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Homer's Dream Guy: An Exploration of Masculinity and Honor in the Odyssey

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INTRODUCTION

The *Odyssey* can be interpreted as story defining what it is to be a man, and a cautionary tale for those who stray from the definition. Men who show restraint and self-control are rewarded while those who act recklessly suffer. Similarly, men who show leadership qualities and an ability to protect their people succeed in their endeavors, while those who fail to guard those in their care are hurt. Vocabulary used throughout the text demonstrates the relationship between rash behavior or lack of leadership with suffering and death. The use of the phrase θύμος ἀγήνωρ, prideful spirit,¹ with the verb πείθομαι, obey or be persuaded, shows that the overly masculine aspects of a man's heart ought to be restrained. The combination of the noun ἀτασθαλία, recklessness, with verbs of death and destruction demonstrate the relationship between unrestrained behavior and subsequent suffering. Only Nestor, king of Pylos, is able to exhibit restraint and safely lead his people. Accordingly, he is rewarded with long life and a large family. Masculine honor in the *Odyssey* is defined by leadership, guardianship, and restraint. Men who stray from this honor are punished, while those who exemplify it are rewarded.

RESTRAINT

Restraint and self-control are key factors in a man's honor in the *Odyssey*. Men who lack restraint and act impulsively or selfishly suffer and often die as a consequence. This concept of restraint—or lack thereof—often appears in language that is definitively masculine. The adjective ἀγήνωρ is used in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad*, it is typically used to describe a single warrior rushing into battle on his own, and is thus often thought to describe excessive bravery.² In their article "Homeric Masculinity: ΗΝΟΡΕΗ and ΑΓΗΝΟΡΕΗ," Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold posit that ἀγήνωρ is derived from the noun ἀνήρ, man, and the prefix ἀγα-, meaning "very much" or "too much."³ Thus, ἀγήνωρ describes a man who is excessively masculine, often translated as "manly," "arrogant," or "prideful." In general, ἀγήνωρ is used in a negative sense in the *Odyssey*. It appears primarily in two constructions: describing the μνηστῆρες ἀγήνορες⁴ and the θύμος ἀγήνωρ.⁵ The μνηστῆρες ἀγήνορες, the prideful suitors, are perhaps the most well-known example of unrestrained, brazen behavior in the

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

² Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold, "Homeric Masculinity: ΗΝΟΡΕΗ and ΑΓΗΝΟΡΕΗ," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 123 (2003): 60–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3246260>, 73.

³ Graziosi et al. 61.

⁴ See *Od.* 1.106, 1.144, and 2.235.

⁵ See *Od.* 2.103, 4.548, 4.658, 9.213, 10.406, 10.466, 10.475, and 10.550.

Odyssey. Their lack of self-control leads them to covet another man's wife, while simultaneously consuming his estate. The participle ὑπερηνορέων, engaging in hyper-manly behavior, is also used to further describe the characteristics and activities of the suitors.⁶ Consequently, they are punished for their arrogance upon Odysseus' return.

The θύμος ἀγήνωρ, excessively manly spirit, is referenced frequently throughout the *Odyssey* as something to be restrained.⁷ It is often used with the verb πείθομαι,⁸ to obey or be persuaded, as when the θύμος ἀγήνωρ is persuaded to step back, "characters manage to avoid rash and (self-)damaging behavior."⁹ The θύμος ἀγήνωρ only ever belongs to men in the *Odyssey*, showing that its restraint is a uniquely masculine struggle. In fact, of the eight¹⁰ references to the θύμος ἀγήνωρ in the *Odyssey*, three describe a woman convincing a man or men to act rationally. In line 2.103, Penelope persuades the θύμος ἀγήνωρ to postpone courting her until she has completed Laertes' funeral shroud. In line 10.406, Circe convinces Odysseus to bring his ship onshore and his men to her home, and in line 10.466, she persuades Odysseus and his men to remain on her island. These uses of the phrase present an interesting case in Homer where female characters are presented as more rational and level-headed than male characters. This contrast emphasizes the rashness and irrationality of the θύμος ἀγήνωρ.

The direct relationship between rash, unrestrained behavior and misfortune can be seen in the use of the word ἀτασθαλία, recklessness. In most cases in the *Odyssey*, ἀτασθαλία is used in the dative case (ἀτασθαλίησιν) to describe the means by which someone has suffered or died.¹¹ Line 1.7 states that Odysseus' comrades died "by their own recklessness" (σφετέρησιν ἀτασθαλίησιν ὄλοντο) after eating Helios' cattle, establishing in the opening lines of the epic that suffering caused by rash behavior is a significant theme in the poem. "Ἀτασθαλίησιν ὄλοντο" is used once more in line 10.437 as Eurylochus, one of Odysseus' companions, calls him out for allowing men to die in the Cyclops' cave. The formulaic line "τῷ καὶ ἀτασθαλίησιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐπέσπον" (by their recklessness they yielded to their shameful fate) is repeated twice, both in reference to the massacre of the suitors.¹² Similarly, in line 23.67 after Penelope

⁶ See *Od.* 2.266, 2.324, 2.331, 4.766, 4.769, 17.482, 20.375, 21.361, 21.401, and 23.31. The only instance in the entire text where ὑπερηνορέων does not refer to the suitors is at 6.5, where it describes the Cyclopes.

⁷ Graziosi et al. 73.

⁸ See *Od.* 2.103, 10.406, 10.466, 10.475, and 10.550. At 11.562, Odysseus tells the spirit of Ajax to δάμασον δὲ μένος καὶ ἀγήνωρα θυμόν, "overcome your passion and prideful spirit."

⁹ Graziosi et al. 73.

¹⁰ See note 6.

¹¹ See *Od.* 1.7, 1.34, 10.437, 12.300, 22.317, 22.416, and 24.458.

¹² In 22.317, suitor Leodas speaks the line as he pleads with Odysseus for his life. In 22.416, Odysseus tells Euryycleia that the suitors have been killed.

has been told by Eurycleia that the suitors have been killed, she says that "through their recklessness they suffered bad things." Ἀτασθαλία is employed several other times in this manner—Zeus laments that mortals blame the gods for misfortune while their own recklessness is at fault,¹³ and Ithakan Halitherses uses it again to justify the deaths of the suitors.¹⁴ Ἀτασθαλία often refers to characters who have died by their own fault due to unrestrained behavior. The frequent relationship between ἀτασθαλία and verbs of death and destruction communicate that reckless deeds will not go unpunished.

LEADERSHIP AND GUARDIANSHIP

Leadership and guardianship go hand-in-hand as important aspects of masculine honor. Men who lack leadership qualities will at best be unsuccessful in their endeavors, while those who are effective leaders and guardians are rewarded. Telemachus is the primary example of a male character who lacks leadership skills. In the first book of the *Odyssey*, he tries and fails to take charge of the suitors in his home—he has not gained the skills necessary to lead those around him and come into his own. As a result, he is unable to expel the suitors from his home or protect his mother and his estate from them. Other men in the *Odyssey*, however, display far stronger leadership and guardianship abilities.

Ποιμὴν λαῶν, shepherd of the people, is used many times in the *Odyssey* to describe a relationship between a group of vulnerable people and a much stronger leader who acts as a guardian. It is used a total of eleven times in the *Odyssey* to describe a wide range of men, from legendary king and general Agamemnon to Odysseus' father Laertes.¹⁵ While the term is often used for warriors and rulers, like Agamemnon, Nestor, and Odysseus, it is also used in a more unofficial sense to describe Mentor, the wise advisor who looked after Odysseus' home and family after Odysseus left for Troy. Ποιμὴν λαῶν describes behavior in men that is respectable and honorable in war, in rulership, and in domestic settings. The phrase is not necessarily solely positive as it is used to refer to Aegisthus at 4.528. Rather, it describes men who have taken charge of those around them.

However, not all those given this epithet were able to successfully protect and lead their people. In his book *Homer's People: Epic Poetry and Social Formation*, Johannes Haubold argues that the term ποιμὴν λαῶν, the shepherd of the people, has two implications: first, that the leader or shepherd is responsible for the wellbeing of the flock, and second, that the leader, like an actual shepherd,

¹³ Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.34.

¹⁴ *Od.* 24.458.

¹⁵ Applied to Agamemnon at 3.156, 4.532, and 14.497; Nestor at 3.469, 15.151, and 17.109; Aegisthus at 4.528; Odysseus at 18.70 and 20.106; Laertes at 24.368; Mentor at 24.456.

is often unable to guarantee the flock's safety.¹⁶ We see these two implications play out several times in the *Odyssey* with multiple leaders who are given the epithet—Agamemnon encounters many troubles on his return home, and Odysseus fails to protect any of his companions. They lose their sheep to the wolves of misfortune. According to Haubold, the *λῆοι* of Homeric society existed on the brink of destruction due to this unstable leadership structure.¹⁷ Odysseus himself is the primary example of a protector who fails to protect and suffers for it.

Throughout his journey Odysseus loses all his men in a variety of leadership and guardianship failures. As described in Book Nine, he makes the rash decision to sack the town of the Cicones, resulting in a battle causing the deaths of many men. In the cave of Polyphemus, several of his men are killed and eaten due to Odysseus' desire to stay to meet the Cyclops. His egotistical decision to announce his name to Polyphemus as he is sailing away guarantees the deaths of the rest of his companions. In Book Ten, Odysseus loses more men to the Laestrygonians as his ship is the only ship to dock outside the harbor. In Book Twelve, more men are lost to Scylla, and finally, any survivors of previous tragedies are killed after eating Helios' cattle. Odysseus, the supposed shepherd of his people, loses his entire flock and consequently suffers immensely.

Not all of these deaths were caused directly by Odysseus' actions. However, most could have been prevented if he had demonstrated stronger leadership skills. If he had chosen to prioritize the homecoming of his companions, he would not have led them to sack the Cicones. If he had listened to his comrades' pleas to take cheeses, kids, and lambs from Polyphemus' cave and return to their ships before Polyphemus arrived, none would have died in the cave and the journey home of the rest would not have been doomed by Poseidon. More deaths were caused by Odysseus' lack of communication. If he had expressed his concern about docking in the harbor of the Laestrygonians or more urgently communicated the dangers of eating Helios' cattle, perhaps so many men would not have been lost. Those lost to Scylla seem to have been the only truly unavoidable deaths. Even in situations where Odysseus does not act rashly or recklessly, his poor leadership and lack of communication lead to the deaths of his companions and to his own grief.

¹⁶ Johannes Haubold, *Homer's People: Epic Poetry and Social Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), quoted in Dean Hammer, "Review: Homer's People: Epic Poetry and Social Formation," *The Classical Journal* 97, no. 3 (2002): 285-87.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3298099>.

¹⁷ Haubold, *Homer's People*, 285-287.

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One man in particular exemplifies masculine honor in the *Odyssey*, and he is rewarded for his efforts. Nestor, the king of Pylos, fought as a warrior and advised in the Trojan war, as he "knows justice and intelligence beyond others" (περι οἴδε δίκας ἠδὲ φρόνιν ἄλλων).¹⁸ He successfully aided in the safe homecoming of his companions. These actions have been rewarded with an abundance of children and an exceptionally long life—according to Telemachus, he has lived three generations.¹⁹ His epithets reflect his role as an exemplary man. Δῖος (noble or divine)²⁰ and ἀντίθεος (literally "facing the gods")²¹ are both used to compare him to the gods. His most frequently used epithet is ἵππότης,²² often translated "horseman," which is a generic epithet used for heroes and warriors. Nestor is also referred to as "ποιμὴν λαῶν," indicating that Nestor has demonstrated that he is a leader and protector of his people. Similarly, Nestor is referred to as "οὔροσ Ἀχαιῶν," the watcher or protector of the Achaeans.²³ He also takes the epithet "μέγα κῶδος Ἀχαιῶν," great glory of the Achaeans, further emphasizing his greatness.²⁴ These epithets outline a picture of an ideal Homeric man: an honorable warrior who looks after and protects his people.

The words δῖος and ἀντίθεος are used throughout the *Odyssey* to describe a wide range of characters. Δῖος seems to have a broader definition—in *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, Richard John Cunliffe defines it as "an epithet of general commendation," meaning "noble, illustrious, goodly, or the like" when referring to men and "noble, queenly, or the like" when referring to women; however, it is often translated for men, women, and gods as "divine."²⁵ Ἀντίθεος has a more specific meaning. Translated literally, it means "facing the gods," though it is more often translated as "godlike." Ἀντίθεος places the character it describes on the same level as the gods, instead of likening their nobility to that of the gods. Unlike δῖος, ἀντίθεος is used almost exclusively to describe men, with two uses describing Penelope.²⁶ Both δῖος and ἀντίθεος seem not to have a specifically positive connotation—ἀντίθεος is used to describe the suitors²⁷ while δῖος

¹⁸ *Od.* 3.244.

¹⁹ *Od.* 2.245.

²⁰ *Od.* 1.284.

²¹ *Od.* 11.512.

²² See *Od.* 3.68, 3.102, 3.210, 3.253, 3.386, 3.397, 3.405, 3.417, 3.444, 3.474, and 4.161.

²³ *Od.* 3.411.

²⁴ *Od.* 3.79 and 3.202.

²⁵ Cunliffe s.v. "δῖος."

²⁶ *Od.* 11.117 and 13.378.

²⁷ *Od.* 14.18.

describes Clytemnestra.²⁸ Thus, both of these epithets convey greatness, but not necessarily goodness.

Nestor's most common epithet is *ἰππότης*, another general epithet of heroes. Its frequency is due largely to its use in two generic lines, "τοῖς ἄρα μύθων ἦρχε Γερήνιος ἰππότης Νέστωρ" (the Gerenian warrior Nestor began speaking to them) and "τὸν δ' ἠμείβετ' ἔπειτα Γερήνιος ἰππότης Νέστωρ" (the Gerenian warrior Nestor, answering him, said). *ἰππότης* is fairly unique to Nestor—in the *Odyssey*, it is used only to describe him, and is used only a handful of times to describe others in the *Iliad*.²⁹ It is often translated as "horseman," however, given its root in the word "ἰππέυς," referring to a warrior who fights with a chariot,³⁰ it could also be translated as "warrior." The repeated use of this epithet establishes Nestor as a warrior and a hero. The epithet "μέγα κῦδος Ἀχαιῶν" (great glory of the Achaeans) is also used to describe Nestor, further emphasizing his greatness. This epithet is used in the *Odyssey* three times, twice referring to Nestor and once referring to Odysseus.³¹

Finally, Nestor is described as a protector. Two epithets tell us of this role: "ποιμὴν λαῶν" (shepherd of the people) and "οὔροσ Ἀχαιῶν" (watcher of the Achaeans). *Οὔροσ* is derived from the verb *ὄρομαι*, to watch. This epithet is only ever used for Nestor, showing that his role as a protector of the Achaeans is particularly prominent. In the *Odyssey*, it is used just once, at 3.411. This scene takes place in Book Three, the morning after Telemachus arrives, as Nestor is ordering his children to prepare a sacrifice to Athena and a feast to see Telemachus off. His wish to appease Athena and aid in Telemachus' journey to Sparta both demonstrate Nestor's desire to protect Telemachus and his companions.

In the same scene, Nestor's epithet "ποιμὴν λαῶν," shepherd of the people, is employed, further showing his protective nature. In the *Odyssey*, Nestor describes his journey home from Troy and his successful shepherding of his people.³² He alone of the Trojan War leaders is able to reach his home without incident, and since his return, he has continued his long reign in Pylos, protecting his people and his flock of children. Thus, Nestor offers a counterpoint to Haubold's idea of the instability implied in the term "ποιμὴν λαῶν." Unlike the other leaders of the war, Nestor is successful in ensuring the homecoming of his people. According to his account of his return, he has disagreements with

²⁸ *Od.* 3.226.

²⁹ According to Cunliffe s.v. "ἰππότης," in the *Iliad* *ἰππότης* describes Phylus at 2.628, Tydeus at 5.126, Oeneus at 14.117, and Peleus at 16.33 and 23.89.

³⁰ Richard John Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), s.v. "ἰππέυς."

³¹ *Od.* 3.79, 3.202, and 12.184.

³² *Od.* 3.130-83.

Agamemnon and Odysseus, but his return journey is otherwise uneventful.³³ Nestor's ability to protect his people, even in the unstable system posited by Haubold, further solidifies his role as an ideal and honorable man. This honor perfectly situates him to be Telemachus' role model in his coming-of-age journey. After years of living with the reckless and prideful suitors, Telemachus is finally given an example of what a man should be.

Conclusion

The ideal man in the *Odyssey* is able to restrain himself and control his impulses, while also demonstrating the ability to effectively lead and protect his people or home. Men who are not able to practice restraint and lead well suffer or die as a result, while men who possess these traits are rewarded. The frequent use of θύμος ἀγῆνωρ with πείθομαι, to obey, confirms that excessive masculinity is something to be restrained, while the use of ἀτασθαλία with verbs of death and destruction links reckless behavior to suffering. Men who are in charge of those around them but fail to protect their charges suffer by consequence. According to Nestor, Agamemnon's men suffered due to Athena's wrath, and Agamemnon paid with his life. Odysseus lost all his men due to a series of poor and ego-driven decisions, and is thus kept from home. The only man in the *Odyssey* to fulfill the requirements of masculine honor is Nestor, who acts with self control and safely leads his people. Consequently, he is rewarded with an extended life and a large family.

While manhood may have been important in Homeric society, excessive masculinity was more destructive than a lack of masculinity. Telemachus may have suffered for his lack of manhood before coming of age; however, men in the *Odyssey* who demonstrated excessively masculine and unrestrained behavior suffered more. Similarly, those who failed to take responsibility for those in their charge suffered more than those like Telemachus who weren't in charge in the first place. Honor, strength, and masculinity were valued in men, but never at the cost of those around them.

³³ *Od.* 3.130-83.

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