

Defining Divinity by Death and Demise:
The Homeric Hierarchy of Divine, Humane, and Dead in the *Odyssey*

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Contrary to religious traditions of centuries of predecessors, Greek mythology illustrates human-like deities instead of animalistic gods and goddesses, such as Egyptian beliefs in “Cannibal Spell to King Unis” and Sumerian deities in the epic *Gilgamesh*. A closer relationship to humanity suggests an alternative definition of divinity for Greek culture, as the gods and goddesses are closer related to mortal image. Still, the question then arises, what underlying factors determine setting gods above humans and humans above the dead, along with a submissive system in the same order?

When English translators refer to “heaven” and “hell” while discussing places in Greek mythology, scholars commonly accept that these texts are not referring to the same “heaven” and “hell” as contemporary Christianity proposes. Christian interpretations of the afterlife suggest a utopia for well-behaved mortals placed in the heavens above, whereas the less fortunate are condemned to an eternity of torture in hell below. In Greek culture, however, the afterlife is contained only to a place beneath the earth where both good and bad souls—or shades—reside. The heavens are reserved for gods and goddesses alone, not to be tainted by human occupation; nonetheless, Greek deities remain closer to human image than Egyptian or Sumerian gods, implying an underlying defining factor of divinity. As depicted in Homeric texts, especially the *Odyssey*, the geographical and social separation of divine, human, and

afterlife represents an ancient Greek hierarchy based on an unfavorable and inescapable fate—death.

Centuries of polytheism precede Homer's time, the earliest being ancient Egyptian religion, as depicted in "Cannibal Spell for King Unis" around 2325 B.C.E., inscribed in hieroglyphics within the tomb of the king (Vol. A 26). This text, presumably "recited during the sacrifice of a bull or ox before a ritual meal that would have formed part of the king's funeral ceremonies," predicts the afterlife of King Unis; the spell that the Egyptian ruler will consume the other deities and humans, consequently absorbing the magic and vitality of victims eaten (Vol. A 26-27). As a human who achieves power over Egyptian gods, King Unis implies that immortality—or, at least, divine authority—is attainable for mortal men.

After the Egyptian religion, Sumerian religion displays in the epic *Gilgamesh*, which was carried orally around Mesopotamia for centuries before finally being recorded in Sanskrit around 1900-250 B.C.E. (Vol. A 95). This text recounts the story of young king Gilgamesh, who begins as a tyrant who befriends wild Enkidu; after this union, Gilgamesh matures, and the two friends successfully defeat giant Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Following the fight with the bull, however, Enkidu falls ill and dies, which spurs Gilgamesh to begin a frantic search for immortality; despite receiving a magical fruit from to become immortal, Gilgamesh's fearful hesitation delays his consumption, allowing a serpent to eat the fruit instead. The existence of a magical, immortalizing fruit and the inclusion of Utanapishtim's existence implies that, in Sumerian beliefs, immortality is attainable for humans, albeit through a demanding endeavor.

Homer's *Odyssey* joins the conversation of religious-based texts in eighth century B.C.E. in Greece; notably, instead of debating the Homeric question of a single or multi-faceted author, this paper will use "Homer" in regard to the author(s) of the *Odyssey* for conciseness.

The *Odyssey* recounts the story of godlike king Odysseus struggling to return home to Ithaca about twenty years after the Trojan war; however, divine intervention and Odysseus' own hubris delay the hero's homecoming. Through the assistance of grey-eyed Athena, aegis-holding Zeus, nymph Calypso, and dread Circe, along with his own cunning and wit, Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca and wreaks vengeance on the suitors that previously raided his home, at last reuniting with his wife, Penelope, and son, Telemachus. The *Odyssey*, in stark contrast to preceding Egyptian and Sumerian texts, institutes a hierarchy among divine, human, and dead, with gods and goddesses at the top.

Top-tier deities reside on Mount Olympus, above the mortal realm and, consequently, separate from humans. If modern English translators describe the gods' home as "heaven" where Homer does not explicitly use the Christian term, then what place—or person—is Homer describing? As with any foreign text, Homer's *Odyssey* translates into several styles that agree on basic ideas, yet differ in style under the influence of time period, religious beliefs, and personal bias of the translators. Thus, for English readers, an examination of multiple translations of the *Odyssey* provides a clearer understanding of the text. Stanley Lombardo and S. Butler, for instance, refer to "the gods" and "the heavens" interchangeably when documenting Athena and Telemachus' discussion of Odysseus' absence from Ithaca (Lombardo 337-338, Butler 1). Homeric culture, then, does not acknowledge Christian beliefs of heaven as an elevated environment for favored, deceased humans; rather, the deathless gods reside in a realm above the earth, free from the stain of mortal residence.

Human beings, on the other hand, live on earth between the divine and dead realms; the only gods conformed to living in the mortal realm are either trapped outcasts or low-tier deities who come along with humans of their own accord. For example, Homer introduces Calypso as a minor goddess confined to the island Ogygia. While Calypso's island is a utopia,

the goddess is not allowed to leave the prison of paradise. Textual evidence confirms Calypso's captivity as the gods communicate with her through Hermes; unlike major deities, Calypso does not simply ascend to Olympus to converse with the other gods of her own free will, nor is she summoned. Furthermore, Calypso submits to Zeus, alluding to an inner system of submission between the glorified Olympians and other immortals—rather, and Olympian hierarchy enveloped within the divine hierarchy. The earthbound goddess releases Odysseus from Ogygia against her own will and in accordance with Zeus' direct orders, but not without protest to Hermes, further alluding to the Olympian hierarchy:

“You are cruel, you gods, jealous above all others . . .

But in no way is it possible for another god

To slip by or frustrate the purpose of aegis-bearing Zeus.

Let [Odysseus] go, if that god commands him and drives him

Out on the barren ocean.” (Cook 55)

Calypso is not the only earthbound goddess referenced in Homer's epic. “Fair-braided Circe, dread [goddess] with a singing voice,” resides in a cottage on Aiaia, where she lures men inside with a song before poisoning and transforming the victims into swine (Cook 107). When Odysseus' men hear Circe's song outside of her halls, the sailors ask whether the voice belongs to a woman or goddess (Cook 109). This implies that while Circe's voice is too enchanting to be human, living in a typically mortal residence makes her divinity questionable.

Alternatively, when high-tier gods and goddesses do roam the earth, these deities usually do so to temporarily assist favored mortals or visit sacrificial ceremonies before returning to Mount Olympus. Poseidon, god of the seas, notices Odysseus sailing away from Calypso's island as “the earth-shaking ruler” travels back to Olympus after visiting the

Ethiopians for a season to obtain honor from the mortals (Cook 58, 282). Athena, goddess of wisdom and war strategy, frequently travels to the mortal realm in many forms—including an elderly man and an owl—to guide Odysseus and Telemachus, yet returns to Olympus to congregate with other gods to discuss important matters, such as when the goddess convinces Zeus to allow Odysseus to leave Ogygia in Book V (Cook 52-53).

If immortals strain to be both geographically and socially separated from humans, however, then why is Homer's beloved hero praised as "godlike Odysseus" throughout the epic? Homeric deities are defined by immortality, or the lack of death; therefore, the longer that Odysseus survives, the more godlike the Ithacan king is. Despite divine favor, however, Odysseus will only ever be godlike, not a legitimate god; unlike *Gilgamesh's* fruitful methods, humans cannot ascend a ladder to immortality because there is none to climb in the first place.

Odysseus, therefore, is not at the top of the divine hierarchy, but he is not at the absolute bottom, either. This revelation ironically comes from two dead men: blind seer Tiresias and great warriors Achilles. After receiving Odysseus' inquiry of how to communicate with Anticlea, Tiresias reveals:

"Easily shall I say the word and put it in your mind.

Whomever you permit of the souls of the dead

To approach the blood closer will speak without error to you.

The one you begrudge will back away." (Cook 119)

This advice highlights the submission of dead to living, as the shades are not allowed to speak to Odysseus unless the living man allows the dead to approach the sacrificial blood. Achilles further suggests a death-based hierarchy through the deceased hero's rightful complaint to Odysseus:

“Nay, seek not to speak soothingly of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.” (Murray 421)

Before expressing this woe, Achilles even greets Odysseus by expressing death’s distastefulness. The deceased hero asks what Odysseus is doing “among the senseless dead, the phantoms of men outworn” (Butcher and Lang 164). Robert Fitzgerald even translates this bitter insult into “these dimwitted dead . . . the after-images of used-up men” (Fitzgerald 200). Achille’s lamentations further solidify the shameful consequence of death; in short, Achilles would rather *have* nothing than *be* nothing.

Besides Tiresias and Achilles’ implications, Homer consistently reminds readers that death is a bitter end. In Book XI, Elpenor’s shade warns Odysseus that the Homeric hero must properly mourn and remember the fallen companion to avoid the wrath of the gods:

“The tribute of a tear is all I crave
 And the possession of a peaceful grace.
 But if, unheard, in vain compassion plead,
 Revere the gods, the gods avenge the dead!” (Pope 159)

Butcher and Lang pen Elpenor’s self-proclamation as “a luckless man,” while Lattimore describes the same sailor as “an unhappy man” (Butcher and Lang 154, Lattimore 170). Thus, life reigns supreme, while even the highest beings enforce remorse for the dead.

In contrast to Achilles and Elpenor’s woes, gods and goddesses *do* reside in the underworld, even ruling over the dead—but why do these deities live in such an unwanted home? The gods and goddesses of the underworld, including Hades and Persephone, are still separate from shades in value because Homeric deities are connected to nature and abstract

concepts, such as fear and doubt. Nature and emotions frequently interact with everyday mortals and Homeric heroes in the form of gods and goddesses; contrariwise, the dead do not initiate contact with the living, but are only permitted to interact through divine intervention or sacrifice from a mortal, such as when Odysseus sails to the underworld and summons Tiresias (Cook 117).

Homer evidently implements a death-based hierarchy, but why is death the final factor in determining where beings spend eternity? Dr. John A Scott writes *Homer and His Influence* to credit the poet with great contributions to Greek culture; according to Dr. Scott, "Wherever the Greeks went Homer went with them" (Scott 97). Additionally, Scott insists, "All Greek art, society, and literature assume the poetry of Homer as a background and a foundation" (93). Homeric texts, then, are representative of the culture surrounding their creation; therefore, Homer's values are ancient Greek values. Other mortals praise godlike Odysseus because of his success in the Trojan War, and Homer's epics heavily drip with consistent laws of hospitality and honor. Consequently, Homer illustrates a culture built upon war values, as well as the reward and punishment thereof. In a culture so obsessed with war and survival, maintaining life—or surviving—is successful, whereas falling to the inescapable grip of death is failure. If Homeric men are valued over women due to being socially acceptable soldiers, then living men are valued over dead men due to being logically effective soldiers; that is, a dead man cannot win a war.

In conclusion, Homer's *Odyssey* constructs a hierarchy based on death, where undying immortals are prized above all, failed dead men reside beneath the earth, and living mortals exist in between, fighting to outrun an inevitable fate. Multiple English translations work together to produce a coherent understanding of the Greek epic, allowing readers to see the many ways Homer expresses a system that favors life over death, going so far as to construct a

submissive system following the hierarchy's order. Understanding Greek war values and culture further allows readers to understand why such a system exists in the first place.

Upon further insight, perhaps studying the Homeric hierarchy of life and death, success and failure, may reveal a better understanding of contemporary mortal culture, where living men and women continue to race in fear from Persephone and dream of attaining Olympic stature.

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