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The Odyssey

Book 13 ~ Study Guide

from John McIlvain

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Image source: http://www.beloit.edu/~classics/main/courses/classics100/museum2/art_museum2.html

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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ITHACA AT LAST

SCENE: The palace of Alcinous, Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Alcinous, Poseidon, Zeus, Athena

The Phaeacians fulfill their promise to Odysseus but at what will prove to be a terrible cost for Poseidon feels betrayed and goes to Zeus for sanction to punish the overly hospitable Phaeacians. Zeus not only agrees, but offers a more dramatic solution and the boat of the returning sailors is transformed into stone in full view of Alcinous and his people. They pray that no further punishment will ensue, but we never know if that prayer is answered. We do know that Poseidon planned to "pile a huge mountain round their port" and that if he chose not to it would be the first time a god in the *Odyssey* changed its mind. Meanwhile, Odysseus, not recognizing his homeland, also feels betrayed. But he is greeted by Athena in disguise as a shepherd who tells him where he is. Their ensuing "conversations" are a kind of friendly duel of wits. Odysseus senses his protector and she seems pleased with his guardedness. Transformed into a beautiful woman, she leads him to a cavern to hide his treasure. She tells him that his son lives, but that he will have to endure hardships before he recaptures his homeland from the suitors of his faithful wife. He is to be disguised as an old man.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- the departure from the land of the Phaeacians
- the power of the Gods
- the juggling of that power
- the way Zeus placates Poseidon
- his reaction to being "betrayed"
- Odysseus' anticlimactic arrival in Ithaca
- his dialogues with Athena
- her transformations
- the juxtaposition of the differing attitudes of gods towards men
- Odysseus' learning about Telemachus
- his disguise after his arrival in Ithaca.

QUESTIONS:

1. How do Poseidon and Zeus interact in this book? What is the balance of power between them? How does Zeus assert his authority? How does Poseidon assert his displeasure?
2. How does Odysseus first feel as he lands on Ithaca?
3. How much does he tell the "shepherd" he meets about his true identity and intentions?
4. Does he change when he realizes it is Athena? How does she react to his caution?
5. How do the actions Odysseus takes compare with those he takes in the stories he has told? Does the fact that he has at this point no crew affect the way acts?
6. Where is Athena going at the end of the book? How does she help him at this point?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

And then, that hour the star rose up, (105)
the clearest brightest star, that always heralds,
the newborn light of day the deep-sea-going ship
made landfall on the island . . . Ithaca at last.

"Zeus, Father, I (Poseidon) will lose all my honor now (145)
among the immortals, now there are mortal men
who show me no respect – Phaeacians, too –
born of my own loins!"

Zeus: "Incredible! . . . (158)
Earthshaker, you with your massive power, why moaning so . . .
if any man . . . pays you no respect . . . just pay him back . . .
Do what you like. Whatever warms your heart."

"I'd like to avenge myself at once, as you advise (167)
but I've always feared your wrath and shied away. . .
But now I'll crush that fine Phaeacian cutter . . ."

"Wait dear brother, here's what seems best to me. (174)
As the people all lean down from the city heights
to watch her speeding home, strike her into a rock
that looks just like a racing vessel, just of shore –
amaze all men with a marvel for the ages
Then pile your huge mountain round their port."

Alcinous: "Oh no, my father's prophecy years ago . . . (194)

He used to say Poseidon was vexed with us because
we escorted all mankind and never came to grief . . .
Hurry friends, do as I say, let us all comply;
stop our convoys home for every castaway
chancing on our city!"

Odysseus: "Damn those . . . Phaeacians . . . (237)
sweeping me off to this, this no man's land . . . well,
they never kept their word. Zeus of the suppliants
pay them back. (note the irony here!)"

Ithaca! Heart racing, Odysseus that great exile, (284)
filled with joy to hear Athena, daughter of storming youth,
pronounce that name. He stood on native ground at last.
. . . he replied . . . not with a word of truth . . .
always invoking the cunning in his heart.
"Ithaca, yes, I seem to have heard of Ithaca."

As his story ended (324)
goddess Athena, grey eyes gleaming, broke into a smile . . .
now she appeared a woman,
beautiful, tall, and skilled at weaving lovely things . . .
"Any man – any god who met you – would have to be
some champion lying cheat to get past you. . .
. . . I am famous among the gods for wisdom,
cunning wiles, too.
Ah, but you never recognized me, did you? . . .
And now I am here once more to weave a scheme with you . . .
the trials you must suffer in your palace . . .
Endure them all. You must. You have no choice.
And to no one . . .
reveal that you are the wanderer home at last.
No, in silence you must bear a world of pain . . ."

"Ah goddess . . . you're mocking me . . . telling me tales (354)
to make me lose my way. Tell me the truth now . . ."

"Always the same, your wary turn of mind . . . (374)
That's why I can't forsake you in your troubles –
you are so winning, so worldly-wise, so self-possessed . . .
I never had doubts myself, no . . .
But I could not bring myself to fight my father's brother . . ."

"Clearly, I might have died the same ignoble death as Agamemnon (437)
if you had not revealed this to me now. . .
Stand by me . . . comrade in arms in battle!"

Athena stroked Odysseus with her wand. (492)
She shriveled the supple skin on his lithe limbs . . .
and gave him a staff and a beggars sack,
torn and tattered, slung from a fraying rope.
All plans made
they went their separate way – Athena setting off
to bring Telemachus home from hallowed Lacedaemon.

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