

# Guest Friends and Beggars in the *Odyssey*



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# Secondary Source



- Steve Reece, *The Stranger's Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene*, University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- Hospitality as a Type-Scene
- Xenos: Guest-Friend, Stranger, Beggar
- Thesis: The Ethical Framework of the *Odyssey* is predicated on how one treats the Xenos
- Good characters treat Xenos respectfully
- Bad characters are marked as bad by disrespectful treatment of Xenos

# Xenos as God Theme



- “Even the gods, likening themselves to guests from abroad, Taking on all forms, frequent the cities, observing both the violence and orderliness of men.” (Od. 17.485-87)
- Phaeacians will suspect Odysseus of being a God
- Telemachus fears that his own father may be a god in disguise

# Xenos as God



- Athena as Mentos
- Received well by Odysseus's son, Telemachus
- Mentos is ridiculed and threatened by the suitors
- Parallels the story of Lot and the Angels
- Mentos in turn will inspire, protect and lead Telemachus as he sails from Ithaca to Pylos in search of information about Odysseus

# Suitors as Bad Guests



- They overstay their welcome
- They are uninvited
- They woo the wife of the home (Penelope) and threaten the host's son (Telemachus)
- They slaughter his animals and drink his wine without being invited
- They treat Mentos, as Xenos, badly

# Telemachus Honors Mentos



- Greets him, takes his right hand, relieves him of his spear and welcomes him, offering to feed him.
- He honors him by placing his spear against a pillar in a stand among Odysseus' own spears
- He seats Mentos on a Thronos; a seat of honor
- Only after feasting does Telemachus enquire of Mentos who he is, where he is from, his city and parents
- Mentos claims to be xenois through their fathers

# Suitors Threatened by Telemachus



- “You suitors of my Mother! Insolent men, now we have dined, let us have entertainment and no more shouting. There can be no pleasure so fair as giving heed to a great minstrel like ours, whose voice itself is pure delight. At daybreak...you are to leave this hall. Go feasting elsewhere, consume your own stores. Turn and turn about, use one another’s houses. If you choose to slaughter one man’s livestock and pay nothing, this is rapine; and by the eternal gods, I beg Zeus you shall get what you deserve: a slaughter here, and nothing paid for it!”

# Telemachus as Xenos



- Telemachus sails to Pylos to learn news of his father
- Nestor greets him as proper Xenos
- After prayers, libations and feasting, Nestor:
- “Now it is better to inquire and ask guests who they are, when they have taken delight in food. O strangers, who are you? From where do you sail the watery ways? Are you on some business or do you wander aimlessly, like pirates, who wander over the sea, risking their lives, bringing evil to foreigners?”

# Bathing and Sleeping



- After telling his story, Telemachus indicates he will go to sleep on his ship, but Nestor refuses to allow this:
- “May Zeus and the other immortal gods prevent this: that you go away from me to your swift ship, as though from someone altogether without clothing or poor, in whose house there are neither mantles nor many blankets...  
3.345-55
- But Nestor will attempt to detain his guest; foreshadows how Circe and Calypso and even Phaeacians will attempt to detain Odysseus beyond his desire to stay

# Telemachus in Sparta



- More rude than Pylos: greeted by palace herald, left standing at door as he asks his master whether they should be granted hospitality or sent elsewhere
- Eteoneus: “Two men are here—two strangers, Menelaos, but nobly born Achaeans, they appear. What do you say, shall we unhitch their team, or send them to someone free to receive them?”
- Menelaos: “You were no idiot before, Eteoneus, but here you are talking like a child of ten. Could we have made it home again—and Zeus give us no more hard traveling!—if other men had never fed us, given us lodging?”

# Helen's gift



- First, she recognizes Telemachus as the son of Odysseus even before he reveals his identity
- In recognizing him, she reaffirms his identity as Odysseus's son
- She tells a story that honors Odysseus: how he came in disguise into Troy as a beggar, and only she recognized him, brought him into her chamber, had him bathed and anointed, and gave him a new cloak
- Menelaos: gift of horses; silver bowl made by Hephaistos
- Helen: a robe woven by her; “keep it for your own bride, your joyful wedding day; let your dear mother guard it in her chamber.” (15.133 ff)

# Odysseus and Phaeacians



- Shipwrecked on island of Scheria
- “Ah me, what mortals’ land have I come to this time? Are they violent and savage and unjust, or are they kind to strangers, and their mind god-fearing?” (6.119-21)
- He appears nude and filthy from sea: “like a mountain lion, rain-drenched, wind-buffeted...with burning eyes—who prowls among the herds or flocks...his hungry belly taking him near stout homesteads for his prey. Odysseus had this look, in his rough skin advancing on the girls with pretty braids; and he was driven on by hunter too.”

# Odysseus begs for Hospitality from Arete



- “He threw his great hands round Arete’s knees...”
- “Arete, admirable Rhexnor’s daughter, here is a man bruised by adversity, thrown upon your mercy and the king your husband’s, begging indulgence of this company—may the gods’ blessing rest on them!”
- “He move, then toward the fire, and sat him down amid the ashes. No one stirred or spoke until Ekheneos broke the spell—an old man—eldest of the Phaeacians, an oracle, versed in the laws and manners of old time.”
- Ekheneos: “King Alcinooos, this will not pass for courtesy: a guest abashed in ashes at our hearth?”

# Odysseus: Man is a Hungry Stomache



- Alcinoos supposes Odysseus may be a God
- Odysseus sets him straight: “you may set your mind at rest. Body and birth, a most unlikely god am I...I should say, rather, I am like those men who suffer the worst trials that you know, and miseries greater yet, as I might tell you—hundreds; indeed the gods could send no more. You will indulge me if I finish dinner?...There is no part of man more like a dog than brazen Belly, crying to be remembered...Yet my hunger drives me to take this food and think more of my afflictions. Belly must be filled.” (VII. 222ff)

# Polyphemus the Cyclops: Hospitality Reversal



- Odysseus and men enter cave and begin to eat and drink—in this they are like the Suitors—improper guests
- Cyclops locks them in cave and proceeds to eat them! This violates principle of eating as a hospitality ritual
- Cyclops' gift: “I will eat you last of all No Man”! violates gift-giving ritual
- Odysseus gives a gift of wine—and Cyclops gets drunk—Odysseus and men blind him; this also reverses ritual of drinking and libations
- Odysseus will be plagued by Poseidon because of his abuse of hospitality as a bad Guest

# Eumaios the Swineherd



- The dogs attack Odysseus: “like a tricky beggar he sat down plump, and dropped his stick.” Eumaios drives the dogs off.
- Eumaios: 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....All wanderers and beggars come from Zeus. What we can give is slight but well meant—all we dare.”
- Contrasts with the luxury of the palaces—but just as hospitable
- Eumaios reveals how he came to Ithaka

# Fake Story



- Odysseus claims to be from Crete, son of a rich man
- In Egypt he was captured and enslaved; he prospered there as servant of Pharaoh
- A Phoenician brought him away with promises to take him home; instead he meant to sell him as a slave; a storm then wrecked the ship among Thesprotians; their king receives him as guest and sends him home on a ship, but the men plot to sell him; he escaped and swam to shore there in Ithaka

# Odysseus begs in his own Palace



- “now a true scavenger came in—a public tramp who begged around the town of Ithaka, and by-word for his insatiable swag-belly, feeding and drinking, dawn to dark. No pith was in him, and no nerve, huge as he looked...named Iros...”
- Iros threatens Odysseus
- Odysseus: “Master, I am no trouble to you here. I offer no remarks. I grudge you nothing. Take all you get, and welcome. Here is room for two on this doorslab—or do you own it? You are a tramp, I think, like me. Patience: a windfall from the gods will come. But drop that talk of using fists; it could annoy me.”
- Beggars should not be territorial—they live on charity and it is wrong for Iros to deny Odysseus
- Foreshadows the beggar Odysseus as one who reestablishes justice in the palace; later he will slay the suitors as he beats up Iros

# Odysseus as Beggar abused by Servant Melanthis



- Odysseus as beggar tells the maids that they should not be with the suitors, but in the women's quarters weaving with Penelope
- “Melanthis spoke to him most impudently...You must be punch drunk, you old goat. Instead of going out to find a smithy to sleep warm in—or a tavern bench—you stay putting your oar in, amid all our men. Fool, not to be scared! The wine you drank has clogged your brain, or are you always this way, boasting like a fool? Or have you lost your mind because you beat that tramp, that Iros? Look out or someone better may get up and give you a good knocking about the ears to send you all bloody outside.”

# Suitors Taunt Odysseus as Beggar



- Eurymachus: “Friend, you have a mind to work, do you? Could I hire you to clear stones...you’ll be paid enough—I’ll give you bread, a cloak and sandals. But no! You’re kind learned long ago to dodge work, no honest sweat for you! You’d rather tramp the country begging, to keep your hoggish belly full.”
- Odysseus responds and Eurymachus throws a foot stool
- Amphinomos reminds the suitors that the stranger is a Xenos and protected by Telemachus, the host.

# Test of the Bow (Book 21)



- Penelope: he who can string the bow of Odysseus and shoot the arrow through the iron rings may marry me
- The suitors cannot even string the bow
- Odysseus offers and they belittle him: Antinoos says “You blear vagabond, no rag of sense is left you. Are you not coddled here enough at table, taking meat with gentlemen, your betters?...The sweat goad of wine had made you rave!”
- Odysseus easily string the bow and “In the hushed hall it smote the suitors and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered overhead, one loud crack for a sign.”
- The “beggar” is revealed as Odysseus
- He gets revenge and slays the suitors and has the disloyal handmaids hung

# Summary



- God protects Strangers and Guest-Friends
- Hospitality is ordained by gods and ritual must be observed
- Good characters know the ritual: Telemachus, Nestor, Helen, Phaeacians, and Eumaios
- Bad characters do not know it: Suitors and Cyclops
- Guest must also be proper: Thus, Odysseus is punished because he also violated Xenia with Cyclops
- But the suitors insult Telemachus, Athena (Mentes) and Odysseus (beggar) and their slaughter is justified
- An ethical frame work is presented and one that is founded upon the mandate of Gods: treat the stranger as if he is God himself