

The Odyssey

Book 4 ~ Study Guide

from John McIlvain

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Note: This site is designed to be used with Robert Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey*, published by Penguin USA. It was prepared for a 9th grade English class.

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THE KING AND QUEEN OF SPARTA

SCENE: Sparta, Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Telemachus, Menelaus, Helen, Pisistratus, Antinous, Eurycleia, Penelope, Athena, Proteus, Aegisthus, Orestes, & Medon

When Pisistratus and Telemachus arrive, a wedding party is taking place but there is no hesitation on the part of the King, Menelaus, to make the strangers feel completely welcome. His wife, Helen – yes, the Helen – is equally hospitable and quickly sees that Telemachus must be Odysseus' son. The palace is sumptuous, the entertainment lavish, and the stories, especially Helen's, embellished. She plays the part she has been given – daughter of Zeus – without shame, and to the consternation but not displeasure of her still smitten husband. Menelaus tells the story of his return, the most important part of which is the evidence from Proteus that Odysseus is still alive. At the end of the book we return to Ithaca where Penelope has learned of her son's disappearance. Athena, in disguise as Penelope's sister, gives her courage.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- More Greek hospitality and feasting.
- Helen's contribution to the "meal."
- Menelaus' return from Troy.
- What Telemachus learns from Menelaus about Odysseus.
- The stories of Troy told by Helen.

- Menelaus' reaction to Helen's story.
- The story of Proteus
- The plot to kill Telemachus

EPITHETS: Who is . . .

- "red haired?"
- "son of Atreus?"
- "the pearl of women?"
- "The Old man of the Sea?"

QUESTIONS:

1. How do Menelaus and Helen compare with Nestor as hosts?
2. How do they contrast with the suitors the suitors as guests?
3. Do Menelaus and Helen know who Telemachus is at the beginning of the book?
4. What do you make of the relationship between Menelaus and Helen?
5. What is impressive about their palace?
6. Who is Proteus? How does Menelaus catch him? With whose help?
7. What does Menelaus tell Telemachus about Odysseus' whereabouts?
8. Why does Telemachus need to go to two homes, and visit two of the Captains destroyed Troy?
9. Why is information withheld so frequently (Proteus at first balks, and Penelope's sister, in a dream, is also reluctant. Why is other information (Helen's) suspect?

QUOTES TO REMEMBER:

Helen emerged from her scented, lofty chambers
striking as Artemis with her golden shafts... (135)

"Do we know, my Lord, who our visitors claim to be, our welcome new arrivals?
...To the life he's like the son of great Odysseus,
surely he's Telemachus. The boy that hero left
a babe in arms at home when all you Achaeans
fought at Troy, launching your headlong battles,
just for me, shameless whore that I was." (153)

"Wonderful!" the red haired king cried out.
"The son of my dearest friend, here in my own house." (185)

So Menelaus mused
and stirred in them a deep desire to grieve. (204)

Then Zeus' daughter Helen thought of something else. (243)
Into the mixing bowl from which they drank their wine, she
slipped a drug, heart's ease, dissolving anger,
magic to make us all forget our pains.

". . .and no one knew him at all (280)
I alone, I spotted him for the man he was."

"There was a tale, my lady. So well told... (298)
Three times you sauntered round our hollow
ambush
feeling, stroking its flanks,
challenging our fighters, calling each by
name –
yours was the voice of all our long lost
wives!
. . . but Odysseus clamped his great hands
on the man's mouth
and shut it brutally – yes he saved us all."

" Weak as the doe that beds down her fawns (374)
in a mighty lions den - her newborn
sucklings -
then trails off to the mountain spurs and
grassy bends
to graze her fill, but back the lion comes to
his own lair
and the master deals both fawns a ghastly,
bloody death
just what Odysseus will deal that mob -
ghastly death."

"Up from the shore he led the king, he (600)
ushered him in -
suspecting nothing of all his doom – he
feasted him well
then cut him down as a man cuts down an
ox at the trough!"
*(Proteus telling Menelaus of Agamemnon's
death at the hands of Aegisthus.)*

"I saw him once on an island, weeping live (626)
warm tears
in the nymph Calypso's house – she holds
him there by force."
*(Proteus telling Menelaus of Odysseus'
plight.)*

Telemachus, (667)
summoning up his newfound tact . . .

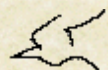
Medon, the soul of thoughtfulness, replied, (801)
"I don't know if a god inspired your son
or the boy's own impulse led him down to
Pylos,
but he went to learn his father's journey
home,
or whatever fate he's met."

Penelope. . .would her fine son escape his (896)
death
or go down at her overweening suitors'

hands?
Her mind in torment, wheeling
like some lion at bay, dreading the gangs of
hunters
closing their cunning ring around him for
the finish.

"He travels with such an escort, one that (930)
others
would pray to stand beside them. She has
power
Pallas Athena. She pities your tears..."

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[Least Tern](#) - John McIlvain - February 29, 2004