

PRESENTER: Hello, and welcome to Classical Wisdom Weekly's guide to the Essential Greeks. In this course we will be focusing on some of the greatest minds of ancient Greece; indeed some of the greatest minds there have ever been.

Men who have managed to attain epithets like 'The Father of Tragedy', 'The Father of Philosophy', 'The Father of History', 'The true Father of history' and so on and so forth.

Today, however we will be looking at the father of them all. The founding father of all we know. A man we are culturally and literarily so indebted to that not only does he transcend time and space, but even knowledge. In other words we know the stories for which he is famous even if we have never taken the time to read them ourselves.

This man of course is the legend who is Homer.

And legend is an appropriate term to use, as the only piece of universal concord in Homeric scholastic fields is that we know almost nothing about the man said to have shaped western civilisation with his two epic poems 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey'.

We could comfortably spend this entire episode going back and forth over the arguments for and against Homer's true origin. However, an abridged version will suffice as a preface to the real business at hand, that of the epics themselves.

It is accepted by many, though by no means all, that Homer came from Chios, just off the coast of modern-day Turkey. And that 'The Iliad' came to us circa 750 BC, and 'The Odyssey', twenty-five to fifty years later.

Even if we accept this as true thus far, we are still riddled with problems and controversies. Not least of which is the method of delivery.

It is widely thought that the stories in the epics, of the Trojan War and the wanderings of Odysseus, were handed down thorough the oral tradition.

The poetry was recited to music by skilled, perhaps travelling, bards.

So the next question, which has never been satisfactorily answered is: did Homer write? Or was he one such bard himself? Did he dictate to a scribe?

If he were blind, as some contest, then surely he must have done – the famous Roman politician and philosopher Cicero certainly thought he did. Additionally, was he creator or merely chronicler? And, most interestingly of all, was he really only one man?

It is no new idea to think that the two poems may have been the work of many hands. Some consider the contrasting themes of the two epics too diverse to be consistent in the mind of one individual.

Others believe it is perfectly appropriate that the young Homer would have been preoccupied with the blood, guts and glory of wrath and warfare. Whilst the older, more reflective poem may have considered a homecoming to wife and child the natural topic of a man in his golden-years to write about.

Samuel Butler and Robert Graves, perhaps the two most famous classical scholars of recent times, even propounded the unlikely idea that the *Odyssey*, with its emphasis on the end of war and the necessity to strive for domesticity, may have actually been written by a woman.

Regardless, the two works contain so many stylistic similarities that they were certainly intended to be seen as consecutive narratives.

And thus, whether he likes it or not, whether he really existed or not, Homer was born unto the world. And, this Homeric scholars do agree on, was a jolly good thing.

But now, to the works themselves.

How to make a satisfactory synopsis of the story of 'The Iliad'? Well, if one was desirous of infuriating the academic community then surmising it as “being about the Trojan War” would do the trick.

However, perhaps there is no better précis than the opening lines of the text themselves, as translated by Samuel Butler.

HOMER: Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Zeus fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another.

PRESENTER: Set over just a few weeks in the tenth year of the Trojan War, an argument between the mighty Achilles and the king of the Greeks, Agamemnon dominates the early exchanges of the Iliad.

Broadly speaking, the focus remains on Achilles throughout as, angered by the arrogance and avarice of Agamemnon...

...he goes on strike, refusing to participate in the war until stirred by vengeance upon the death of his close friend, Patroclus.

'The Odyssey' on the other hand deals with Odysseus' journey home which is thwarted at every turn by the fearsome and cantankerous sea-god, Poseidon.

After ten years, twenty if we include the years at Troy, of combating men, monsters, gods, witches, weather, and the whims of fate, Odysseus manages to make it home and must deal with the difficult task of reclaiming his oikos, his household, from the 108 Suitors who have taken up residence with his wife, Penelope and son, Telemachus.

To deal adequately with all the themes presented in 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey' would be impossible in the time available, thus today we will focus on just one theme, but an all-important one, that of xenia.

Xenia has been broadly interpreted as comprising aspects of hospitality and generosity directed towards foreigners. Foreigners, for those living in Ancient Greek city-states, meant those not from your town. However, it was more than merely a set of manners and social customs, but actually a religious ritual which placed demands both on hosts and guests.

The god Zeus Xenios oversaw appropriate observation of the xenia laws. Slightly confusingly, Zeus Xenios is merely an aspect of the head god Zeus, and not an entirely separate being. This was not unusual or indeed exclusive to Zeus and can, very loosely, be compared to the different roles and responsibilities conferred on the Virgin Mary: Our Lady of Victory, Queen of Prophets, Morning Star, Gate of Heaven, Destroyer of Heresy and Untier of Knots to names but a few. Like with Zeus, none of these in any way diminish from her primary religious role.

The importance of the theme of xenia in the epics may be surprising when we consider all the Homeric blood, guts and gore, the tall-tales, deceptions and subterfuge, the sex, the glory, the gold, the family, the love, and not to forget, the gods with their divine wrath and vengeance. Despite all these, it is one aspect of xenia, one that appears so simple, that has a hugely dominant role to play.

However, before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's stop to examine what exactly was xenia? Of what did it specifically comprise?

Well, a good executor of xenia should do the following:

...immediately welcome strangers into the home... offer them food, drink, and a bath... give up the most comfortable chair for them... not ask them any questions until they are satisfied and comfortable... and give them a gift to depart with. However this sacred relationship was reciprocal, in other words, when playing the guest one should be respectful, charming, entertaining, and not outstay one's welcome. Also, ideally, give a gift if you have one.

While the extreme punishments of death and destruction for breaching xenia are not contemporary, the idea of hospitality seems very familiar and comfortable to us.

Granted, in our time it is unusual to welcome someone into the home without let, hindrance or even asking their name, but these principles are basically those that our parents taught us when we were young, though perhaps not because they thought we might encounter a disguised, powerful, wrathful god.

An example of the importance of xenia is that it was actually the root cause of all the troubling situations Odysseus found himself in, in addition to being the root cause of the deaths of Achilles, Ajax and Hector. This being because the casus belli of the Trojan war, Paris abducting Helen, was an extreme and incredibly serious breach of xenia etiquette.

We see the importance of the conventions of *xenia* recurring in both epics; they were an essential part of civilised life and social interaction, seemingly for all levels, not merely kings and nobles. However, whilst we can confidently say 'the Iliad' was predicated on a breach of hospitality, 'The Odyssey' deals with it at every turn. In fact the entire poem is preoccupied either with entertaining, or being entertained.

So much so that not only does it underpin most of the significant scenes of the poem, but the moral and heroic quality of most of the characters is determined or reflected by their adherence to, or rejection of the conventions of *xenia*.

As early as book 1 we see that Odysseus' wife, Penelope and his son, Telemachus are obliged to entertain the very men who are threatening the disruption of the social order and putting the life and legacy of Telemachus in peril. These 108 Suitors who are looking to usurp Odysseus have only been prevented from doing so by the wiles of Penelope who claims she cannot marry until she has completed her weaving, which she cunningly had unpicked every single evening so that no progress was ever made for four years!

Such is the importance of *xenia* that, in honouring it by feeding and housing unwelcome guests at great personal expense and danger, Penelope and Telemachus rather risk her ruin and his murder from the Suitors than the wrath and disfavour of a slighted Zeus *Xenios*.

We see the true, innate, inner quality of the often weak and emasculated Telemachus when he is given the opportunity to show his heroism through *xenia*.

This following excerpt highlights how Telemachus treats a stranger, unbeknownst to him Athena in disguise, with great civility and kindness in a manner by which his mighty father would surely have been proud.

HOMER: Now far the first to see Athena was godlike Telemachus, as he sat among the suitors, his heart deep grieving within him, imagining in his mind his great father, how he might come back and all throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter, and hold his rightful place and be lord of his own possessions. With such thoughts, sitting among the suitors, he saw Athena and went straight to the forecourt, the heart within him scandalized that a guest should still be standing at the doors. He stood beside her and took her by the right hand, and relieved her of the bronze spear, and spoke to her and addressed her in winged words: 'Welcome,

stranger. You shall be entertained as a guest among us. Afterward, when you have tasted dinner, you shall tell us what your need is.'

PRESENTER: This is a scene in which the boorishness and contemptuousness of the suitors contrast starkly with our young hero; acting impeccably and oppositely to them. As Telemachus chidingly puts it, "they are eating up my substance, waste it away; and soon they will break me myself to pieces".

If eating your host out of house and home weren't bad enough, the suitors also show poor *xenia* to a fellow guest, Odysseus in disguise, when they mock him and hurl a stool and an animal hoof at him when he comes begging for food.

This behaviour towards Odysseus is a double breach of hospitality as the suitors have overstayed their welcome to such an extent that they have become quasi-hosts and consequently are disrespecting *xenia* over both sides of the table.

Books one to four of 'The Odyssey' are often referred to independently as 'the Telemachia' as they have almost nothing to do with Odysseus himself, but are instead concerned with the personal development and minor wanderings of Telemachus.

This 'coming of age journey' provides an opportunity to develop the *xenia* theme further when the young man visits the courts of two heroes from Troy; Nestor and Menelaus. In contrast to before, here we have the chance to see how *xenia* should be conducted properly by wise and noble Homeric heroes.

The exception to this being Menelaus' wife Helen who refuses to accept personal responsibility for her *xenia*-breaching collusion with Paris, passing it off as temporary insanity: "I grieved for the madness that Aphrodite bestowed", are the precise words she uses. Even if we are initially convinced of her contrition, then we are not for long, as she commits the bizarre and unnecessary hospitality sin of drugging Telemachus' wine!

However, we needn't look solely at the obvious sources to see character flaws. As good and noble as Odysseus is, and as much as we are rooting for him, he is by no means perfect. Sometimes arrogant, avaricious, cruel, appetitive, lazy, neglectful and downright stupid; Odysseus is not a one-dimensional Clark Kent figure.

And despite being pre-destined for greatness, he is not exempt from incurring the wrath that goes hand-in-hand with disrespecting the laws of hospitality.

A key reason Odysseus' journey home takes ten long years is because he angers the god Poseidon by blinding his son, Polyphemus, commonly known to us as the Cyclops.

In itself, the act may be justified, but because it is done in the Cyclops' home, Odysseus is breaking the xenia laws, he is being the ultimate bad guest. In fact, Odysseus is doubly culpable in this case as, in addition to blinding his 'host', he also has the temerity to steal his cheese!

Likewise, at the climax of the poem, Odysseus shows very poor hospitality by slaughtering the 108 suitors in his own house. This is despite it being clear in the poem that only the ringleaders are truly guilty and the others are not merely ready to accept Odysseus as their lord, but also willing to pay him reparations.

Finally, he also brandishes a sword on the nymph Circe when he and his men pay a visit to her island.

These xenia transgressions of Odysseus are partially forgivable because, even though he is sinning as both host and guest, he is sinned against even more gravely.

The cyclops imprisons and kills his men, Circe transforms them into pigs, and the suitors are constant threat to his kingdom and legacy. That said, his behaviour is not excused away entirely. There are only ever explanations for contravening xenia, never justifications.

There are three characters in the Odyssey who are held up as paradigms of good xenia. The first is Nausicaa, the daughter of the Phaeacian king Alcinous. She shows a complete lack of regal haughtiness when encountering the shipwrecked and dishevelled Odysseus, immediately offering to have him bathed and beautified.

The nobility of Nausicaa is phenomenal when we consider that she is a defenceless, regal virgin who may be risking her honour in aiding the powerful, rugged stranger. However, in the unlikely event that Odysseus should have taken advantage of the situation then he could only have expected swift and brutal divine-retribution.

Next is the humble swineherd Eumaeus who shows his piety and goodness when encountering the, seemingly perpetually, disguised Odysseus. Eumaeus' devotion to

Zeus Xenios is made greater and nobler by his own inferior social status and abject poverty. Indeed, he seems to have been a favourite character of Homer as he is, extremely peculiarly, referred to in the second, rather than the third person, as can be seen in the following excerpt.

HOMER: Then, O swineherd Eumaeus, you said to him in answer: 'Stranger, I have no right to deny the stranger, not even if one came to me who was meaner than you. All vagabonds and strangers are under Zeus, and the gift is a light and a dear one that comes from us, for that is the way of us who are servants and forever filled with fear when they come under power of masters who are new'.

PRESENTER: The third, and most important shining-example of good xenia is the character upon whom Odysseus is most focused and most depends; his wife, Penelope. She manages to strike an almost impossible balance between being a good hostess to the Suitors, ensuring that she remains true and virtuous to Odysseus and also finding time to raise, protect and instruct Telemachus.

In book 11, the chillingly named 'Nekyia', or Book of the Dead, she is compared favourably by Agamemnon to his wife Clytemnestra. Odysseus had journeyed to the underworld in order to parley with an assortment of ghouls. Agamemnon, murdered in his own house by his wife's lover, assures Odysseus he'll never fall foul of such an extreme breach of xenia with the words: "circumspect Penelope is all too virtuous and her mind is stored with good thoughts".

The poem's ultimate retribution for transgressing xenia comes in a moment of bloody climax at Odysseus' court on Ithaca.

Having been beaten and abused by the Suitors Odysseus picks up and attempts to string a mighty bow.

A bow so large and cumbersome that nobody but a superhuman hero could manage to wield it, and certainly not the ragged and filthy figure who is comically attempting to do so at this very moment. Though, as harmlessly innocuous as the wooden horse was to the Trojans, so the beggar is now to the Suitors.

He succeeds, he strings the bow. Even as the mockery and jeers are being swallowed down, choking the incredulous Suitors, our hero takes aim and fires straight through the neck of the usurper-in-chief, Antinous. The giant, almost



inoperable bow had poetically, aptly, beautifully, once-upon-a-time been a xenia gift to Odysseus himself.

107 more Suitors fall to sword, spear and bow. Thus blood pays for the dishonouring of host and household. The almighty Zeus finds a way to punish those who fail to show appropriate levels of honour and humility. The hubristic and impious are slain without mercy. Justice is done. Xenia has won.

And we are left only with the cold, clear feeling that next time we go round to a friend's house, we will definitely, definitely not outstay our welcome.

And so, for now, we must leave Homer, Odysseus, xenia, and the world of the sublime.