nor ever will be, for you were adored by all us Argives as long as you were alive, and now that you are here you are a great prince among the dead. Do not, therefore, take it so much to heart [literally: do not feel *akhos*] even if you are dead.’

[487] ““Say not a word,’ he answered, ‘in death’s favor; I would rather be a servant in a poor man’s house and have much life [*bios*] than to be king of kings among the dead. But give me news about my son; is he gone to the wars and will he be a great warrior, or is this not so? Tell me also if you have heard anything about my father Peleus—does he still rule among the Myrmidons, or do they show him no respect throughout Hellas and Phthia now that he is old and his limbs fail him? Could I but stand by his side, in the light of day, with the same strength that I had when I killed the bravest of our foes upon the plain of Troy—could I but be as I then was and go even for a short time to my father’s house, any one who tried to do him violence or supersede him would soon feel my strength and invincible hands.’

[504] “‘I have heard nothing,’ I answered, ‘of Peleus, but I can tell you the truth [*alêtheia*] about your son Neoptolemos, for I took him in my own ship from Scyros with the Achaeans. [Blah blah blah about Neoptolemos here.] Yet when we had sacked the city of Priam he got his handsome share of the prize wealth and went on board (such is the fortune of war) without a wound upon him, neither from a thrown spear nor in close combat, for the rage of Ares is a matter of great chance.’

[538] “When I had told him this, the ghost [*psukhê*] of Achilles strode off across a meadow full of asphodel, exulting over what I had said concerning the prowess of his son.

Huh? What kind of Akhilles is **this**?

Odysseus in the underworld, part II:

[435] “And I said, ‘In truth Zeus has hated the house of Atreus from first to last in the matter of their women’s counsels. See how many of us fell for Helen’s sake, and now it seems that Clytemnestra hatched mischief against you too during your absence.’

[441] “‘Be sure, therefore,’ continued Agamemnon, ‘and not be too friendly even with your own wife. Do not tell her all that you know perfectly well yourself. Tell her a part only, and keep your own counsel about the rest. Not that your wife, Odysseus, is likely to murder you, for Penelope is a very admirable woman, and has an excellent nature. We left her a young bride with an infant at her breast when we set out for Troy. This child no doubt is now grown up to man’s estate, in a happy [*olbios*] way, and he and his father will have a joyful meeting and embrace one another as it is right they should do, whereas my wicked wife did not even allow me the happiness of looking upon my son, but killed me before I could do so. Furthermore I say—and lay my saying to your heart—do not tell people when you are bringing your ship to Ithaca, but steal a march upon them, for after all this there is no trusting women.

Huh? What kind of Agamemnon is **this**?

.5) The name of Odysseus: apparently related to *odussomai*: “to be angry at.” Also related to *odino*: to give or receive pain. Possible meanings of “Odysseus”: “man of pain” or “man of wrath.”

- 1) Teiresias to Odysseus: [11.118] ‘When you get home you will take your revenge on these suitors; and after you have killed them by force [*biê*] or fraud in your own house, you must take a well-made oar and carry it on and on, till you come to a country where the people have never heard of the sea and do not even mix salt with their food, nor do they know anything about ships, and oars that are as the wings of a ship. I will give you this certain sign [*sêma*] which cannot escape your notice. A wayfarer will meet you and will say it must be a winnowing shovel that you have upon your shoulder; on this you must fix the oar in the ground and sacrifice a ram, a bull, and a boar to Poseidon. Then go home and offer hecatombs to the gods in heaven one after the other. As for yourself, death shall come to you from the sea, and your life shall ebb away very gently when you are full of years and peace of mind, and your people shall be prosperous [*olbios*]. All that I have said will come true.’
- 2) Elpenor to Odysseus (11.40): Do not go thence leaving me unawaked and unburied behind you, or I may bring the gods' anger upon you; but burn me with whatever armor I have, build a grave marker [*sêma*] for me on the sea shore that may tell people in days to come what a poor unlucky man I was, and plant over my grave the oar I used to row with when I was yet alive and with my messmates.’
- 3) Odysseus' *sêma* is, in fact, the marker for the death of his life as a *sailor*: the oar in a mound is a sailor's remembrance of past life. Compare this to a variant in the life of St. Elias (collected in the early 20th century Greece): Saint Elias was a seaman who lived a dissolute life, but he repented of what he had done and thereby detested the sea. He resolved to go to a place where people know neither what the sea was nor what ships were. Putting his oar on his shoulder he set out on land, asking everyone he met what he was carrying. So long as they answered that it was an oar, he proceeded to higher and higher ground. Finally, at the top of a mountain he asked his question, and the people answered, 'a stick'. Understanding then that they had never seen an oar, he remained there with them.
- 4) The moment of return: a mental and physical re-orientation. Another death (and another birth) for Odysseus (Od. 13.63): Thereon, when they began rowing out to sea, Odysseus fell into a deep, sweet, and almost deathlike [*thanatos*] slumber. [81] The ship bounded forward on her way as a four in hand chariot flies over the course when the horses feel the whip. Her prow curved as it were the neck of a stallion, and a great wave of dark blue water seethed in her wake. She held steadily on her course, and even a falcon, swiftest of all birds, could not have kept pace with her. Thus, then, she cut her way through the water, carrying one who was as cunning as the gods, but who was now sleeping peacefully, forgetful [*lethê*] of all that he had suffered both on the field of battle and by the waves of the weary sea. [93] When the bright star that heralds the approach of dawn began to show, the ship drew near to land.
- 5) Odysseus (10.190-202): 'My friends, we are in very great difficulties; listen therefore to me. We have no idea where the sun either sets or rises, so that we do not even know East from West. I see no way out of it; nevertheless, we must try and find one.

- 6) After re-orientation, and after *proper lethê*, Odysseus can return home: a return to light and life. The drug of forgetfulness was Helen's warped attempt at *lethê*. It counters the *penthos* – but in the *Odyssey*, the *penthos* needs to be re-lived.
- 7) Odysseus begins his quest for *dikê* [reminder: **dikê**, pl. **dikai** 'judgment (short-range); justice (long-range)'] through a series of *âthloi* [**âthlos** 'contest, ordeal']. Odysseus' first thoughts are of *dikê*: 13.200: "Are [these people] savage and uncivilized [non-*dikaios*] ... ?" and 13.205 "... the chiefs and rulers of the Phaeacians have not been dealing in a fair [*dikaios*] way with me, and have left me in the wrong country!"
- 8) Odysseus, man of many trials, makes them for others: Od. 13.329 Athena to Odysseus: "[you won't reveal yourself at home] until you have made trial of your wife" – and everybody else, too.
- 9) **anagnôskô** 'recognize; read'; Aristotle uses a specific form of the word at *Poetics* 1452a29ff, discussing "recognition scenes" in tragedy: "Recognition [**ana-gnô-risis**] is ... a change from ignorance to knowledge [**gnô-sis**], tending either to affection [**philia**] or to enmity; it determines in the direction of good or ill fortune the fates of the people involved" (tr. Margaret Hubbard).
- 10) Remember the ascending scale of affection: the ranking of 'bonds' that is one determinant of a cultural identity. Odysseus will test every member of Ithaka to determine their ranking: whether they will recognize (**anagnôskô**) him as *philos*.
- 11) First test goes to Athena (a *philos* goddess?). 13.256: "I killed [Orsilokhos] because he wanted to rob me of the spoils I had got from Troy with so much trouble and danger both on the field of battle and by the waves of the weary sea." A tissue of half-truths: true that he was at Troy, and at sea; not true that he killed Orsilokhos. Athena doesn't buy it [13.287]: "Can you not drop your tricks and your instinctive falsehood, even now that you are in your own country?"
- 12) Next test to Eumaios: 14.199: "I am by birth a Cretan, etc., etc., etc."
 - a) birth as Cretan: false
 - b) fought at Troy: true
 - c) sailors disobeyed him: true
 - d) men lose their *nostos* [14.299]: true
 - e) met Pheidon, king of Thesprotians: false
- 13) Eumaios doesn't really buy it, either [14.337]: "Poor unhappy stranger, I have found the story of your misfortunes extremely interesting, but that part about Odysseus is not in order [*kosmos*]; and you will never get me to believe it. Why should a man like you go about telling lies in this way?"
- 14) Another test: the *ainos* of the cloak. Recall definition: **ainos** 'authoritative utterance for and by a social group; praise; fable'. Related to **ainigma**: puzzle. The test (paraphrased, 14.457): "I once was cold and needed a cloak; Odysseus tricked a man into leaving his." Response: And Eumaios answered, "Old man, you have told us an excellent *ainos*, and have said nothing so far but what is quite satisfactory; for the present, therefore, you shall want neither clothing nor anything else that a stranger in distress may reasonably expect, but

tomorrow morning you have to shake your own old rags about your body again, for we have not many spare cloaks nor shirts up here, but every man has only one. The *ainos* worked: Eumaios has the proper emotional and mental connection to understand the point of the riddle. Eumaios is *philos*.

- 15) More tests: this time Odysseus of his son. Doesn't reveal himself, but allows son to display proper attention due a *xenos*. Definition: **xenos**, pl. **xenoi** 'stranger who should be treated like a guest by a host, or like a host by a guest; **xeniâ** 'reciprocal relationship between **xenoi**'. Telemakhos: 16.68: "...still, as the stranger [*xenos*] has come to your station I will find him a cloak and shirt of good wear, with a sword and sandals, and will send him wherever he wants to go. Recognition scene demonstrates a bond of *philia* between the two men. Also a nice pun in the Greek: 16.186 "I am *outis theos*: I am no god." *Outis* is the name Odysseus gives the Cyclops. This is followed by 16.187: I am your father. [Cf. Star Wars.]
- 16) Next recognition scene [**ana-gnô-risis**], my personal favorite. 17.290: [290] As they were thus talking, a dog that had been lying asleep raised his head and pricked up his ears. This was Argos, whom Odysseus had bred before setting out for Troy, but he had never had any work out of him. In the old days he used to be taken out by the young men when they went hunting wild goats, or deer, or hares, but now that his master was gone he was lying neglected on the heaps of mule and cow dung that lay in front of the stable doors till the men should come and draw it away to manure the great field; and he was full of fleas. As soon as he saw Odysseus standing there, he dropped his ears and wagged his tail, but he could not get close up to his master. ... [Odysseus wipes away a tear, and asks about the dog. Next,] [324] As [Odysseus] spoke he went inside the buildings to the hall where the suitors were, but Argos died as soon as he had recognized his master. Argos is the *only* creature in Ithaka that doesn't need some sort of 'help' to recognize Odysseus. His name in Indo-European? "Flash".
- 17) Book 17: Odysseus (man of *noos*) meets *Anti-noos*. (This can't be good.) Result: another Cretan tale. 17.415. "I was a blessed [*olbios*] man once, and had a fine house of my own. [I used to give help to beggars, etc, etc.]... Thence I am come hither in a state of great misery." Antinoos' response: "What *daimôn* can have sent such a pestilence to plague us during our dinner?" Antinoos fails the test, obviously.
- 18) Things to look for in the next books: after yet another Cretan lie (!), this time to Penelope, the tables are turned: 19. 203 "Now, stranger, I shall put you to the test and see whether or not you really did entertain my husband and his men, as you say you did. Tell me, then, how he was dressed, what kind of a man he was to look at, and so also with his companions." Turn-about is obviously fair play.
- 19) Exercise: Axes of combination and selection. Web question for Thursday: what's **your** axis of combination? Where would you end the *Odyssey* and *why*?