CLASSICAL WISDOM

Litterae

November 2021, Issue No. 67

The Appeal of *The Odyssey*

Cunning Homer: A new Look at Odysseus

Polyphemus: Two Faces of a Cyclops

PLUS!

The Female Monsters ?

The Language of the Odyssey

The Route of Odysseus

Odysseus Killing The Suitors Of His Wife Penelope On The Island Of Ithaca

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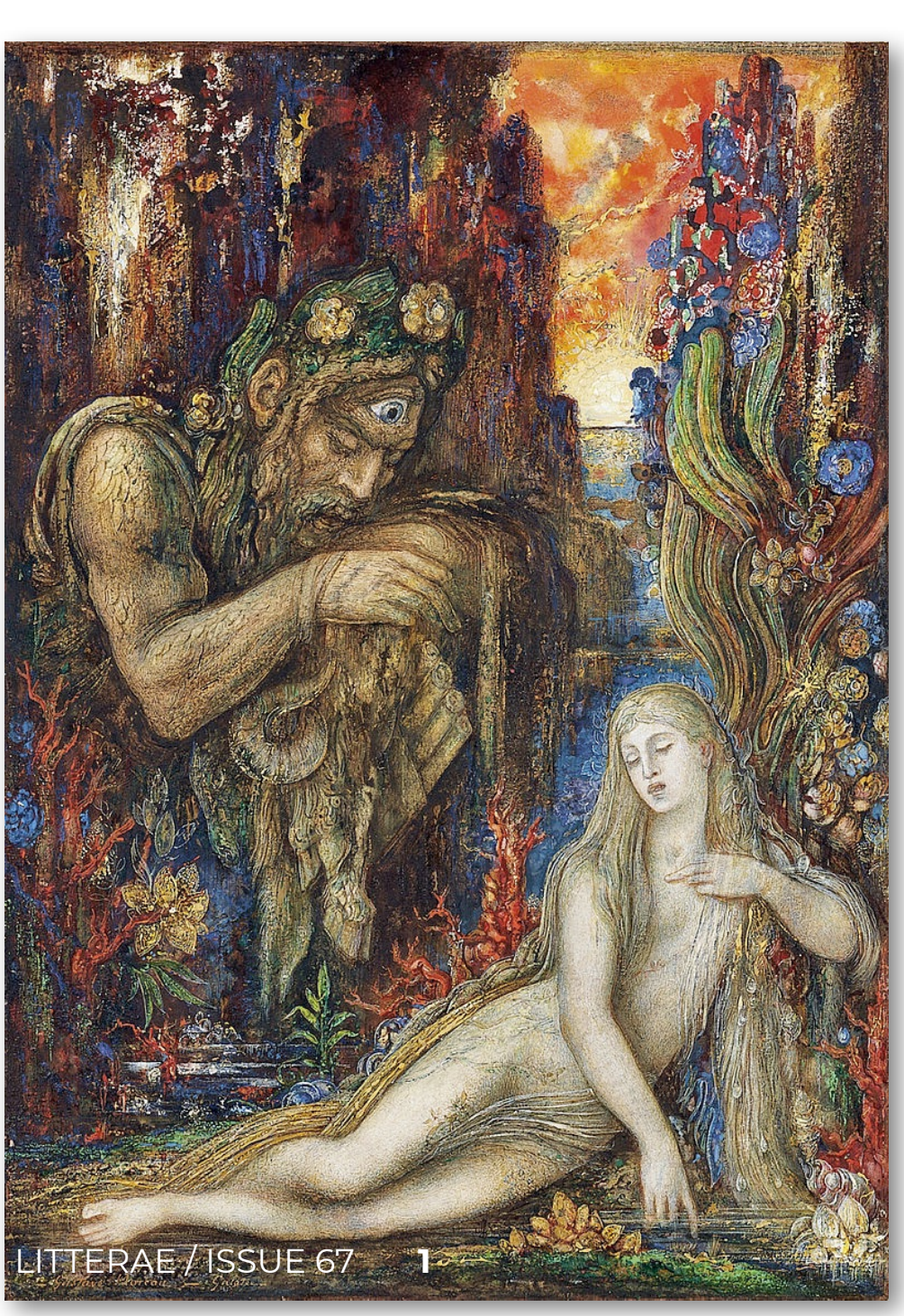

Classical Wisdom Litterae

A LETTER FOR THE CLASSICALLY MINDED

I don't need to tell you why *the Odyssey* is important... I don't have to describe its significance, culturally or historically. There is no need to explain its legacy or lasting impact.

It's *the Odyssey,* at all. And if you are a member of Classical Wisdom, then all of that is already a given.

So why study and review Homer's epic poem, when no doubt it's been discussed so many times before? Why should we return again and again to t*he Odyssey?*

Not only has *the Odyssey* been part of the Canon since the 6th century BC, one could easily argue it encompasses the very idea of the Canon.

Derived from Ancient Greek: **κανών**, the Canon means a measuring rod, or standard, and it is this 24 book epic with which we can measure so much. We can use it to compare cultures, identities, psychologies, and values, both in the ancient world and throughout every time period since. It is an important standard to understanding literature and poetry and important concepts, such a nostos (**νόστος**; "return"), wandering, xenia (**ξενία**; "guest-friendship").

But more than that, it is a measure for ourselves. A timeless piece of literature to return to again and again within our own lives. Each revisit will reveal not only new treasures found in the text, but insights into ourselves and where we are at the time of reading.

Like Heraclitus' famous river, we are never the same person when we re-read, re-study, re-enjoy *the Odyssey*.

So let us continue the 'Great Conversation'... and keep alive one of the oldest extant works of literature still read by contemporary audiences. Enjoy this month's *Classical Wisdom Litterae*, dedicated to t*he Odyssey*.

Anya Leonard
Founder and Director
Classical Wisdom

IN SEARCH OF HOMER

A Voyage to the World of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the Aegean and Ionian Seas

Aboard the 34-Guest Yacht Callisto

With Professors Emily Wilson and William B. Irvine

September 10 -21, 2022

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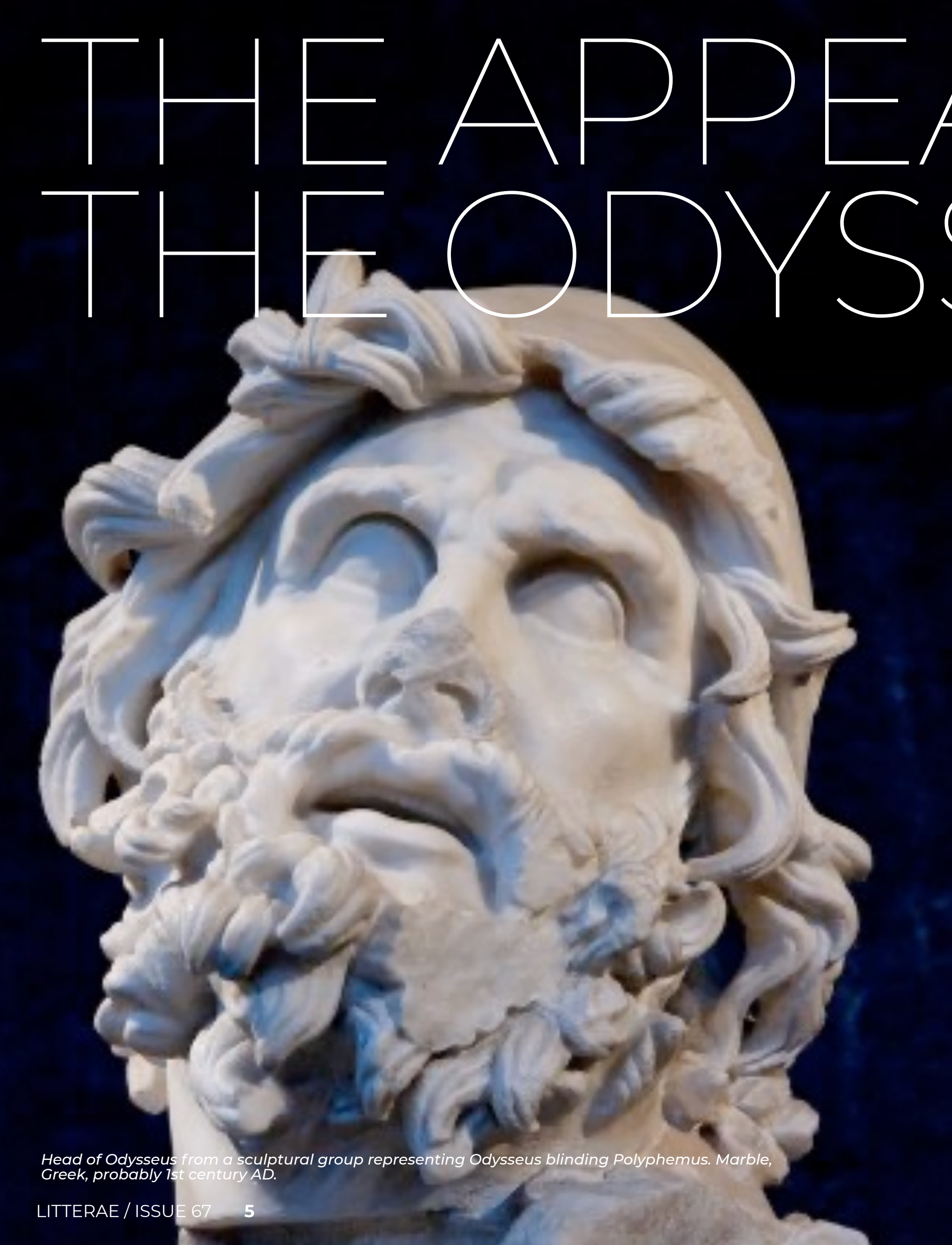
THE APPEA
THE ODYSS



Head of Odysseus from a sculptural group representing Odysseus blinding Polyphemus. Marble, Greek, probably 1st century AD.

AL OF SEY

BY BEN POTTER

Even those of you who have only recently taken an interest in the classical world will have a pretty decent idea about what to expect when picking up a copy of Homer's Odyssey, his blockbuster sequel to the Trojan War epic, the *Iliad*.

This familiar tale of the eponymous Odysseus taking ten long years to traverse the breadth of Greece, from the ruins of Troy to his home on Ithaca (having already spent ten years fighting the war itself), can be roughly divided into four distinct sections:

- Books I-IV deal with the adventures of Odysseus' son Telemachus.

- Books V-VIII show Odysseus being released from the clutches of the nymph Calypso, to whom our hero has been a sex-slave for seven years. He then travels to Scheria, home of the noble Phaeacians.

- Books IX-XII contain stories told by Odysseus to the Phaeacian king and queen about why it has taken him so long to get home. Here are recounted the most famous stories of Odysseus e.g. Circe turning his men to pigs, the descent into the underworld, the Cyclops, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis.

- Books XIII-XXIV show Odysseus back on Ithaca going about his heroic business of vanquishing a group of Suitors – uncouth local nobles who have taken up at his court, who are attempting to kill his son and marry his wife, Penelope (and with her take the throne of Ithaca).

So what is it about this story, this twenty-four book long epic poem, that captures the imagination? Why, when there is so much choice of literature from the classical world, is it still so popular, so enduring? Why does it unquestioningly rank as one of the greatest of all great works and retain a special place in the heart of academics and laymen alike?

Well, there are plenty of obvious reasons – the very most obvious of which is that it is, of course, a very high quality piece of literature. That aside, there's also the hugely important historical and cultural significance of the piece. Perhaps no other secular work has had a greater impact on the world than that of Homer.

Not only do the Homeric texts underpin so much of ancient Greek culture, but they, by proxy, have a similar such influence on Roman, European, and (if somewhat obliquely) New World cultures.

On top of this, the *Odyssey* can boast a great richness of language and would have been rhythmically (i.e. poetically) pleasing – even if this last aspect is somewhat lost on us today.
So, there's plenty to shout about in terms of style and significance, but what about substance? What details of plot and character have managed to excite and amaze for the better part of three millennia?

A GRIPPING ADVENTURE

There are, of course, plenty of (what we would now call) dramatic staples, certainly enough to write a pulse-quickening blurb on the back of the dust-jacket: a sea-tossed hero, a family in danger, seductive femme-fatales, constant peril, fights, races, monsters, romance, sex, blood, noble peasants, evil aristocrats, a flawed hero, a long suffering wife, capricious gods… you can almost picture the cigar-chomping Hollywood mogul tripping over himself in a rush to buy the exclusive rights (despite complaining: "but the name's no darn good. Odysseus!? Let's call him… Buster MacNally").

All this is well and good and certainly lends human interest and spectacular grandeur to the work, but one of the most intriguing things about the epic, one of the things that make its analysis and rereading so rewarding, is much more psychological and cerebral. In the words of eminent Homeric scholar P.V. Jones: "the rich interaction of past and present is one of the great glories of the *Odyssey*".

FINDING THE FUTURE, THROUGH THE PAST…

Obviously, being a sequel, the *Odyssey* harks back to the *Iliad* and the entire mythology (more like a heroic history to the Greeks) surrounding the Trojan War. In particular, Book XI – the *Nekyia* (the book of the dead) – gives us a chance to indulge in a veritable smorgasbord of Trojan War heroes who spellbind the audience with their ghoulish cameos.

"Odysseus in the Cave of Polyphemus." Painting by Jacob Jordaens circa 1635

This retrospective, however, may not tickle everyone's fancy; indeed it may only pique the interest of *Iliad* lovers or Greek mythology nerds. Moreover, the fact that Homer's depictions have become canonized means that the revelations from the lips of the deceased, though of interest, do not create the same wide-eyed wonder in a modern audience as they would have done in antiquity.

However, this orgy of nostalgia may only have been part of what Jones was referring to. A much more interesting notion (and here we pick up on the cerebral and psychological aspect) is that books IX-XII are a complete fantasy.

THE PLOT TWIST

These four books contain the tales told by Odysseus to his regal hosts on the island of Scheria/Phaeacia. However, unlike the other stories in the epic which are told to us by the poet, these tales are directly narrated by

“The key point is that it is not necessary for the things heard to be true, only that they are recounted through the ages. Thus, Odysseus has ten unaccounted-for years to fill up with fantastical stories that glorify his name.”

Odysseus himself; what is more, all of the characters who shared in these adventures with him (i.e. his crew) have died. Thus, so the theory goes, the *Odyssey* isn’t merely one of the earliest examples of folklore and epic poetry we have, but may also have given birth to a ‘Kaiser Soze’ style plot-twist.

This idea is given credence as more than merely a literary conspiracy-theory by the nature of the main character, a nature that is defined by the epithets Homer gives him: ‘master of stratagems’, ‘cunning’ and ‘nimble-witted’. Let’s not forget that Odysseus was the man to come up with the idea of the Trojan Horse in the first place; duplicity and lies are part of his make-up… and a noble and heroic part at that.

ODYSSEUS AND THE SIRENS

Okay, so maybe we’re happy to accept that our hero could do this, but why would he? Well, the two popular theories are as follows: the first is that he is doing it to enhance his *kleos*, the ultimate goal for every Homeric hero. *Kleos* is often loosely translated as ‘reputation’, but more accurately means ‘what people hear about you’. The key point is that it is not necessary for the things heard to be true, only that they are recounted through the ages. Thus, Odysseus has ten unaccounted-for years to fill up with fantastical stories that glorify his name.

The other explanation is that the twenty years of war and storm-tossed seas (and whatever else he got up to if the stories he tells King Alcinous were falsified) have left our protagonist with a psychology that’s either inherently mistrustful, or perversely deranged. In other words, either he’s gotten so used to lying to protect himself that doing so has become an instinct, or maybe even a compulsion, or alternately he is suffering from some sort of trauma – perhaps PTSD – and fantastical deceit is one of its manifestations.

ODYSSEUS FIGHTS THE SUITORS

This idea of compulsive behavior has its best evidence at the end of the epic after Odysseus has been re-established as king of Ithaca and his identity is commonly known. Known to all, that is, except his ancient father, Laertes, who is pining for his lost, possibly dead, son. Instead of revealing his identity and embracing Laertes, Odysseus claims to be called Eperitos, son of Apheidas, from Alybas. He only actually reveals who he is after his elderly father has some sort of panic attack.

If our hero cannot bring himself to be honest with his own frail father and feels the need to instantly concoct a rather pointless and hurtful falsehood, then surely we must question the authority of everything he says that Homer, as narrator, doesn’t corroborate?

Ulysses and the Sirens by H.J. Draper

Interestingly, if we do dismiss what Odysseus says to the Phaeacians as a pack of lies, then there is nothing overtly supernatural or otherworldly in the epic. Though gods do appear, speak and act in the present (as opposed to the past) passages of the book, their actions are only an extrapolation or interpretation of physically accountable things.

So did Homer want us to ask questions about the mental capacity or moral fibre of his hero? Well... possibly, possibly not. However, it does seem likely that the rich texture of the work and psychology of the characters is not something that happened by accident, but was devised by an author who was either instinctively in tune with the nuances of human nature, or the world's first student of psychology!

It is up to us to put our faith in whatever Odysseus we prefer. If we decide to believe in the one who fabricated all of the weirdest and most wondrous tales from perhaps the most famous story ever told, then we can. If we prefer to take him on face value, then our hero is simply extraordinarily strong, courageous and intelligent.

3rd Cent. BC Hellenistic sculpture
Roman copy, 2nd Cent. AD,
Legato Giovanni Grimaldi
Venice, National Archaeological Museum

Ancient Anecdotes

The Language of the Odyssey

The first epitaph used for Odysseus in the Odyssey is “polytropov”, which can be translated in many ways. The literal Greek can mean a variety of things including “many turning” or “many ways”.

The play on the language is most significant when applied to Odysseus as a man. He has been on many turns, physically, by being scattered throughout his travels, but also in his own right is many-turning with his cunning and trickery. Previous translators have chosen more audience friendly terms such as “wiley”, which captures the personal aspect of his polytropov, but not the tragic reality of his situation.

More recent translators, such as Emily Wilson, have chosen to bring the literal translation to readers, so they can capture the full intention of Homer’s words.

THE FEMALE MONSTERS OF THE ODYSSEY

Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses
Painting by John William Waterhouse

BY JULIA HUSE

Of the monsters and mythological creatures Odysseus encounters during his long voyage from Troy to Ithaca, among the fiercest are female. Three of these are Circe, the Sirens and Calypso, who all prove to be difficult and terrifying obstacles to Odysseus' journey home.

THE WITCH CIRCE

After escaping the island of the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, Odysseus and his crew stumble upon Aeaea and the home of Circe, who is referred to as both a witch and a nymph. She has a vast knowledge of potions and herbs, which Odysseus and his crew experience first hand. Odysseus and half his crew stay behind with the ships while the others go in search of Aeaea to see what people live there. The search party comes across the home of Circe, which is described as a large house in a clearing in the middle of a thick forest. All around the house are lions and wolves, which at first frighten the crew... until they notice how docile the beasts are.

It is later found out that these are the previously drugged victims of Circe and her potions. In her house Circe welcomes Odysseus' crew as guests, feeding them a meal of cheese and honey which she has drugged, turning the crew into pigs.

All but one crew member is changed into a pig and he manages to escape to warn Odysseus and the other half of the crew what has happened.

Odysseus ventures to Circe's house to save his men, but is stopped along the way by the god Hermes, who was sent by Athena. Hermes tells Odysseus of an herb called moly that will protect him from the potions of Circe. Immune to her potions, Odysseus acts as if he is going to attack her.

Afterwards, she tries to coax Odysseus into bed with her, which he avoids, due to Hermes' advice. Having done all this, Odysseus convinces Circe to turn his crew back into humans and free them

.

THE SIRENS

Odysseus also encounters the famous sirens during his wanderings. Typically in Greek depictions, the sirens are half-woman half-bird creatures that perch on the rocks by the sea and sing beautiful songs that lure men who, refusing to leave, die of starvation.

In the *Odyssey*, Circe warns Odysseus about the sirens and tells him to plug his and his crew's ears with beeswax in order to block their sweet songs from entering their ears. Being curious about the songs the Sirens sing, Odysseus only plugs his crew's ears with beeswax and then has his men tie him to the mast of the ship, instructing them not to untie him... no matter how much he begs for it. Odysseus hears the song and begs and pleads that his crew release him, but his faithful crew only tighten the ropes more, binding him to the mast.

It is then revealed that the reason the songs allure and entice men is because they sing of past and future truths. They sing to Odysseus about his past endeavors, such as the glory and suffering he endured on the battlefields of Troy, and his future actions and what he will achieve... and they falsely promise that their hearers will live to tell these truths to others. Odysseus, of course, achieves this and this is how we are able to get this account from him.

Ulysses and the Sirens, 1891, By John William Waterhouse.

Calypso by George Hitchcock (about 1906)

THE NYMPH CALYPSO

At the end of his wanderings Odysseus washes up alone on the island Ogygia, the omphalos, meaning navel or center, of the sea, and also the home of the nymph Calypso. Homer describes Calypso as the daughter of the Titan Atlas, who holds up the pillars of the sky and the sea. In Homer's epic, Calypso keeps Odysseus on her island for seven years, accounting for a large part of his journey home. Calypso desires to make Odysseus her immortal husband and enchants him with her singing as she weaves on her loom. Odysseus performs all the duties of a husband for Calypso, including sleeping with her.

Detail from a Terracotta lekythos, showing two women spinning wool into yarn and two women working at an upright loom, c.550–530 BC. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Even under Calypso's spell Odysseus desires a different life. The promise of immortality does not sway him from missing his wife Penelope. Odysseus, a man, does not desire the life of a god; he much prefers the life of a mortal, even with all its hardships that are so clearly lacking on Calypso's island.

Noticing that Odysseus wants to leave the island, Athena asks Zeus to order Odysseus' release. Zeus sends Hermes to tell Calypso to release Odysseus because it is not his fate that he should remain on the island forever anyways. Calypso eventually, and stubbornly, agrees to free Odysseus and sends him on his way with wine, bread and materials for a raft.

BEGUILING WOMEN OF ANCIENT GREECE

These women, although not necessarily terrifying in their looks, are certainly terrifying in their abilities to enchant mortal men. With much help Odysseus is able to resist or break free from these enchantments. Even the seemingly least threatening woman of the three, Calypso, manages to keep Odysseus detained for seven years, proving to be one of the greatest obstacles to his journey.

Clearly the women are seen as enchanters and deceivers of men, distracting them from their intended course or purpose... and this reflects a feeling found in Ancient Greece that women were deceitful creatures who could not control their sexual desires and sought to entrap men.

This becomes especially clear when compared to male monsters, such as the Cyclops Polyphemus, who does not have the enchanting and deceiving nature of these women. Odysseus immediately sees through his deceit and is able to win against Polyphemus with his own trickery.

Whereas Odysseus can detect this deception on his own, when it comes to women monsters and goddesses, he needs the help of the gods and others to warn him and help him break free.

The Cunning H
Look At The ‘O

François-Xavier Fabre (1766-1837)
Ulysse et Néoptolème enlèvent à Philoctète l’arc et les flèches d’Hercule, 1800

Homer: A New Odyssey’

BY ALBERTO MAJRANI

Who really killed the suitors in Homer's *Odyssey*? A careful reading of the epic poem reveals a myriad of clues left by Homer with a surprising conclusion: Ulysses was not...really Ulysses. He was the expert Achaean archer Philoctetes in disguise!

With this key, the Homeric poem suddenly assumes a logic and coherence hitherto unsuspected. This explains why Homer continues to praise the art of deception: it is he who has deceived us for three thousand years! And the surprises do not end there: all the apparent inconsistencies of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that have plagued students and teachers for generations, known as the "Homeric Question", now fall effortlessly in place. The ancient texts finally agree with historical and archaeological data, fully revealing the genius of their author.

"And what if Ulysses was not actually...Ulysses? Let's examine the hypothesis that the son of Ulysses, Telemachus, had hired a mercenary to interpret Ulysses and to slaughter of the suitors asking the hand of his mother Penelope..."

It's a strange story, that of Ulysses. Is it possible that the King of Ithaca stayed away for twenty years, missing his homeland, abandoning a beautiful nymph who would make him immortal, only to return to a wife no longer young after a dangerous solo crossing?

And when he does return, nobody recognizes him, not even his father or his own wife, so he kills all the pretenders threatening to provoke a bloody revolution, and finally, when he would have every right to a little peace and quiet, he decides to sail away in secret, leaving everyone baffled! All right, yes, it is a mythological tale, but it is not very...*logical*!

WHO SHOWED UP ON ITHACA... AND WHY?

And what if Ulysses was not actually...Ulysses? Let's examine the hypothesis that the son of Ulysses, Telemachus, had hired a mercenary to interpret Ulysses and to slaughter of the suitors asking the hand of his mother Penelope: the same Telemachus would then cast a poet to tell a fantastic story that could justify all the years of his father's absence. All this in order to free the royal palace of all the suitors eating them out of house and home — not to mention that if someone had married his mother, Telemachus would have lost his right of succession to the kingdom.

In fact, Penelope was of noble birth, being the daughter of the powerful King Ikarios, while Ulysses was an "upstart" tradesman familiar with piracy and looting, activities which, at that time, were not clearly defined. The claimants themselves were plotting to get rid of him, and he had to anticipate them as soon as possible.

Who was this mercenary? Can you imagine? Think about it...it is suggested to us by Ulysses himself...when he is in the land of the Phaeacians. Ulysses claims to be the best of the Achaeans in archery, immediately after Philoctetes!

PHILOCTETES

As for Philoctetes, who was he? Maybe someone remembers him thanks to the

Philoctetes, by Jean Germain Drouais

amusing cartoon “Hercules”, produced by Disney in 1997 in which the script writers got a bit too carried away by the need to invent a fun story. They changed the events and roles of various mythological characters. It’s best, then, to refer to Classical sources.

The *Iliad* tells us that Philoctetes was the head of a contingent of the Achaeans headed to the Trojan War. However, he was bitten in the foot by a snake, a serious wound that became infected and forced his teammates to abandon him on the island of Lemnos. As Sophocles recounts in his play *Philoctetes*, according to a prophecy, Troy would fall only with the help of Hercules’ weapons.

Philoctetes had been a pupil of Hercules and had inherited his bow and arrows, so after being cured by the Achaean doctor Machaon, Philoctetes kills Paris, decisively contributing to the defeat of the Trojans.

Of course! The mercenary was Philoctetes! That explains a lot: he had known Ulysses for some time—that lent itself well to interpret him– he also was a “family friend” and therefore may have been more willing to risk his life in such a dangerous undertaking. He was an extremely skilled archer, requiring a level of training that Ulysses could not have maintained after so many years at sea.

That is assuming, of course, that Ulysses was really equipped with this skill: as the *Iliad* recounts, Ulysses never uses the bow, even during the games in honor of Patroclus, in which he won wrestling and running competitions. And when he finally does have a bow in hand—borrowed from the young warrior Meriones—all he does with it is whip horses!

Note also that Homer does not say that Philoctetes was abandoned on Lemnos on Ulysses’ orders: this is the work of subsequent mythographers and repeated by Sophocles, who reworked the old myths to build on his story–not very different from the authors of Disney. So there is no reason to think that Philoctetes was harboring resentment against Ulysses or his family members.

The youth of Ithaca would not have recognized Philoctetes, but some elderly people might, so it was necessary to leave the island as soon as his mission against the suitors was accomplished. He had been seriously wounded in the foot by a snake, which would have left him with some obvious lameness. In fact, Homer, without saying so openly, does everything to make us

understand that the mysterious stranger limps: he walks slowly, leaning on a cane, is likened to the god Hephaestus, who is lame too. There are many strange references to “feet”, for example the old nurse who recognizes “Ulysses” by his knee injury caused by a wild boar (which is never mentioned either in the *Iliad* or the rest of the *Odyssey*, in

which the legs of the runner Ulysses are absolutely perfect), a recognition that comes just as she washes his feet. Perhaps it had more to do with the foot than the knee!

But Philoctetes was not content with his substantial reward— i.e., all the precious objects Telemachus loaded on his ship when he sailed off—he aspired to eternal glory! And since he could not reveal the deception, he was lauded as one of “the best of the archers Achaean” by the great “Ulysses” himself.

That same “Ulysses” even alludes — in the poem dedicated to him — that there was someone better than him in the art of archery. His words are something of a Freudian slip, a kind of “Message in a Bottle” launched to posterity, as if to say: “he who has ears to hear, let him hear!”. Homer has left a host of similar messages throughout the poem that guide us through the actual course of the action.

As for the real Ulysses, he had probably died long before, killed in battle or drowned at sea. This can be deduced from the fact that, throughout the *Odyssey*, the idea that the hero is now deceased is repeated several times. What about the fact that at some point Ulysses descends into the underworld? Or the episode in which his name is Nobody, so the cyclops Polyphemus will repeat that Nobody blinds him, No one kills him? Other messages in bottles, which.. no one, so far, had taken literally!

And again, does it not appear very suspect that the extraordinary coincidence in time, that Ulysses would return to Ithaca after two decades, and within hours his son is landing on the same beach, located on the opposite side to the main port?

Let’s reconstruct the affair, let’s imagine how it could have taken place in reality. There is a power vacuum in Ithaca; the king left for decades and never came back. The suitors are plotting to eliminate Telemachus and take over the kingdom, so he sets sail with a ship

ship full of precious objects to hire a mercenary (Philoctetes already means “the one who loves to possess”). Philoctetes comes and performs the massacre with the help of the most faithful servants, whom, as the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius take the trouble of informing us, will be adequately rewarded

The fake Ulysses cannot stay there pretending nothing had happened, because sooner or later someone will recognize him. So he sails off again, leaving Telemachus the kingdom... and they all lived happily ever after.

The Odyssey is not just a fairy tale for overgrown children, but an intricate maze filled with ingenious references that will inevitably escape those who do not study it closely. *Quandoque dormitat bonus Homerus*–“Even good old Homer nods,” Horace proclaimed– but maybe Homer was a lot more awake than we thought!

Wounded Philoctetes - Francesco Paolo Hayez (1791-1881)

Penelope - Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)

More Linguistic Ody-ities

Like her Husband, Penelope is also surrounded by linguistic curiosities. In ancient but still Post-Homeric Greek, her name is most associated with her most famous skill - weaving.

However, prior to the known start of the Homeric Epics, the origins of her name is unknown. Her name may still reference the weft used in weaving, but more surprising is the theory that her name originates from a now unknown bird of prey.

Just as in the epic we receive her from, the Queen of Ithaca remains mysterious and withholding even in her name.

Telling Tall Tales
Wanderings of

Odysseus before Alcinous King of the Phaeacians
by August Malmstrom

s: *The*
Odysseus

Pieter Lastman: Odysseus and Nausicaa (oil on panel, 1619; Alte Pinakothek, Munich)

BY JUSTIN D. LYONS

The most well-known episodes in Homer's *Odyssey* are the adventures described in Books 9-12. Full of one-eyed giants, amorous goddesses and narrow escapes, they are considered the most memorable and thus most likely to be included in collections of excerpts. They have received so much attention that it is often forgotten that they make up only a small part of the epic—an epic that is far more concerned with the homecoming of Odysseus than with his wanderings.

These stories are told in the first person by Odysseus himself. Given what we know of his character from both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Odysseus does not hesitate to deceive when circumstances allow. Thus, we should carefully consider the veracity of his tales. After all, Homer calls Odysseus a "man of twists and turns," and we expect him to live up to the description.

Odysseus' reputation thus begs the question: Is it possible that the tales are not meant to be taken as relating "real" events? In other words, could it be that Odysseus did not actually have these adventures, or at least did not have them as he relates them?

The stories Odysseus tells have a fairy-tale, magical quality about them that is different from the rest of the *Odyssey*. The unreal, dream-like world of monsters and enchantresses is distinct from the more

realistic, historical world of Ithaca and the Greek mainland. Further, Odysseus' stories interrupt the forward-moving time scheme of the poem; they have the character of flashbacks, contributing to the feeling of "unreality."

It should be noted that Odysseus is speaking to an audience, the Phaeacians, from whom he is in desperate need of aid. Certainly, Odysseus is not above using his stories to sway them according to his desire.

Indeed, Odysseus may have been catering to King Alcinous, who expressly asks to hear of his guest's exciting travels:

"*But come, my friend, tell us your own story now, and tell it truly. Where have your rovings forced you? What lands of men have you seen, what sturdy towns, what men themselves? Who were wild, savage, lawless? Who were friendly to strangers, god-fearing men? Tell me, why do you weep and grieve so sorely when you hear the fate of the Argives, hear the fall of Troy? That is the god's work, spinning threads of death through the lives of mortal men, and all to make a song for those to come… (Odyssey, VIII.640-650)*"

Odysseus' tales conveniently sound these same themes: the savage, the hospitable, the pious, the lawless, and death. Odysseus is on next after the great bard, Demodocus, has regaled the assembly with his songs, one of which was suggested by Odysseus himself and glorified his exploits at Troy.

Statue Of Odysseus At The Port Of Ithaca Island

Francesco Hayez: Odysseus at the court of Alcinous (oil on canvas, c. 1815; Galleria

Odysseus has a big act to follow and, as he is about to announce his identity as the Odysseus about whom the Phaeacians have just heard so much, it would obviously not do to disappoint. Homer here refer to Odysseus as “the great teller of tales.”

Both the reader and the Phaeacians are expecting something big, and Odysseus delivers. The Phaeacians respond well to the stories, hanging on Odysseus’ every word and showering him with even more gifts. Would not someone of Odysseus’ resourcefulness be expected to knowhow they would respond and be able to tailor his adventures to the tastes of his audience?

The Phaeacians appear to be a relatively innocent people. They are no match for devious Odysseus. King Alcinous goes so far as to praise Odysseus for his honesty:

‘*Ah Odysseus,’ Alcinous replied, ‘one look at you and we know that you are no one who would cheat us—no fraud, such as the dark soil breeds and spreads across the face of the earth these days. Crowds of vagabonds frame their lies so tightly that none can test them. But you, what grace you give your words, and what good sense within!’ (Odyssey,XI. 410-415)*

The King’s words must come off as ironic to any reader or listener aware that wiliness is the epitome of the Odyssean character. Homer, being well-acquainted with the Odyssean character, already knows what we will think about Alcinous’ remark.

Claude Lorrain: Port Scene with the Departure of Odysseus from the Land of the Phaeacians (oil on canvas, 1646; Louvre, Paris)

Later in the poem, when Odysseus reached Ithaca, it is amply demonstrated that he is a consummate liar. Upon arriving, he spins a series of bold-faced deceptions, commonly referred to as the "Cretan lies."

At first, he tries to deceive a shepherd boy, who turns out to be Athena in disguise.
She, of course, sees through him:

"Any man—any god who met you–would have to be some champion lying cheat to get past you for all-round craft and guile! You terrible man, foxy, ingenious, never tired of twists and tricks—so not even here, on native soil, would you give up those wily tales that warm the cockles of your heart!"

What better candidate could there be for these "wily tales" than the stories Odysseus so recently told to the Phaeacians?

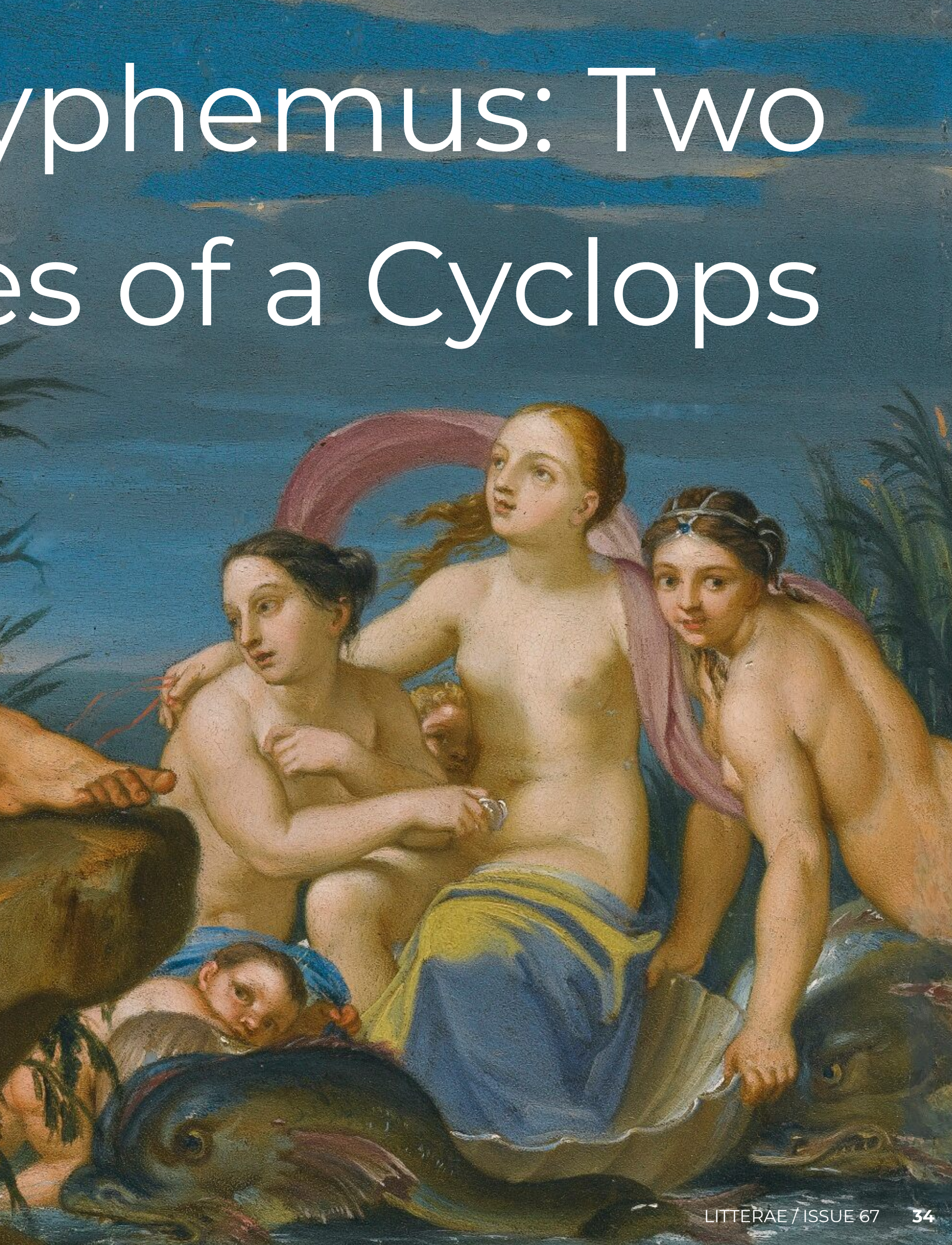
Homer has left us many textual clues which suggest that the stories Odysseus tells the Phaeacians are not meant to be taken as having "really" happened. Such a view of these stories should encourage us always to be careful readers.

We may encounter unexpected "twists and turns" that reveal more and deeper levels of art and meaning, inspiring us to read old books with fresh eyes.

Poly
face

Polyphemus and Galatea,
Bolognese school

yphemus: Two
es of a Cyclops



BY KATHERINE SMYTH

Polyphemus is best known as the Cyclops that Odysseus and his men encountered on their return from the Trojan War. But, is there another side to this man-eating giant? And what happened to him after Odysseus sailed away?

THE LEGEND IS BORN

Polyphemus was one of the many children born to Poseidon, and to Thoosa, the daughter of the primordial sea-god Phorcys. Polyphemus and his brothers are not to be confused with the three Cyclopes that were born to Uranus and Gaia, along with their 12 Titan siblings.

No, Polyphemus is the grumpy and reclusive Cyclops who lived in a mountain cave on the Cyclopean isles, near Sicily in Italy. This island is the home of these Cyclopean sons of Poseidon. It is not known if he and his brothers were brought into the world through any divine birthing ritual. However, it is conceivable that as both his parents were of the sea, that Polyphemus and his brothers came ashore after their primordial delivery.

It's there, on the Cyclopean isles, where Polyphemus carried out his daily routine of herding sheep, making cheese, and keeping his own company. It is also here that he quickly gained a reputation for dining on lamb and mutton, sheep's milk and cheese, and for developing a taste for human flesh. It is this latter preference that eventually leads him into trouble.

ODYSSEUS ARRIVES

A first century AD head of a Cyclops from the Roman Colosseum

Whilst sailing back from the Trojan War, Odysseus and his crew land on the shores of the Cyclopean isles. In a search for provisions, they uncover Polyphemus' store and help themselves. No doubt tempted by the aroma of human flesh, and angered by their rudeness, Polyphemus traps the men inside his cave by closing the giant stone door.

He denied these guests the customary hospitality; instead, devouring two of the men before going to sleep. When morning came, Polyphemus again attacked the crew, killing and eating another two men before leaving to graze his sheep for the day.

Odysseus and his remaining men were left all day inside Polyphemus' cave. There they conceived of an escape and made preparations, including hardening a giant stake. When Polyphemus returned, Odysseus engaged him in conversation and offered him undiluted wine. The Cyclops once again proved himself rude and uncivilized by eating another two men.

Polyphemus then sealed his fate by offering Odysseus a guest-gift, or Xenia; the offer of friendship and hospitality, in exchange for Odysseus' name. Wise to the cruel behavior of the Cyclops, Odysseus gives him the name "Οὖτις," or 'Nobody.'

"But when the wine had stolen about the wits of the Cyclops, then I spoke to him with gentle words: 'So, you ask me the name I'm known by, Cyclops? I will tell you. But you must give me a guest-gift as you've promised. Nobody is my name, Nobody do they call me—my mother and my father, and all my comrades as well.' So I spoke, and he straightway answered me with pitiless heart: 'Nobody? I'll eat Nobody last of all his friends —I'll eat the others first! That's my gift to you!'" ~ The Odyssey, Book IX

Polyphemus receives a love-letter from Galatea, a 1st-century AD fresco from Pompeii

As Polyphemus' drunken state takes hold, he falls asleep, and this is when Odysseus and his men strike. They maneuver the wooden stake above the Cyclops' eye, plunging it into the soft-muscle, blinding Polyphemus. The Cyclops began shouting for help from his brothers, but on hearing that 'Nobody' has hurt him, his brothers believe it to be a divine situation and suggest prayer as the solution.

"Thus, they escaped as the sheep exited the cave, but not before Odysseus tells Polyphemus his real name; an act of hubris that will have ramifications later."

In the morning, Polyphemus opens the doorway to let his sheep out for grazing. But, aware that his attackers, and breakfast, are still inside he counts the sheep as they exit by feeling their backs.

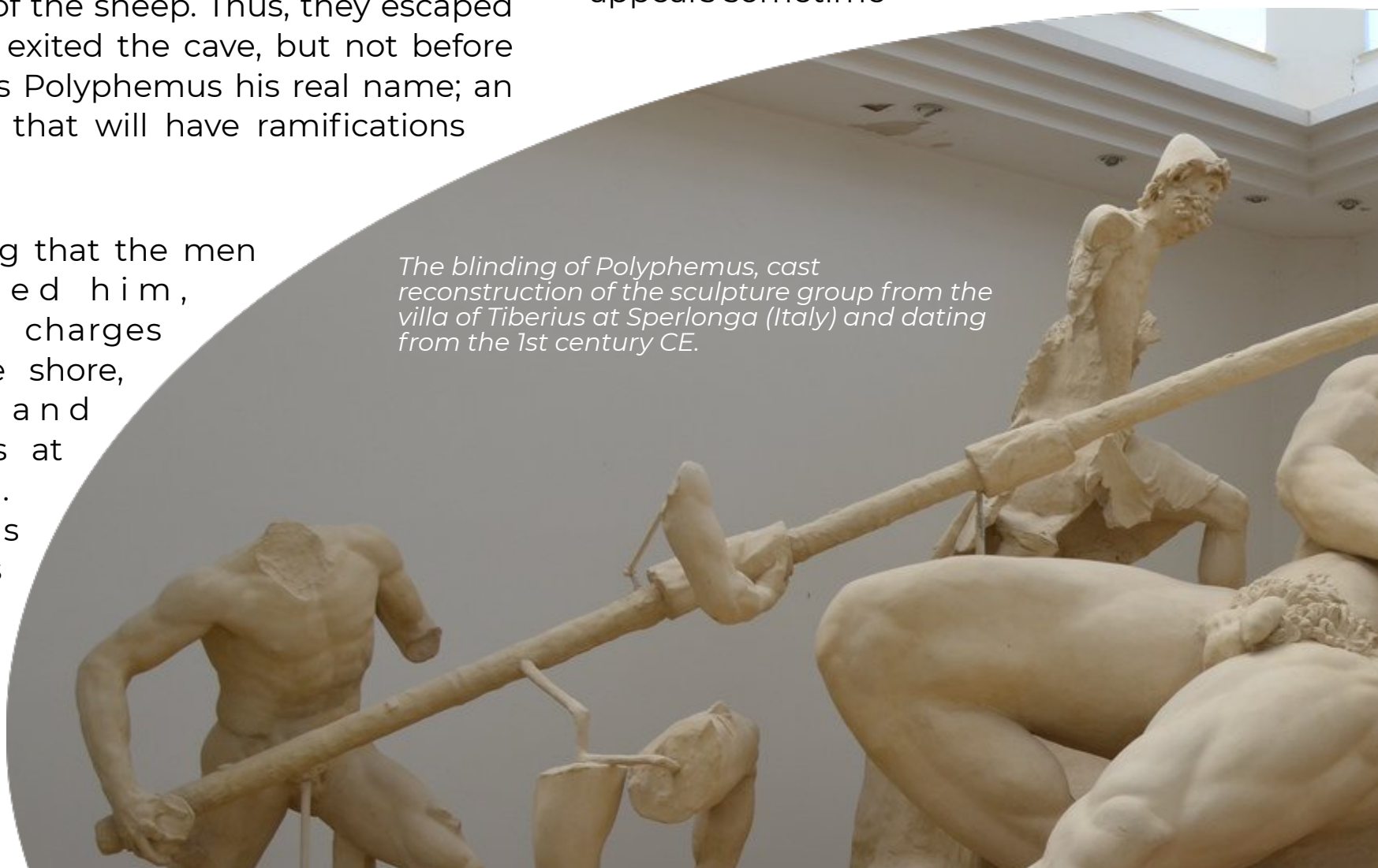
Unbeknownst to the blind Cyclops, Odysseus and his crew have tied themselves to the underbellies of the sheep. Thus, they escaped as the sheep exited the cave, but not before Odysseus tells Polyphemus his real name; an act of hubris that will have ramifications later.

Upon realizing that the men have fooled him, Polyphemus charges down to the shore, shouting and hurling rocks at the men. Polyphemus prays to his father, who appears not to respond to his blinded son. Hearing no answer, he continued to throw rocks at them, only narrowly missing the departing ship.

We hear again of Polyphemus' rage when Aeneas describes having watched the Cyclops using a "lopped pine tree" as a walking staff. With this aid, the giant staggers down to the shore where he washes his oozing eye socket, the painful groans echoing out across the water.It is here that Aeneas encounters Achaemenides, one of Odysseus's crew, who was unfortunately left on the island as they fled. The lost crew member tells Aeneas how his crew escaped and he is taken aboard, with Aeneas' ship casting off immediately as Polyphemus discovers them. The Cyclops' roars of anger and frustration draw the other Cyclopes to the shore, only to see the ship on the horizon.

LOVE-SICK POLYPHEMUS

Whilst most of us are well acquainted with the story of Odysseus and Polyphemus, there is a second account of the Cyclops that appears sometime



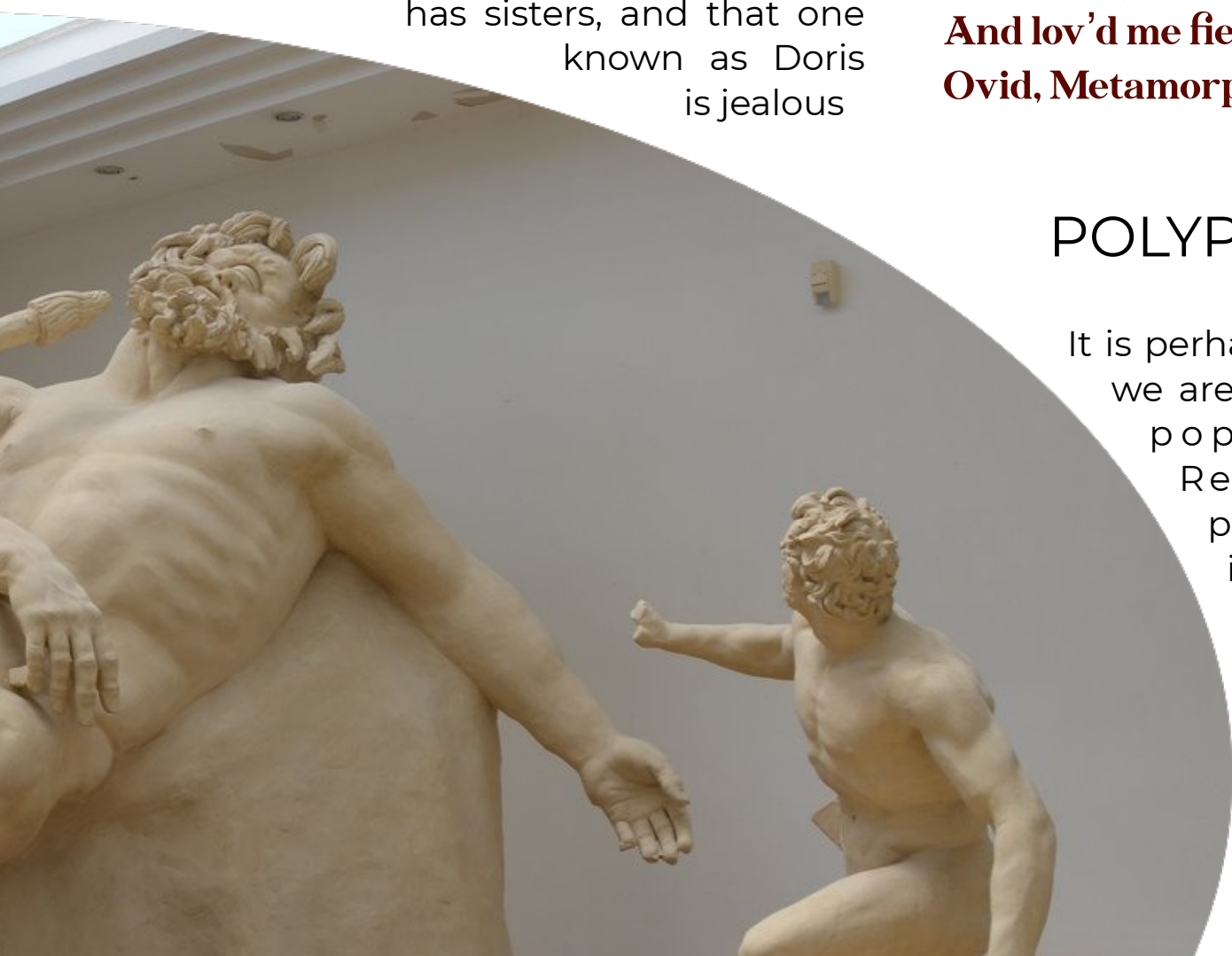
The blinding of Polyphemus, cast reconstruction of the sculpture group from the villa of Tiberius at Sperlonga (Italy) and dating from the 1st century CE.

later, although apparently pre-dates the interaction with Odysseus. Some Classical writers have made a link between the nymph Galatea and Polyphemus, with different portrayals of his behavior.

The best known of these accounts is a play by Philoxenus of Cythera, which dates from 400 BC. In it, there is a link between the author, and Dionysius I of Syracuse, and the king's mistress, Galatea. In the play, the author is represented as the Odysseus character, and the king as the Cyclops, with the two lovers escaping.

Theocritus was more sympathetic with his pastoral poetry, wherein Idyll XI and Idyll VI, Polyphemus is transfigured into the role of a herdsman who finds solace in song over his love for Galatea. Bion of Smyrna is also much kinder in his portrayal of Polyphemus and the Cyclops' undying love for the sea-nymph, Galatea.

However, it is in Lucian of Samosata that there are indicators that Polyphemus' relationship with Galatea was more successful. Lucian suggests that Galatea has sisters, and that one known as Doris is jealous of their relationship, but that Galatea does not love Polyphemus—a fact that fails to bother him, as he has chosen her above all others. Whilst there are other versions of this same theme, it is perhaps Ovid's depiction that we recognize as having similarities to Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops.



In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes the blind rage that Polyphemus flies into upon spying Galatea and the mortal Acis during their lovemaking. In his enraged state, Polyphemus crushes Acis with a rock, with Galatea fleeing into the water. She returns only briefly to change Acis into the spirit of the Sicilian river.

"Acis, the lovely youth, whose loss I mourn,
From Faunus, and the nymph Symethis born,
Was both his parents' pleasure; but, to me
Was all that love could make a lover be.
The Gods our minds in mutual bands did join:
I was his only joy, and he was mine.
Now sixteen summers the sweet youth had seen;
And doubtful down began to shade his chin:
When Polyphemus first disturb'd our joy;
And lov'd me fiercely, as I lov'd the boy." ~
Ovid, Metamorphoses

POLYPHEMUS TODAY

It is perhaps this version of events that we are most familiar with, as it was popular during both the Renaissance and Baroque periods. During these times of increased artistic creativity, we see many paintings, sculptures, poems, and music created.

The blinded Polyphemus seeks vengeance on Odysseus: Guido Reni's painting in the Capitoline Museums.

In 1627, Luis de Góngora y Argote produced *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea,* as a homage to the work by the same title (1611) by Luis Carillo y Sotomayor. The story was also given an operatic overhaul and made popular by Antoni Lliteres Carrió (1708).

Polyphème en furie, a sonnet by Tristan L'Hermite in 1641, was produced as a condensed version that contained only 14 lines. Italy also embraced the story, with Giovanni Bononcini's Polifemo in 1703, and George Frideric Handel's cantata Aci, *Galatea e Polifemo* that was written in that country.

In 1718, John Gay composed work that would later be given to and updated by Mozart and Mendelssohn. It also followed the Theocritan pastoral style, but largely focuses on the two lovers over the actions of Polyphemus. There are many more musical representations that span the years into the 21st century with Reginald Smith Brindle's *El Polifemo de Oro* (1956) and Andres Valero Castells' *Polifemo i Galatea*, written for brass band in 2001.

Polyphemus has been portrayed in many sculptures and paintings as well, including paintings by Giulio Romano in 1528, Nicholas Poussin in 1649, Corneille Van Clève in 1681, and others like François Perrier, Giovanni Lanfranco, Jean-Baptiste van Loo, and Gustave Moreau who painted a whole series. Auguste Rodin's series of clay statues from 1888 that were later cast into bronze statues are well known and may have been inspired by the work of Auguste Ottin from 1866.

What does appear to be a theme in all of these works, is the moment of rage that comes over Polyphemus upon discovering Acis and Galatea, and the casting forth of a rock as the lovers flee; somewhat akin to the Cyclops' reaction towards Odysseus.

DON'T BREAK XENIA

Whilst it is hard to imagine Polyphemus, a man-eating and crude Cyclops, having fallen in love with a sea-nymph, it is plausible to believe the link from Ovid's description of his rage-filled behavior.

Perhaps it is this link that fueled the Cyclops' taste for man-flesh; with feelings of anger and unrequited love, it is understandable that Polyphemus would punish any man who took what the Cyclops felt was his.

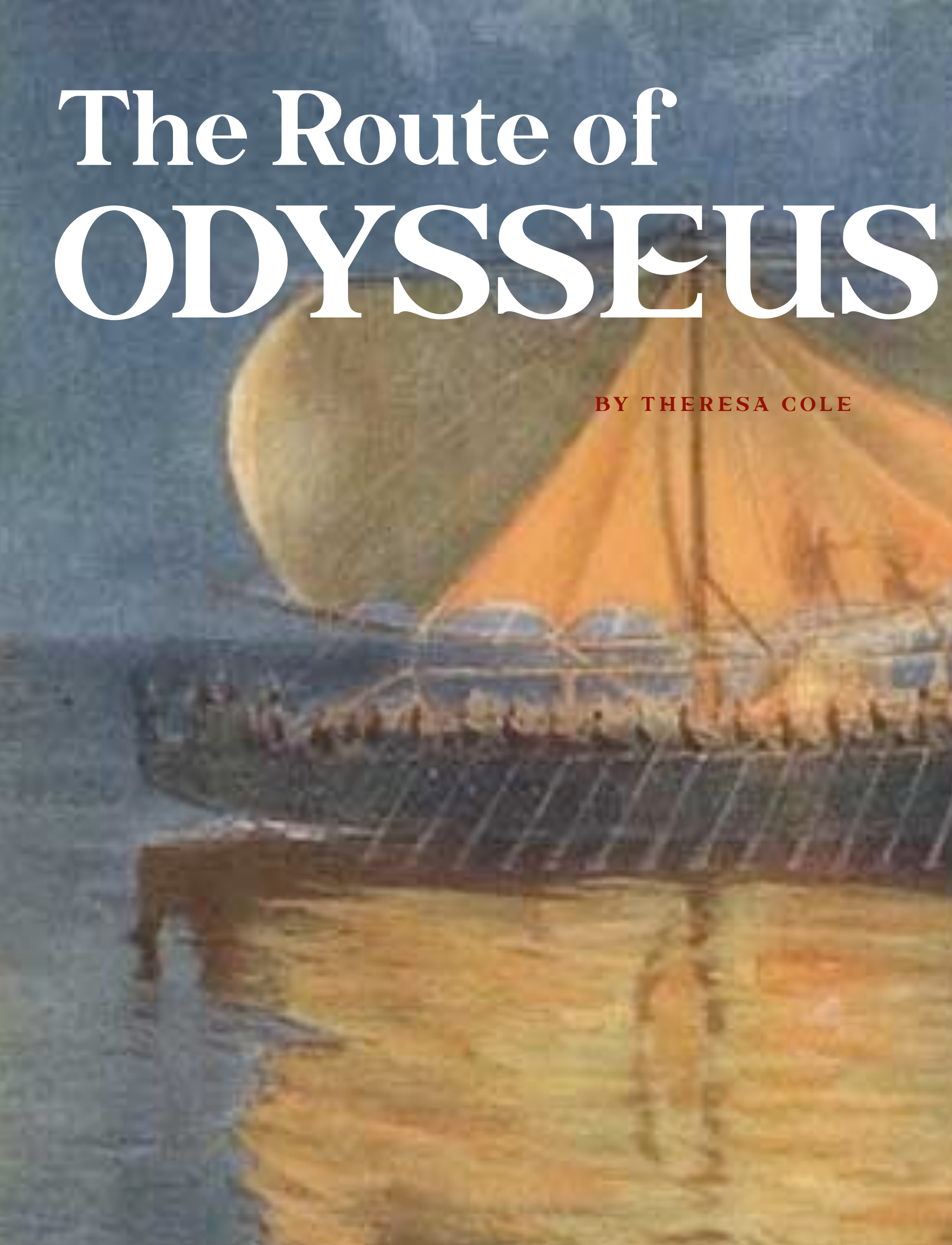
However, it is this attitude that ultimately betrays him, distorting fact and duty from emotion and mentality. When Polyphemus set about to punish Odysseus and his men, he broke the rules of hospitality and further insulted his guests by lying in his offering of *Xenia,* the ritual of gift-giving.

This is what brought about his physical blinding by the legendary hero, and also thrust the Cyclops into the pages of history as a cruel and vengeful giant who was bested by a scared and desperate man.

If we learn nothing else from the story of Polyphemus, it should be to be slow to anger, to be generous to strangers, and to not break the laws of hospitality. For if we do, we leave ourselves blind, with nobody to blame but ourselves.

The Route of ODYSSEUS

BY THERESA COLE



Since the *Odyssey* is the only extant tale of the Greeks' return from Troy, it is able to provide a unique picture of the dangers of travel, and the understanding of geography, that existed at the time. The distance between Odysseus' home in Ithaca and the battlefield of Troy is not a significant enough distance to justify the amount of time Odysseus spent at sea by any measure... After all, it took him ten years to make his homeward return (*Nostoi*). Where did he go? What was the route he took? And can we ever really know his journey?

First, remember that the Greeks did not travel on the open ocean for considerable voyages. They either hugged the coastline, far enough to avoid shoals and other hazards, or island hopped (a natural development, considering the geography of the islands).

In addition to not sailing as the crow flies, Odysseus is regularly taken off course. Each time this occurs, his trip becomes significantly delayed. He and his men are in need of supplies, of course, but more importantly, their ships' navigational technology were not made for long distances away from land.

So where did Odysseus go?

The physical route of Odysseus' journey, and whether or not it had any basis in reality at all, has been hotly debated since antiquity. One of the most significant issues with determining a route is the way land changes over time.

Natural and man-made environmental factors, such as the changing of coastlines from erosion, can make it tricky to replicate his path. Even in the modern world, fluctuations in coastlines, and the outright disappearance of small islands is not unknown. Given the age of the Homeric epics and the lack of geographic monitoring for the majority of history, it is not unlikely that if a route existed, the locations would differ drastically from any evidence available today.

Another issue with determining the route is drawing the line between historical fact and poetic fiction. We know that the fantastic adventures of the Ithacan king could not possibly have all taken place. The epic, however, is still able to provide modern scholars and enthusiasts an idea of how much the ancients understood of the world and geography around them. Taking the poem as presenting a vague idea of the travel capabilities available at the time opens the door to theories and speculation that capture the imagination, in the very spirit of the Odyssean adventure. But even using this approach, modern scholars are still uncertain of the proposed route.

Nonetheless, fictional or based in reality, here are some of the real places Odysseus *may* have visited:

TROY

Where else to begin than where Odysseus himself starts his journey? While the city of Troy, known as Ilium in Latin, was thought to be simply mythological for centuries and centuries, it is now widely recognized to be located at the present-day hill-top ruins at Hisarlik. This discovery is due to the controversial, yet clearly impassioned German businessman-turned-archeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, who began digging at Hissarlik in 1870, and by 1873 had discovered nine buried cities.

Ruins of Troy, Hisarlik, in modern day Turkey

LAND OF THE LOTUS EATERS

When Odysseus and his men arrive at the Land of the Lotus Eaters, they are given fruit that almost makes them not want to leave the island. Ancient historians, such as Polybius and Strabo, identified the location as the island of Djerba, in Tunisia. It was called Meninx (Ancient Greek: Μῆνιγξ) until the third

century AD, and according to Strabo, there was an altar of Odysseus there.

ISLAND OF THE CYCLOPS

Next on Odysseus' fictional or factual route is the island of Sicily. After leaving the Lotus Eaters, Odysseus and his men find themselves on an island inhabited by Polyphemus, the Cyclops. This is thought to be south-east Sicily, near Etna and Lentini, or around Marsala in the west.

LAMOS

Later on the Greeks arrive on Lamos, the land of Laestrygonians. It is here that a group of cannibals destroy all of Odysseus' ships, except his own. Ancient writers, such as Thucydides (6.2.1.) and Polybius (1.2.9) note that the Laestrygonians inhabited southeast Sicily. However, the name is akin to that of the Lestriconi, a branch of the Corsi people of the northeast coast of Sardinia (now Gallura), a point proposed by modern scholar Victor Bérard.

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

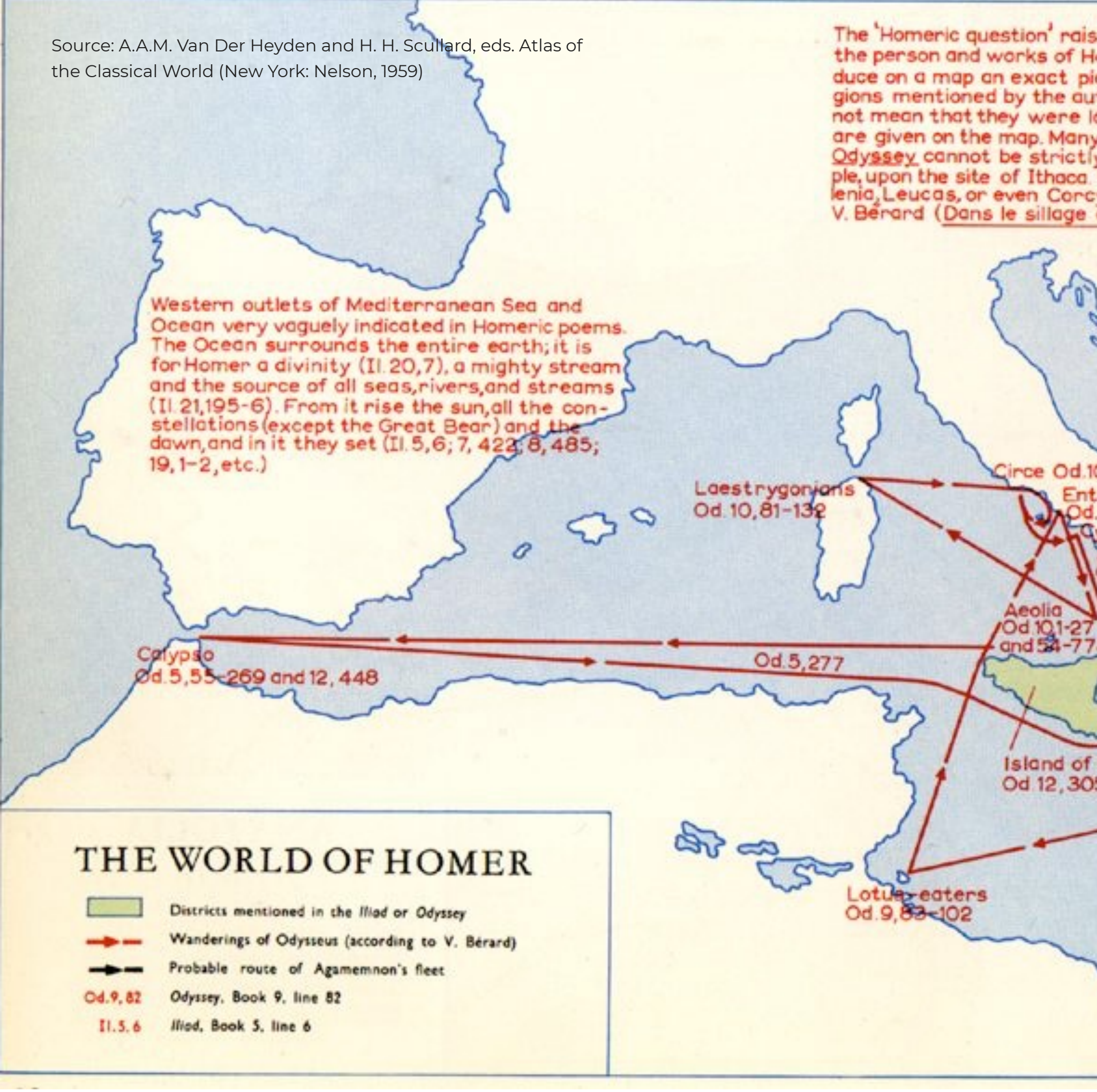
One of the more grueling and dangerous moments of the epic is when Odysseus and his men must pass between the six-headed monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. This area has long been identified with the Strait of Messina, located between the eastern tip of Sicily (Punta del Faro) and the western tip of Calabria (Punta Pezzo), because of its strong tidal currents that create a unique marine ecosystem. Indeed, there is a natural whirlpool in the northern portion of the strait, which of course must be Scylla and Charybdis!

HADES, THE UNDERWORLD

The realm of Hades, to the Greeks, was a real physical location in the world with actual access points. In Book XI, the eponymous hero begins his nekyia at the entrance of the underworld. *Nekyia*, being the communication with the dead for divination, is closely related to a journey to the underworld known as a *Katabasis*.

Being such an important location for the ancients and an idea so radically different from most modern views in the west, the exact location of Odysseus' Nekyia has captured the interest of many. One such theory, proposed by Henriette Mertz in the 1960s and then later by Enrico Mattievich in 2010, declares that the location was, in fact, in South America, with the final stop being in

Source: A.A.M. Van Der Heyden and H. H. Scullard, eds. Atlas of the Classical World (New York: Nelson, 1959)



the major cultural site of Chavín de Huántar, Peru.

While the thought is fantastic, it should be noted that to date, no significant or verifiable archaeological evidence has been found to support this theory and it has been widely discredited by the scholarly community from the time it was first introduced. Another crucial issue with this idea is that it separates the cultural heritage of South Americans from their material culture and assigns it to European travelers. However problematic this theory may be, it is still an excellent example of the distance a Homeric audience is able to imagine.

More plausible theories of Hades' location, with material and historical evidence to corroborate their claims, have been proposed. One such is the Necromanteion of Acheron in northwestern Greece, but even this location has been refuted by evidence found at the site.

The Underworld may continue to remain a place shrouded in mystery, possibly as Homer intended.

THE ISLAND OF SCHERIA

In Book V, Odysseus reaches one his most

fruitful stops, the island of the Phaeacians, named Scheria. The location of these key allies has been an issue, even from ancient times. The Phaeacians are familiar and well-practiced with Greek customs, especially the all-important concept of Xenia, loosely translated as hospitality. However, they did not participate in the Trojan War, an event that supposedly unified all Greeks for the same cause.

Odysseus himself notes the distance between his lands and the Phaeacians in his thanks to them. Although the exact distance is not known, it is still far enough for Odysseus to imply the likelihood of another visit in the near future.

It is for this reason (among many others) that the prevailing thought is that Scheria is the island of Corfu, which is within 110 km (68 miles) of Ithaca, Odysseus' final destination.

"It is for this reason (among many others) that the prevailing thought is that Scheria is the island of Corfu, which is within 110 km (68 miles) of Ithaca, Odysseus' final destination."

This corresponds to the mythology. Vengeful Poseidon turns the Phaeacians' ship into stone as punishment for aiding the Greek hero. Off the coast of Corfu, the picturesque islet of Pontikonisi is often identified as this mythic location.

Thucydides also confirms Scheria as Corfu, or Corcyra, in his Peloponnesian War. In I.25.4, he records the Corinthians' resentment of the Corcyraeans, who "could not repress a pride in the high naval position of an island whose nautical renown dated from the days of its old inhabitants, the Phaeacians."

(The beauty and isolation of the islet would later inspire Bocklin's dreamy painting The Isle of The Dead.)

While we can venture as to the specifics of Odysseus' route based on the literary or geological clues, we can never know exactly where he went. This is partially because we know now that the ancients' concept of geography was not highly accurate.

"Additionally, since the Homeric epics began as an oral tradition, there is much that could have been altered through the years."

Additionally, since the Homeric epics began as an oral tradition, there is much that could have been altered through the years.

Nonetheless, the investigation teaches us more than just the itinerary of Odysseus' journey. Compared to the *Iliad*, which provides an in depth look on the lives of Greeks in comparison with Trojans, the *Odyssey* skillfully contextualizes Greek identity within the broader Mediterranean community... as seen throughout Odysseus' route.

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