

The Value of Hospitality

Hospitality in Homer's time was well shown through long travels such as Odysseus' in *The Odyssey* as well as the guest-friend relationship, known as *xenia*.

It seems as though modern people do show hospitality towards others, but in a different way than those in Homeric times. It is not custom anymore to provide food, protection, and shelter to a stranger that arrives at someone's door. This could be because there are hotels and restaurants almost anywhere one can go. There is no need to for someone to ask for these. Also, protection is not a large concern for most travelers, especially in the United States. Hospitality is still shown, however, in modern society. For example, when someone's car breaks down most people would welcome them into their homes and help them in any way they can without even asking who they are. Also, most people know of someone, be it family or friend, in a different city that would welcome them and provide them with a place to stay and food, which is similar to the *xenia* in Homer's time. Although the hospitality customs of Homer's time are not still around, there are similarities to them and hospitality is still visible.

Fear of Gods

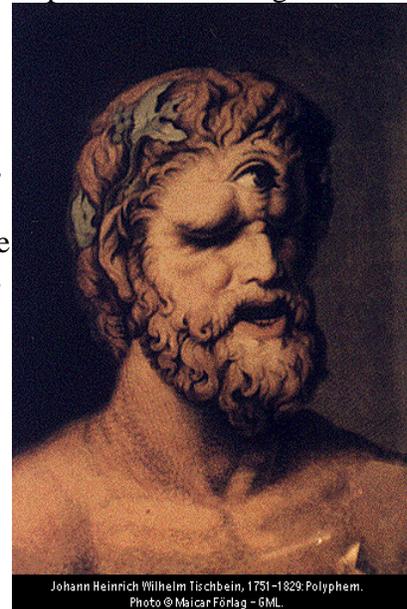
Throughout *The Odyssey* there are many ongoing themes, but one of the most important themes of this story is the tradition of Greek hospitality or *xenia*. This type of hospitality was very unique and it played an important role in the ancient Greek society. As a matter of fact, this kind of hospitality was so unique that it almost seems unbelievable, because very few societies have behaved in this manner towards their guests. From the very nature of this behavior, one can easily come to the conclusion that the people of ancient Greek society were truly hospitable. However, fear of the gods, rather than pure decency, is a possible cause of the actions of ancient Greeks towards their guests.

The hospitality of ancient Greek society is very clearly seen throughout the *Odyssey*. During the travels of both Odysseus and Telemachus, one can easily see how strangers were greeted and treated upon their arrival to a new place. It seems as if strangers were invited in for a feast, showered with gifts and luxuries, and then asked who they were and what their business was. As anyone can see, this type of hospitality is very unusual and distinctive. Not very many cultures would treat strangers in this manner. Therefore we are led to believe that there is some other reasoning behind all of this generosity.

The people of ancient Greek society did not show all of this hospitality solely out of the goodness of their hearts, but rather they did it for the gods. During this time, hospitality was treated as a test from the gods. In Book XIV on page 275 Eumaeus says: "for it is Zeus who sends to us all beggars and strangers; and a gift, however small, means much when given by a man like me..." This means that it is the god Zeus who demands magnificent hospitality upon all mortals. Since hosts had no way of knowing who their visitors were, they were forced to treat every visitor as if they were a god. By treating every guest like a god, there is no mistake of

accidentally treating a god differently, just in case one was to show up at their door disguised as a stranger. This appears to be done through fear, not generosity.

The fear of the gods' wrath is seen in many of Odysseus' travels. Many of the hosts ask Odysseus to pray for their happiness to the gods in return for their hospitality. This leads us to believe that they only shower him with gifts and feed him because it is what the gods want. There is, however, an adventure where Odysseus is not shown good hospitality. This adventure is the encounter with the Cyclops, Polyphemus. When entering the cave of Polyphemus, Odysseus relies on the expectation of hospitality and helps himself to food and shelter. When Polyphemus returns, however, we see that he does not follow the rules of Greek hospitality. The reason he does not abide by these rules is because his father is the god Poseidon. He does not fear the wrath of the gods because he feels his father will protect him.



Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, 1751-1829: Polyphem.
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As anyone can see, the people from ancient Greece were very hospitable. It is possible, however, that this Greek hospitality comes from the fear of the gods, and not only from pure politeness. Not only can this be seen in the story of *The Odyssey*, but it can be seen in other ancient Greek stories as well.

Hospitality... Or Else!

Hospitality in today's world has become little more than being friendly and considerate to your guest. There are no universal rules for the conduct of the host or the guest; much less a threat of violence if a person does not behave in a certain manner. *The Odyssey*, takes its reader to a very different world of rules and manners. In the story, the importance of hospitality goes beyond being a gracious host; there is a threat of violence if the host or guest does not fulfill their responsibilities.

When Odysseus arrives on Kirké's island, his men are being turned into animals and he goes to confront the witch. On his way to meet with her Hermes advises him on how to deal with the witch. The ways in which Odysseus must deal with Kirké is by threatening her with his sword. There are a few factors that may have motivated Hermes to help Odysseus confront Kirké. One very important reason is that the goddess was violating the code of conduct between host and guest and not even a goddess can violate the rules. From her confrontation with Odysseus, Kirké was taught a lesson by the other gods so that she would become more hospitable.

The meeting with the Cyclops, Polyphemos, is another violent example of what happens with there is a violation between host/guest relations. When the Cyclops decides to eat rather than welcome Odysseus and his crew, the men poke his eye out. This event does not bother the gods at all. The father of the Cyclops, Poseidon, is only upset by the event because it was his son who was hurt. Zeus even praises Odysseus after the event by claiming that, "There is no

mortal half so wise” (Homer, p. 3). This statement proves that violence was an acceptable answer when a host was not gracious.



The most violent reaction to the disregard of the responsibilities between a host and his guests occurs when the suitors are killed. These men were not only killed with the gods’ permission, but they were killed with the help of the gods. Even when Odysseus wants to warn Amphînomos, the only suitor with honest intentions, he is bound to the palace by Athena.

Violent penalties for not respecting the “rules” of hospitality are not only found in the world of the ancient Greeks. In the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorra three angels search in the city for someone who will welcome them into their home. When they do not find anyone inside the city, they travel to the home of Abraham. According to the story, Abraham was recovering from a circumcision and in a great deal of pain when he saw the strangers. Even with his

pain he welcomed the strangers and was saved from the destruction of the city.

In both the Bible and The Odyssey violent penalties are given as a threat to anyone who is not hospitable and accommodating to their guest. Because of this, it is not difficult to see that hospitality was one of the most important aspects to both societies.

Given and Received

As we have seen, hospitality plays a major part in the Odyssey, but the actual hospitality is not as important as the way that that hospitality is received, and the consequences of that reception. For our first example we will look at how the suitors respond to the hospitality given to them at the house of Odysseus. Throughout the duration of Odysseus’ absence, the suitors are treated well, and in response to this, they refuse to leave when asked. The suitors are fed and housed, and after a number of years they overstay their welcome. In response to this Telemachus, prompted by Athena, informs the suitors that his father is returning home and they are all to vacate Odysseus’ home. The suitors, in turn, ignore him and continue to eat drink and be merry, at the cost of Telemachus and Penelope’s household. What are the consequences of these actions taken by the suitors? Although the primary consequence is their death, they also lose the hand of Penelope. None of them are able to pass the test of stringing the bow of Odysseus except Odysseus himself. This is followed by the main consequence of the suitors’ execution at the hands of Odysseus and Telemachus. By not respecting the hospitality given by Penelope, they set the stage for their own deaths.

Our next instance of hospitality occurs on the island of the Cyclops. The Cyclops meets Odysseus and his crew with undesirable hospitality. Although not without cause the Cyclops’ reaction and subsequent actions against Odysseus and his crew ultimately resulted in an attack on him. Although the hospitality of the Cyclops was objectionable the reaction of Odysseus, in the

form of blinding the Cyclops, brings only more trouble onto himself. Since the Cyclops was Poseidon's son Poseidon was angered and brought about more problems for Odysseus and his crew. Just like with the suitors, undesirable hospitality and a bad reception of that hospitality ultimately results in a break in the sacred guest host relationship.

Next we shall look at Odysseus' stay on the island of Calypso. Here he is met with exceptional hospitality. Odysseus received this hospitality well and continued to please Calypso. Only at the end did he ever try to refuse her hospitality and leave, and even this caused no serious problems. Here we have an example of the guest-host relationship working well. Calypso is provided with a companion, even if it was not permanent, and Odysseus was provided with shelter, provisions, and protection for his men. In the end it proves to be a beneficial situation for them both.

We have examined only a few instances of how the reception of hospitality is pivotal to the plot of Homer's *Odyssey*. The suitor's reception of the hospitality provided by Penelope and Telemachus was negative; therefore the consequences of that reception were not what the suitors had wanted. On the island of the Cyclops, Odysseus' reaction, although somewhat warranted, resulted in only more complications for both the guest and the host. The final example showed how a healthy guest-host relationship resulted in an advantageous situation for both parties involved. All of these situations are excellent examples of the repercussions of not providing good hospitality, and how the consequences of this affected the story of *The Odyssey*.