



Teaching the Odyssey with Dr. Hannah Hintze and Dr. Eva Brann of St. John's College

Lesson 9: Lecture on Homer: "The Cattle of the Sun"

Outline:

The slaughter and eating of the cattle of the sun in Book 12 is the only episode Homer finds worthy of repeating in the poem (the first 10 lines).

- The crew has been rehearsing this act when they slaughtered the Ciconians' flocks, killed those in the land of the lotus-eaters, pillaged the cyclops's sheep and slaughtered his prize ram, and were turned into pigs by Circe.

Odysseus has been pitted against the crew, or encourages them, or loses control of them. But here the contrast is explicit: Odysseus's choice of mortality determines his heroic difference from his doomed crew.

- Eurylochus, a thorn in Odysseus's side, is often in the right. He sees through Circe, alone mourns the fate of the crewmen turned into swine, and accuses Odysseus of reckless hubris in the cyclops incident. His complaint that Odysseus cared more for adventure than his crew was just. But is he right here (at the end of Book 12)?
- Eurylochus argues that the crew ought to slaughter the immortal cattle of Helios and charges them to the act. He says it's better to die by quickly, as by drowning, than to waste away by starvation, squeezed out "drop by drop."
- But in what sense better? Better by the standard of kleos—vivid, brutal, and short are the lives worthy of renown.
- In an instance of this idea, Penelope begs the gods in Book 20 to drown her rather than having to take one of the suitors as a husband. This might seem a contrast to the men's thoughts. But honor and human goods are at stake for her too. She compares herself to a daughter of Pandareus. Drowning is easier than the choice she has before her. Better to serve in hell than be a queen over the living—Achilles's perfect foil.
- (Meanwhile, Odysseus tosses fitfully "like a blood sausage roasting over the fire" [one of the best similes of The Odyssey], recalling the embers of the leaf bed of book 5.)
- Odysseus has also had such thoughts. He begs the sea to swallow him after the bag of winds is opened and after he leaves Calypso, but these are passing terrors. He and Penelope both cling to mortal life.

Contrasting the slaughter of the cattle of Helios with an earlier moment (Book 10)... Having killed the stag, Odysseus says they should rely on their food and not die of hunger. Odysseus and Eurylochus seem to urge the same thing.



- But Odysseus wants to lengthen life, not come to too sudden an end (and go to Hades too early). Eurylochus says that a sudden, untimely death is better than a pitiful one—starvation.
- By contrast, Odysseus says they should live as long as possible, however pitifully, rather than to die immediately. Eurylochus is concerned with escaping mortal indignity. For Odysseus, mere life is at stake.

Terrified, the crew follows Eurylochus's advice to die immediately but with one last meal. They make an absurd bargain with absent Helios. They promise to make up for their sacrilege by dedicating the best of the offering of the cattle to the gods and by building an altar to the sun later on. To actually offer to undo the guilt during the sacrilege is as presumptuous as the sacrilege itself. There is no heroic dignity in pretending consequences can be put off by placating the gods when it's more convenient.

- Eurylochus and the crew have blinded themselves to their crime. They are about to eat immortal beings. The cattle are dear to Helios, like pedigreed pets. They are beautiful beings not for use but only for the god's visual pleasure. To slaughter them for food to stave off the indignity of hunger for a few mortal beings turns the world of value on its head.
- In about the dead center of the epic, if you go by the number of lines, Homer conjures up horror with the description of the meat and hides: "cow hides began to crawl. And beef both raw and roasted bellowed like cattle upon the spit." How desperate and determined the men must have been to continue in this, since it goes on for six days, long after their hunger must have been slaked.
- Lawrence's translation in the proem: "The fools! To destroy for meat the oxen of the most exalted sun!" The tone is derisive disbelief.

All piety is cast aside. It is a refusal to feel the press of one's mortality.

- On the other hand, to refuse to sate pressing desires when piety, fittingness, and justice do not allow is to choose to be reminded continually of one's mortality.
- The killing of the cattle is the utter peak of unbounded arrogance. The crew take for themselves the immortal portion. Overreaching brings down terror and perversity on the overreachers. (See Tithonus.)
- When he discovers their act, the sun god threatens to overturn the world by going to Hades instead of shining on the earth.
- In Book 20, a prophecy is made for what happens to the suitors, and a comparison is drawn between them and the crew.

Nostos depends on Helios's presence. His presence is everywhere in the story if you look for him. He is a "traveler" like Odysseus.

- Helios's centrality may lead us to Homer's deepest thinking, how the teaching is inextricable from its form.



Mortal life is the burden of *The Odyssey*. “Episodic dailiness” characterizes the entire epic. All the actions and sufferings of the humans of *The Odyssey* depend on and unfold in an order set by Helios and his sister, “rosy-fingered Dawn.” The places that are exempt from Helios’s alternating light are places of horror and chaos.

- To be subject to night and day is to be ephemeral, a creature of the day, with all the joys and sorrows that belong to that life. To live day by day is to live drop by drop and to daily seek a bed.
- Odysseus returns outraged to his house like the outraged Helios. But unlike the god, Odysseus has a limited charge. He reestablishes his kingship but returns to the everyday. His “household gods” will be sleep, old age, and death.

Odysseus tells the story of the slaughter of the cattle of the sun in part to establish that he is different from both the crew and the god. Odysseus refuses to eat the meat for six days—he chooses to risk dying of hunger, to be wrung out drop by drop.

- If eating the cattle is both the height of arrogance and the utter depth of animalistic impulse, then perhaps being nostos-minded is also a twofold choice of death and life. One can bear up under the pressure of one’s mortality and not be conquered by it, but be grateful for the life that remains.
- Odysseus refuses the crew’s choices and instead chooses the properly human choice. He is faced with this choice over and over and though tempted, chooses mortality and his bed of leaves.

The Phaeacians mistake him for an immortal. Odysseus says he is not, but more like those who have suffered most with pain and grief. He would choose to humanly eat and drink.

- Though the speech is wily, it is the fullest confession Odysseus has yet made of his true identity and his heart’s desire.
- He admits immortality is not his portion.
- His mortality needs constant tending. Odysseus goes on to confess his hunger can put out of his mind his trials and even his soul’s agony. He admits he would like to die at home.

He tells only one uncompelled story—he refused Calypso’s gift and chose mortality. He chose Ithaca over empty immortality, including the empty immortality of kleos. He chose mortal life and the indignity of hunger as its badge and sign.

At the beginning of Book 5 of *The Odyssey*, after four books of introduction, we finally meet our hero, Odysseus, in person. We meet him in a beautiful, idyllic setting. Calypso is singing - she wants to keep him there.

- But Odysseus is sobbing.
- [Hannah here reads from the prose translation by T.E. Lawrence—yes, Lawrence of Arabia. It is not strictly a literal translation but is a good entry



- point and good for young readers. But the original Greek is the best way to read Homer.]
- What are we to make of this first glimpse of Odysseus? Out of all the stories of Odysseus, why does Homer begin with this one: Odysseus crying in paradise?

We must watch him refuse Calypso's offer of immortality. All other tales may be seen in light of this one decision.

- The action is as nearly as possible “one action” (per Aristotle's *Poetics*): suffering Odysseus returns home.
- Because *The Odyssey* is episodic, Odysseus's single decision to return home, to make *nostos* (the Greek word for homeward voyage), is restaged a hundred times before the final scenes, sometimes in the most devious mirrorings.
- Every episode is directed to the *nostos*/his return, with aids or impediments. Sometimes they are external (gods, goddesses, and monsters), but more often those things that keep him from home or impel him toward it are within Odysseus himself—his own internal compasses and mazes.
- His own desire for homecoming is *polytropos*, “many turning”—the hero who turns.
- His desire to make *nostos* means embracing a mortal life—a term that is something of a contradiction—dying life, living mortally.

The first two lines hint at this complexity. We are Tithonus's bedside. He was the lover of Dawn, who made him immortal, and he forever regrets his choice to become immortal. She keeps him from death but cannot keep him young. He ages forever but never dies. In fact, the line break is between “Tithonus” and “arose.” Even in the word order, the goddess leaves him behind in his eternal deathbed.

What can we draw from the contrast?

- Odysseus does not prefer death to living and he does not suicide himself, nor does he take sullen Achilles's path. Rather, Odysseus's rejection of Calypso, and several reflections of the same choice, demonstrate Odysseus's choosing of the third thing—mortal life. To continue to delight in life and set his heart on living, even while his body reminds him he is subject to death.
- This embrace of life and death, enjoying and weeping, sets him apart as a wholly different kind of hero than Achilles, for whom mortality is a grievous daily rebuke.

[In future lectures, I will touch on the five most famous homegoing moments of Odysseus: 1) parting from Calypso, 2) the bed of leaves, 3) Odysseus goes to Hades in Books 10–11, 4) confrontation with Scylla, Book 12, and 5) the slaughter and eating of the cattle of the sun at the end of Book 12. For those who are reading and teaching for the first time, I hope you find a few different ways to enter the epic and at least one thread to follow to the end.]



Meanwhile, the immortal Calypso still thinks she has a chance with mortal Odysseus—she doesn't mention Dawn and Tithonus's tale, but offers stories of goddesses losing a mortal lover to the jealous wrath of other divinities.

- Her stories don't help her argument in the long run: Dawn and Orion—Orion dies by a divine arrow; Demeter and Iasion--Zeus kills him by a thunderbolt. Calypso blames the gods, but the stories don't help her understand Odysseus. The man himself, not the gods, has rejected paradise.
- Calypso's puzzlement makes her pitiable. If only she could give her arguments a quarter-turn, she might understand that she cannot truly secure his immortality.
- The mortal himself, even after sleeping with her, is the one creating difficulty. Her offer is more a hope than a promise. Does Odysseus understand this? He does already understand that immortal life, though relentlessly tempting, is not for him.
- Calypso must give Odysseus up according to Zeus's edict. She promises to help him go, though she persists in not understanding his decision. She is especially rankled by the idea of Odysseus's mortal wife as the rival of herself, a goddess.

Odysseus concedes that his wife falls short. She is mortal. Yet he chooses her.

- This answer is not satisfying to many. Freshmen usually are puzzled by this—is Odysseus being honest? Why this choice? Why can't he give a clear answer? Does the epic give us the answer?

Book 5 ends with Odysseus having hauled his waterlogged body from the wreck. He sinks into a bed of leaves and covers himself, rejoicing, with them. Odysseus, "like a neighborless man," schemes to keep himself alive there for a time. It is a rehearsal of his own funeral. Yet he plans for the next day. He is both the seed of fire, and the man who hoards and prepares it before bed. He is aware of both its value and its fragility.

- The words used here is kalupsato and later kalupsas. Homer repeats the word and the goddess's name often here and elsewhere, perhaps to remind us of Odysseus's choice. He has traded Calypso's protections for the less stifling, temporary, mortal, incomplete respite of sleep.
- Kaluptein also means "to hide" and he will have to do that to survive.
- Athena gives a natural gift of sleep as she covers his eyes, which contrasts with Calypso's unnatural offer.
- Another contrast is between our first meeting with Odysseus, weeping at his choice to reject Calypso's offer, and his rejoicing, exhausted, to find a way to survive in the leaf bed and perhaps eventually find his way home.

Later when he discovers his dead mother in Hades, she describes his father, Laertes's "covering"—in the ashes, in the dead leaves, sighing for Odysseus's return. Later, when Odysseus tests his father, Laertes covers himself with ashes of grief. Will he give way to despair, as Odysseus has been tempted to do?



Yes. Laertes has given up his authority. To be old, to him, is to be dead.

- He is so divorced from the action of the epic that some scholars even think that Laertes might be imported from another ancient poem. But this distraction is at the center of the tale. Remember that Penelope's infamous weaving is in fact Laertes's death shroud—before he is dead.
- Odysseus, unlike his father, sets store in the little life that remains to him.

Kusin, the homely pile of leaves, is used also in Book 19 in the “flashback” with Odysseus's nurse...she catches sight of the scar on his leg and discovers who he is.

- Odysseus's grandfather was responsible for his name and his “joy.” His name means “odiousness” and “trouble,” “difficulty.” When Odysseus gets his “joy”—it is to be wounded and scarred by a wild boar. It is the most lasting thing that he brings home with him from his journeys.
- With the same phrases as used of the first sleep in the leaf pile—kusin--of Book 5, Homer describes the boar's appearance.

The resonance between the scenes gives us a sense of poetic déjà vu (as Homer often does). These connections between similar but distant scenes produce a tension and a vibration so that the fabric of the story becomes a unified whole. The episodic becomes the epic. Such an instance of resonance is good to puzzle over—there's usually something deep to discover there.

- The two leaf piles show us Odysseus rejoices in his identity, his name, his burden, and his scar when he returns to that “same” pile of leaves. It is home—both womb and tomb, both wound and preservation, his source of identity as a mortal, a place of weakness and strength. The place toward which and away from which mortals are always tending. Birth and death are our defining limits. Yet Odysseus finds happiness within his limits.
- Odysseus is vulnerable—but he does not rail against it as Achilles does. Odysseus's wound is a hardened scar. It is a sign that he has a history. Achilles's wound is his future, but Odysseus carries his already.