

From the Found Notebooks of Homer's Writing Group

by Sean Carman

Re: "The Odyssey"

H: Another solid story from the group's most prolific member! And we'd barely finished workshopping the Iliad! A lot going on here that I like. Nice arc to the story, and I'm heartened you let the plot play a larger role in this one — sustains the dramatic tension, and provides some fascinating twists! Really liked the setting details, e.g., "dawn with her rose-red fingers" and Odysseus' "black-beaked ships." Excellent word economy, as usual. Overall, good job.

My thoughts:

I understand what you are doing with the suitors overstaying their welcome in their pursuit of Odysseus' wife Penelope —making the reader want Odysseus to make it home, so his wife won't marry another, etc. I think you're on the right track, because for this story to work the reader definitely has to want Odysseus to make it home. But is Penelope really going to forsake Odysseus for the offerings of any of these pretenders? The idea seems to undercut her unceasing devotion to him, which you develop quite well. Also, seems a little contrived for the bond between Penelope and battle-hardened Odysseus, direct descendant of Zeus, to be threatened by a rabble of guests overstaying their welcome at a dinner party. With these choices, why wouldn't Penelope simply remain single? Tried to think of a more compelling reason for Odysseus to make it home, but couldn't come up with much . . . maybe a local conflict threatens Penelope and Odysseus' son Telemachus, like the battle for Troy but on a smaller scale? Maybe a gang of rogue swineherds kidnaps Penelope and demands Telemachus' sacrifice as ransom? Just some ideas to get you started.

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The Cyclops is wonderful! You have such an imagination! A little confused as to why they have to spend so long in the cave, though. Maybe they could feed Cyclops the wine a little earlier, to make him fall asleep sooner? That would quicken Odysseus' escape, cut the scene short and pick up the pace. Then you could interpose a plot complication on their return to the ship, for a more satisfying denouement.

Having Circe turn Odysseus' men into swine is a great imaginative device. Really sets up a great conflict, esp. given the crew's aching hunger and lack of other food. Still, I wonder if you could do more before Odysseus unmasks Circe's deception? What if, for example, before Odysseus' return, one of the crew catches a fleeting glimpse of a fellow warrior in the eyes of one of the swine? That could provide a tender moment, with the crew member unknowingly seeing through Circe's spell, yet one also filled with self-doubt, because the idea of a man transforming into a pig is so ludicrous. See what I mean? Might also raise larger "nature of man" issues not fully explored here, though you're definitely on track

I love Scylla and Charybdis! Reminded me of all those times there's no easy way out of a difficult situation! Talk about symbolism! And the scene really shows Odysseus' leadership, bravely deciding to sacrifice some of his crew to save the group, etc. Still, why does Scylla snatch up and devour six men, instead of some other number? Yes, you say Scylla has six heads, but you don't explain why the monster has that particular number of heads. Seems like it could easily be four, or ten. Why not twenty? Also, you haven't told us how many men are on the ship. This is a problem throughout, actually — and keeps us from gauging the seriousness of the repeated incidents in which some number of crew meet their doom. With a crew of 12, the loss of six men would be pretty serious. (How many men does it really take to sail the ship anyway — that's another fact I think the reader needs to know). But let's say the men on the ship number 60. Then the loss of six doesn't seem so bad — only ten percent. See my point? So, if you're going to stick with six heads for Scylla, I think I'd put 20 or so men on the ship at that

point. Either way, I think you have to specify, and anyway doing so would drive the tension that much deeper.

Oh, also, had no idea what the whole visit to the Kingdom of the Dead was getting at. Interesting, but seems unrelated to the larger story. I'd cut it. Remember — this is a story about one man's attempt to get home. Stay focused on that.

In the final chapters, I like Odysseus' return in the guise of an anonymous vagrant — again, excellent symbolic choice — but the device wears a little thin. Doesn't it seem odd no one suspects anything? It also seems an unnecessarily complicated device for symbolizing the difficulty of becoming re-acquainted with a long-lost love. Why not just give us the scene of Odysseus and Penelope reunited? We could see them fumbling with introductions, exchanging embarrassed confessions and revelations, etc. Isn't that the center of the story? Also, I don't buy that Telemachus can't string Odysseus' bow. Let's not forget he's the great, great grandson of a god. He should be able to string a bow. Maybe he could string it, but not quite as well? Maybe the bow has lost its fabled rigidity, allowing Telemachus to string it for the first time in his life, thereby providing a nice "coming of age" touch? Also, doesn't each suitor's failure even to come close to stringing Odysseus' bow pretty much give away Odysseus' slaughter of them in the end? If you want that to be a surprise, you're going to have to disguise it more cleverly.

On the whole, though, an excellent first draft. Look forward to reading your revisions!

