



Greek Heroes in Popular Culture Through Time

Odysseus discussion

Penny Boreham:

Odysseus, the legendary Greek King of Ithaca, known in Roman times as Ulysses, he was one of the first Greek heroes to show as much brain as brawn. The hero of Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*, he surmounts endless obstacles and a 20-year long journey to get home to his beloved Ithaca. He's also a key player in the *Iliad* and in the *Epic Cycle*. He's the strong, courageous, clever one, the wise one, the survivor; pious and respectful of the gods, but also smooth-talking, handsome, very attractive to women. He's the cunning lad, the wily one with a thirst for glory, an obviously many-sided person grappling with difficulties, the master of disguises, capable of saying one thing and meaning another; an inventive liar, a trickster. Today's popular culture is littered with odysseys, in fact no literary figure has been so endlessly adapted as Homer's Odysseus, and he seems to have a persistent and all-pervading presence in the Western tradition. How come? To throw some light on this I've been joined by the Open University's classicists, Dr. Paula James and Dr. Elton Barker. Thank you so much for joining me.

Both:

Hello.

Penny Boreham:

Paula, why do you think he's so omnipresent? What is it about him?

Dr. Paula James:

Well, I think partly his experiences, his actual odyssey, his home-coming which is full of such, almost fairytale adventures. They are going to capture the imagination and, indeed, it's the odyssey which seems to kind of resonate across all kinds of disciplines and areas of culture, so you have 'personal odysseys', it's common phrase, you have a film like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, so going beyond the planet into realms unknown. So, in fact, his journey, *The Odyssey*, comes from Homer but we probably know him as a character better as Ulysses, which is interesting because of course his Greek name is Odysseus. But people are more likely, I think, to respond to you saying Ulysses. They might think of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, so as a character it's that Latin name that seems to resonate.

Penny Boreham:

Elton, the wisdom that we associate with Odysseus, or Ulysses, is this a wisdom he gains through those experiences, through that odyssey, through those trials and tribulations, or is it something that's innate to him as part of him?

Dr. Elton Barker:

Well I think it's both. One level, being wise is part of his epic DNA. He's called 'wily Odysseus', '*Polymetis Odysseus*', so it's part of who he is, what makes him stand out. But it's also a wisdom that is very practical. It's a wisdom that gets him out of the Cyclops's cave, for example, when his men are going to be eaten, he's the one that gets them out through the trick of attaching them to the sheep, and so they get out, and he get outs himself that way. So it's both the wisdom that he's famous for in the epic tradition, but it's the wisdom that we see being enacted throughout the whole performance of *The Odyssey*.

Penny Boreham:

Is it fair to say that he's one of the heroes that you're aware that there's a sort of inner dialogue going on all the time, which is different from what he's doing when he's actually dialoguing with people publicly?

Dr. Elton Barker:

Oh in fact Homer takes us through that, so constantly throughout *The Odyssey* you'll see Odysseus weighing up his options. You can see the way his brain is working and he takes us through various options, and he always goes for the one that's, you know the clever option and one that's less obvious.

Penny Boreham:

Paula, in what way does popular culture see him differently from the way the Ancient Greeks would have seen him, would you say?

Dr. Paula James:

I think intriguingly they kind of flatten out this more complex Odysseus. If you think of the 1950's film with Kirk Douglas, for instance, or even later, NBC TV mini-series in 1997, they tend still to focus on someone who is courageous and strong. They also take everything at face value. Perhaps I should explain. They just trace his adventures whereas, of course in Homer, he tells a story to the Phaeacians and there's a kind of critical minority in classical scholarship that suggests because in Phaeacia these are a people who are semi-mythical, feel they're divine people in some ways, they're close to the gods, they even have magical ships, that Odysseus is kind of tailoring what's happened to him over 10 years to suit the environment, and how true is it all? So you get films that tell it as Odysseus says it is, and then you get other films that I think perhaps somehow capture a more subtle and conflicted Odysseus and take you through a very different kind of story.

Penny Boreham:

Are there any examples of those more subtle ones?

Dr. Paula James:

Well I suppose one could think about the film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which the Coen brothers produced, and they did say that it was based on the character of Odysseus, the George Clooney character but, in fact, they hadn't read Homer. So it's interesting what *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* does. It does have sort of parallel episodes to Odysseus's adventures. Interestingly, again, it does have a central song which makes the Odysseus / Ulysses character successful and gives him his happy ending, *The Man of Constant Sorrow* which, of course, links up very nicely with the way we're introduced to Odysseus at the beginning of Homer, and I find that intriguing because Odysseus's bardic qualities, his ability to spin a yarn and sing a song, *Phaeacia*, is perhaps neglected in films, such as the Kirk Douglas or the NBC.

Dr. Elton Barker:

Yes, Paula's exactly right. Odysseus's great quality is not just being that typical Achilles hero, you know he's good in battle, he's good in the *Iliad*, he can fight; it's not just that he's clever and uses his intelligence, but his ability to spin a yarn. Three books of the *Odyssey*, books 9-12, are about Odysseus taking over the telling of the tale and so you see this power that he has, this great skill, being enacted in the *Odyssey*, and that this is of course the story that he tells about he's managed to lose all his men. You know on the face of it that doesn't sound very good, but the way he spins it you can see actually that he's done the best he can, and actually yes it is their own fault.

Penny Boreham:

So Paula, do you feel that Odysseus loses something when we remove him from this original ancient context, or are there new nuances that we can learn so much from, these modern retellings?

Dr. Paula James:

I don't think he loses because visualising some of the wonderful adventures he has, if you keep him in his ancient context it's obviously very good cinema, say, if you're going to go through that medium, but if you keep Odysseus in his ancient context there's a tendency to want him to be the standard issue hero who is defeating the monsters, so the brain gets lost, as we've said, a bit around the brawn. But then there are other versions which resonate with the character of Odysseus, or Ulysses, other films which I think bring out more clearly some of the subtleties, and some of the questions and ambiguities around this character. For

instance, these elaborate fictions he has, he loves, he loves to enter into other personas, and he really does it very enthusiastically, and sometimes prolongs it over the time really needed in some episodes, indeed, of Homer. So I think there's that aspect of Odysseus which you can see in a film, for instance the Tim Burton film based on the Daniel Wallace book called *Big Fish*, where you have an old man dying, infuriating the son who's trying to get close and bond with him by making elaborate fictions out of past episodes in his life, or apparently so. He is the joker, he is the trickster par excellence, and although Odysseus is not referenced, his name is Bloom, which might want to take us back through to the James Joyce connection, and he's a fascinating character because, indeed, figures who look rather fairytale do arrive at his funeral, which seemed to give those lying tales validity.

Penny Boreham:

So Elton, it seems that every period, every interpretation is championing the hero for its own reasons. Was this evident in other periods in history as well?

Dr. Elton Barker:

Yes, well even in antiquity, so you have the very qualities that make Odysseus this hero that we've been talking about, someone who is able to put up with a lot of stuff and keep what he's really feeling and thinking in his heart. This makes him a paradigm for stoic philosophers because he's able to kind of put up with things, he's able to hold the true target that he has in front of him and thus deal and overcome with all kinds of issues that are presented before him. But at the other side of the coin, just to pick up on something that Paula's been talking about, the kind of slightly dodgier side of Odysseus, someone who says one thing while keeping another in his heart, isn't just a good model for being a philosopher, it's also a good model for a politician. And so on the tragic stage, Odysseus is always the dodgy politician, the 'king of spin', the kind of 'Teflon Tony' figure who basically you throw everything at him and he manages to kind of wriggle out of it and this is, again, a very I think interesting response to the Odysseus that we get from Homer. He's this kind of character, he changes according to his audience. Paula's also talked about the Phaeacian audience and the fact that he tells the tale there, and you certainly see that he is telling a tale in order to get home, you know there's a purpose for telling this tale. And after all the other kind of epic DNA that he has is, he's Odysseus of many turns, and so even in that epithet that Homer gives us you see this Odysseus figure who kind of shifts and shifts his shape according to the particular audience or situation that he's in.

Penny Boreham:

But is that why Odysseus is so omnipresent because he has, this complexity is more apparent?

Dr. Elton Barker:

Exactly, exactly. He's able to shift shape and we see him in many different reincarnations. And, in fact, the reason why I got into classics in the first place was through this BBC Television children's television programme, presented by Tony Robinson, *Odysseus: The Greatest Hero of Them All*, and I got into classics because of the stories that Tony Robinson was telling, and I've been thinking about it, Tony Robinson, of course, famous for being Baldrick out of *Blackadder*, and this was the reason why I was watching this in the first place, and of course Baldrick always had a cunning plan, and so I think it's interesting that it should be Tony Robinson who's giving us kind of the cunning plans of Odysseus. And it's what I later learned was these stories he was telling us were the great epics by Homer, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but it was Odysseus's tales that he was telling.

Penny Boreham:

In terms of reinterpretations of Penelope, this is his wife, had that shed some light on Odysseus as well, I mean I'm thinking Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, and things like that. Has that been important in the reviewing of the whole narrative?

Dr. Elton Barker:

Can I just come in there, because I would say that actually it has because we see Penelope kind of standing up for herself, and the very interesting thing with the *Odyssey* is that although it's Odysseus's tale, it's his journey back home to Penelope, Penelope never is his key figure.

She's the one who manages to put off these suitors for 10 years, these guys who are trying to marry her, and she puts them off with a trick. She says that once I've finished this funeral shroud for Odysseus's father, then I'll marry one of you, but each night she unpicks it and so she's doing something similar to what Odysseus does, and she's as tricky as Odysseus, and in fact Homer has a word for this: *homothumadon*, they're of the same mind, Odysseus and Penelope are of the same mind. And so Margaret Atwood's reinvention of Penelope I think, again, takes us back and allows us to see what's already there in Homer actually, that there's this very sensitive picture of Penelope even in there.

Penny Boreham:

So Odysseus and Penelope are mirroring each other in a way?

Dr. Elton Barker:

That's right, and that's what makes them such a perfect epic couple and why Odysseus should want to go back to her, even though he's got the option of sleeping with these goddesses and witches, and what not.

Dr. Paula James:

Interestingly, the 1955 film had the same actress playing Penelope as Circe, both women who weave of course, and I always thought was rather a clever idea. And the other thing about Penelope as the soul-mate too, as I think this too comes at a cost. It's about robbing time, isn't it? I mean there's Odysseus taking so much time to get back, and there's Penelope unraveling her loom, and I always that's part of it, it's almost like a metaphor for her sterility because what, in fact, is happening is the very thing that identifies a woman in the ancient world is something she has to unpick every night, while waiting for her husband to return.

Penny Boreham:

So finally, if we're trying to sum up why Odysseus, the hero, still holds such sway for us and is constantly portrayed and reinvented in print, audio and film over and over again, what for you is the overriding reason?

Dr. Elton Barker:

Well, he's a great hero but he's also an everyman. First word of the *Odyssey* is *andra*, man, and that can both mean husband, he's a husband of Penelope so that's a driving force of the epic, but it's also 'the man', the great hero from Troy, but also 'a man', and it's part of a journey and the *Odyssey* takes us on a journey. And there's a wonderful reimagining of that by the modern Greek poet, Constantinos Cavafy, his poem is called *Ithaca*, and there he talks about this idea of learning through experience, a kind of a wisdom that you get through your life's journey, and so it doesn't just become in this poem the journey of Odysseus, it's kind of our journey through to Ithaca, and we're all searching for Ithaca through our own lives, and learning along the way.

Dr. Paula James:

Well I think also he's described in that first line, isn't he, as *Polutropos*, so he is a man of many parts which Elton has, in fact, discussed already, and many stratagems, not that that means he doesn't fail to have a stratagem at times, which makes him very human, it does make him fallible, so I think he's just got so many layers and aspects to him that we can identify with, or even if we're distanced from them I think that's also a good thing, because it's good to look at the past from a critical distance. And if modern versions remove some of the complexities that classicists feel are there in Homer and in the classical world's treatment of him, or refashioning of him, even so I think we're bound to kind of reinsert them in his personality. It might take on a much more modern psychological form when we do so but I do think he is endlessly adaptable from that point of view, and of course his story could go on being told because he doesn't actually get home and stay there. He tells Penelope 'the gods will want me to be traveling off again soon.'

Dr. Elton Barker:

So the journey continues!

Penny Boreham:

Here we must close. For my part, I've certainly learned a lot. Many thanks to our contributors, Paula James and Elton Barker, for grappling so bravely with such a multi-faceted character.

Both:
Thank you.