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The Odyssey

“A lion that has just fed upon an ox in a field has his chest and cheeks smeared with blood”(Book 22, 426-427). Odysseus’ violent behavior in Troy is consistent with his gruesome behavior once he returns to Ithaca, similar to that of a lion. Also, Odysseus’ selfish and self centered nature is unchanged no matter the circumstances. Odysseus’ longing to return home for his wife emphasizes her importance to the epic as a whole. Throughout the epic, Odysseus’ brutal behavior and his selfish manner for reaching Ithaca remains unchanged. Odysseus’s character remains stagnant and is driven, as well as the epic as a whole, by the journey of Penelope.

Odysseus’ gruesome behavior is seen through his actions performed at Troy as well as the atrocities he performed on his way home to Ithaca. Demodocus, the bard of the Phaeacians, illustrates the atrocities committed by Odysseus and his men while away in battle at Troy when he sings, “A woman wails as she throws herself upon her husband’s body. He has fallen in battle before the town walls, fighting to the last to defend his city and protect his children. As she sees him dying and gasping for breath she clings to him and shrieks, while behind her soldiers prod their spears into her shoulders and back, and as they lead her way into slavery her tear-drenched face is a mask of pain” (Book 8 , 566-574). Odysseus and his men are seen in this scene as brutal savages because they murder the husband and further rape the newly widowed wife. One would hope that after Odysseus realizes, “This was his song. And Odysseus wept. Tears welled up in his eyes and flowed down his cheeks” (Book 8 564-565), that he would recant his violent ways and change, but this obviously is not the case. This brutal behavior is not changed over Odysseus’ journey rather revisited when he returns home to Ithaca. Odysseus’ brutality is seen when he strung his bow and, “Odysseus took dead aim at Antinous’ throat and shot, and the arrow punched all the way through the soft neck tissue. Antinous fell to one side, the cup dropped from his hands, and a jet of dark blood spurted from his nostrils” (Book 22, 15-20). If Odysseus had learned from his lesson from reflecting on his brutal actions in Troy at the Phaeacians’ island, then he most definitely would have treated the suitors in a more friendly manner. Like Odysseus’ unwavering brutality, his selfishness in pursuit of his way home do not change from Troy to Ithaca.

Odysseus selfishly sacrifices those around him in order to pursue his greater good throughout the epic. Odysseus blames his men after waking up to the smell of Helios’ cattle being cooked by his men when he says, “Father Zeus, and you other immortals, you lulled me to sleep - and to my ruin - while my men committed this monstrous crime” (Book 12, 381-383). Odysseus blames his men for his mistake, while he left his men unsupervised. A good leader should take the blame for his crew rather than curse their names to the gods. His selfish pursuit to get home, blinds him from his mistakes as a leader and the well being of his crew. Odysseus’ selfishness does not change even when he returns home to Ithaca. He bashes the generous Phaeacians when he says, “Those Phaeacian lords were not a wise as they seemed, nor as just, bringing me to this strange land. They said they would bring me to Ithaca’s shore, but that’s not what they’ve done. May Zeus pay them back, Zeus, god of suppliants, who spots transgressors and punishes them” (Book 13, 218-223). Even after Odysseus is placed in his homeland, he still is ungrateful and selfish. He bashes the people who helped him do what he could not do on his own; return to his city. Penelope’s journey, unlike Odysseus’, changes the outcome and dictates the plot of the epic.

Without Penelope waiting patiently and faithfully in the land of Ithaca, Odysseus’ journey would not have been important. Penelope’s loyalty to Odysseus is the driving force of the story and without it, Odysseus may have stayed on Calypso’s island and never returned home. Penelope’s cunning nature is seen when she explains her plan to fool the suitors, “First some god breathed into me the thought of setting up a great loom in the main hall, and I started weaving a vast fabric with a very fine thread, and I said to them: ‘Young men-my suitors, since Odysseus is dead-eager as you are to marry me, you must wait until I finish this robe - it would be a shame to waste my spinning - a shroud for the hero Laertes, when death’s doom lays him low’ ” (Book 19, 150-158). Penelope’s cunning nature allows her husband more time to come home from Troy. Without her strategic plan, the suitors may have pressured her into a marriage way before Odysseus returned. Penelope questions her husbands identity when she says, “Nurse, bring the bed out from the master bedroom, the bedstead he made himself, and spread it for him with fleeces and blankets and silky coverlets” (Book 23, 184-186). Odysseus catches her trick, and Penelope knows that it is really her husband who stands before her. This careful endeavor again drives the plot and the stories importance. If Penelope had not questioned Odysseus, she may have fallen for one of the suitors pretending to be her husband. By not letting her guard down and marrying a suitor, Penelope allowed Odysseus to reclaim his throne.

One may argue that Odysseus’ reflective weeping on the island of the Phaeacians’ was a transformative moment for Odysseus. This could have been a pivot point of Odysseus’ character, however his brutality and selfishness remain at the forefront of his personality. Another may argue that Odysseus’ encounter with his dying dog may exploit his new found gentle side as he sheds a tear. However, this seemingly transformative moment from brutality to reflective gentleness is ruined by the violence committed against the suitors in the lines that follow. While Odysseus’ journey commands the majority of the lines in the epic, he remains the same ruthless and selfish man from Ithaca to Troy and back again.