

The Odyssey: A Platonic Journey

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Let us set sail in the way Homer, in an allegorical way, I think, tells us that Odysseus fled from the sorceress Circe or from Calypso. Odysseus was not satisfied to remain there, even though he had visual pleasures and passed his time with sensual beauty. Our fatherland, from where we have actually come, and our father are both in the intelligible world.¹

In the Platonic tradition, the journey of Odysseus is the soul's journey to her home. The imagery of storms, trials, and tribulations found within Homer's text are echoed in the poems of Proclus and in the metaphorical language of the commentators as they comment on Plato and work through deep philosophy. Homer's poetry is discussed in both the *Republic* and in the *Lesser Hippias*.² The epic follows the journey from Troy to Ithaca undertaken by Odysseus over a ten-year period. His story begins nine books into the twenty-four book work:

Where shall I start? Where can I end? The Gods
have given me so much to cry about.
First I will tell my name, so we will be
acquainted and if I survive, you can
be my guest in my distant home one day.
I am Odysseus, Laertes' son,
known for my many clever tricks and lies.
My fame extends to heaven, but I live
in Ithaca, where shaking forest hides
Mount Neriton. [...]
Now let me tell you all the trouble Zeus
has caused me on my journey home from Troy.³

Odysseus, on leaving Troy with his twelve ships, is pushed by blustery winds towards the Cicones, a Thracian tribe that had allied with the Trojans, where he and his men commit a successful raid on the shore. This is the first of many times that his crew does not pay

¹ Plotinus. *Ennead 1.6.8*. Trans. George Boys-Stones, John Dillon, Lloyd Gerson, R.A.H. King, Andrew Smith, and James Wilberding. Ed. Lloyd Gerson. Cambridge University Press, 2018.

² The *Lesser Hippias* may have been authored by someone other than Plato, possibly Antisthenes, another student of Socrates.

³ All of the quoted passages from the *Odyssey* are from the Emily Wilson translation. This particular one is Book 9, lines 15-24 and 38-39.

attention to him: “Then I said we must run away. Those fools / refused to listen. They were drinking wine / excessively, and killing sheep and cattle / along the beach” (44-47). Reinforcements arrive, and the fight kills six from each ship.

This time, a storm drives them to the land of the lotus-eaters, where they stay a short time due to the potent effects of the drug. From there, they arrive at the island of the Cyclopes, twinned to another island where the crew disembarks and refreshes themselves. Odysseus’ curiosity sparks him to learn about the people on the other island, so he brings a crew. The Cyclops Polyphemus, son of Poseidon, lives there. Odysseus loses several members of his crew before escaping. They tie themselves onto the bellies of Polyphemus’ rams. After the successful escape, Odysseus taunts Polyphemus from afar, naming himself and what he has done. This enables Polyphemus to enact his curse:

But he prayed
holding his arms towards the starry sky,
‘Listen, Earth-Shaker, Blue-Haired Lord Poseidon:
acknowledge me your son, and be my father.
Grant that Odysseus, the city-sacker,
will never go back home. Or if it is
fated that he will see his family,
then let him get there late and with no honor,
in pain and lacking ships, and having caused
the death of all his men, and let him find
more trouble in his own house.’⁴

Odysseus then meets Aeolus, with whom he and his crew stay for about a month. Aeolus gives Odysseus a bag of winds. Odysseus’ crew believes that the bag contains something precious, so they open it and scatter the winds, driving the crew back to Aeolus, who now shuns them. Next, they encounter the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, who destroy eleven of the ships, leaving Odysseus’ vessel alone seaworthy. They arrive at Circe’s island, where the Goddess turns visitors into animals — swine, in the case of his crew members — and Odysseus must rely on the favor of Hermes, beloved of Odysseus’ grandfather, to counter the potions of the daughter of Helios. The crew is allowed to stay, but Odysseus soon yearns for home.

⁴ *Odyssey*, Book 9, lines 526-536.

Circe advises that Odysseus visit the underworld and offer to Tiresias a pure black ram to learn how to get home.⁵ The challenge that Circe has given Odysseus, along with her parentage and her mastery of potions, prompted this interpretation from Proclus:

For [Athena] and all her chorus, as she remains above, are said to weave the order of life. Yet that weaving is participated in by all the gods in the cosmos — for the one Demiurge bids the young demiurges to interweave “the mortal” form of life “with the immortal” (Tim. 41D) and finds its ultimate development among the gods in charge of generation. Included among these is Homer’s Circe, who weaves all of life in the four classes and at the same time makes the region under the moon harmonious with songs. Thus, to these weaving deities, Circe too indeed, “golden” Circe, as they say — is assigned by the theologians, who thereby indicate her intellectual and immaculate essence, both immaterial and unmingled with generation. Her function is to discriminate the things that are at rest from those that are in motion, and to separate them according to divine difference.⁶

His crew first sails past the Sirens, stopping their ears, with Odysseus tied to the mast still able to hear them. Proclus has this to say about the Sirens:

The great Plato knows three genera of Sirens: the celestial which is under the kingdom of Zeus, the generative which is under Poseidon, and the purificatory which is under Hades. It is common to them all to subject all things to their own commanding-gods by way of harmonious motion. This is why they wish to unite the soul, when it is in heaven, with the ways of life there. But it is fitting that those souls living in generation should “sail past them” (*Phdr.* 259A7), just like the Homeric Odysseus, if indeed the sea is an image of generation, lest they be lured astray by generation. But it is also fitting that, when they have come to Hades, they be attached to this God through their intellectual thoughts. As a result, Plato knows about classes of gods, daemons, and souls in the kingdom of Hades, souls that dance around the God, charmed by the Sirens there.⁷

From there, they sail between Scylla and Charybdis, losing the six anticipated by Circe. The success is short-lived: They land on the island of Helios, Circe’s father, where they are

⁵ The passages in the *Odyssey* about the underworld are worth comparing to the passages in Plato’s *Phaedo* and the *Republic*’s Myth of Er, but that is a deep topic of its own.

⁶ Proclus. *Proclus: On Plato Cratylus*. Trans. Brian Duvick and Harold Tarrant. Bloomsbury Academic, 2007. 22,1.

⁷ *On Plato Cratylus*, 88,15.

becalmed long enough that their supplies dwindle. Tiresias and Circe had warned Odysseus away from Helios' cattle. While Odysseus is away praying, he falls asleep, and his crew slaughters sacred cattle. The crew soon sets sail again, and the Gods send a storm to demolish the ship. Odysseus washes up on Calypso's island Ogygia completely alone, where he remains for seven years weeping.

Throughout Odysseus' wanderings, the immoderate and imprudent behavior of the people surrounding him bring the collective closer and closer to disaster until they are all gone. However, he is favored by Athena, who advocates for him to Zeus. While Poseidon is away enjoying feasting, Athena takes the opportunity to act, returning Odysseus to Ithaca through a series of steps. Calypso allows him to construct a raft and leave. He lands on Scheria and meets Nausicaa and the Phaeacians, naked. Their generous hospitality enables him to return to Ithaca in secret very quickly, laden with goods donated by the families. The ship is turned to stone by Poseidon on its return to Scheria.

Odysseus ends up in the Cave of the Nymphs, the subject of an essay by Porphyry. The remainder of the book is about his coordinated effort to put everything in place to decisively take back control of his own house from the suitors — who envy Odysseus' life — while disguised as a beggar by Athena.⁸ He, his son, and two of his male slaves kill the suitors through a plot with an arrow during a sacred day of Apollon.⁹ Athena quells the town from taking vengeance on what Odysseus has done, especially as the laws of hospitality were violated and the youths were plotting the deaths of Telemachus.

Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* face criticism in the *Republic* for their unsuitability for the young, filling them with ideas that are not conducive to building a strong moral foundation. Proclus, while writing on what the *Republic* says about these epics, offers a rich landscape of Platonic interpretation of the epic. One example is the interpretation of the passage cited by Plato at 390a-b:

⁸ "Because they erroneously make themselves the point of reference for the experiences of life, men who are lovers of the body (philosômatoi) believe that death, as a cause of corporeal dissolution, is a fearful thing. But in truth, it is much better for a man to die and live naturally in Hades than to live unnaturally in conjunction with the body and hindered from operating intellectually. For this reason, he should be stripped of the flesh with which he has been clothed, as Odysseus was stripped of his rags (Od. 22.1), and no longer be "like a wretched beggar" (Od. 16.273), "throwing his rags about himself" (Od. 14.512) out of the needs of the body. For the divine is not accessible to mortals who think in bodily terms, but such as have stripped themselves hasten up on high, as the Oracle says (Or. Chald. 116)." *On Plato Cratylus*, 87,22-88,3.

⁹ There are some comparisons being drawn between this and the slaying of Niobe's children in the subtext.

I think there can be no greater pleasure
than when the whole community enjoys
a banquet, as we sit inside the house,
and listen to the singer, and the tables
are heaped with bread and meat; the wine boy ladles
drink from the bowl and pours it into cups.
To me this seems ideal, a thing of beauty.¹⁰

Here is Proclus' discussion:

Now, with regard to the criticism of the words of Odysseus, let it be said first of all that those who refer what are called the “wanderings” of Odysseus to secondary, allegorical meanings and place the Phaeacians and their “blessedness” beyond the sphere of mortal nature interpret these things more symbolically. Thus “banqueting, among them, “feasting, and “harmonious song” will be said in another sense and not the one generally recognized. It should be emphasized, however, that those who concern themselves with the apparent meaning of the poem are also able to answer such accusations and to point out that, in the first place, the wisest of the Greeks does not think that “pleasure” should prevail in correctly run states, but rather “good cheer”, and we learn this distinction from Plato himself. And then, [second, they can point out] that [Odysseus] approves of the notion that the whole state is brought into harmony through music and becomes unified in its thinking, in obedience to the melodies that lead toward virtue. The fact of placing over the many not just anyone, as far as music is concerned, but a divinely inspired musician extends education and true virtue from those concerned exclusively with music down to the entire state. Third, [they can point out] that for those who participate in such harmony, [Odysseus] adds as well abundance of those necessities of life that the many in the cities generally need. What [Odysseus] specifically praises is a life lacking nothing of those things that make mortal existence complete, and not a life glutted with such things.

Thus, the wisest of the Greeks is clearly saying things that are in harmony with our own notions as well as with the incontrovertible received opinions regarding the well-being of the state. If one should take away the “good cheer” and education through inspired music, and should think that [Odysseus] was considering only pleasure, and was praising feasting and immoderate and inelegant indulgence, then Socrates is perfectly right to say that such things have nothing to do with his state. It is not right for

¹⁰ *Odyssey*, Book 9, lines 5-11.

boundless pleasure and a life of gluttony to prevail in a city of men who are truly blessed.¹¹

Plato does seem to use Odysseus as a contrasting example later in the *Republic*, as his soul draws the final lot from among the ones Er witnesses:

And by chance [Er] saw the soul of [Odysseus], who had drawn its lot last of all, going to make its choice: and in remembrance of its former toils, and tired of ambition, it went about a long time, seeking the life of a private man of no business, and with difficulty found it lying somewhere, neglected by the rest. And that on seeing this life, it said, that it would have made the same choice even if it had obtained the first lot, —and joyfully chose it. In like manner the souls of wild beasts went into men, and men again into beasts: the unjust changing into wild beasts, and the just into tame; and that they were blended by all sorts of mixtures.¹²

¹¹ Proclus, *Essay 6 on the Republic*, in *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems: Essays 5 and 6 of His Commentary on the Republic of Plato*, trans. Robert Lamberton. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012.

¹² Plato. *Republic*, trans. Thomas Taylor, 620c.