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Not the Same Old Story: Dante's Re-Telling of *The Odyssey*

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Abstract: Dante's *Divine Comedy* is frequently taught in core curriculum programs, but the mixture of classical and Christian symbols can be confusing to contemporary students. In teaching Dante, it is helpful for students to understand the concept of noumenal truth that underlies the symbol. In re-telling the Ulysses' myth in Canto XXVI of *The Inferno*, Dante reveals that the details of the narrative are secondary to the spiritual truth he wishes to convey. Dante changes Ulysses' quest for home and reunification with family in the Homeric account to a failed quest for knowledge without divine guidance that results in Ulysses' destruction.

Keywords: Dante Alighieri; *The Divine Comedy*; Homer; *The Odyssey*; Ulysses; core curriculum; noumena; symbolism; higher education; pedagogy

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When I began teaching Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the 1990s as part of our new Cornerstone Curriculum, I had little experience in teaching classical texts. My graduate preparation had been primarily in rhetoric and modern British literature, neither of which included a study of Dante. Over the years, my appreciation of Dante has grown as I have guided, Vergil-like, our students through a reading of the text. And they, Dante-like, have sometimes found themselves lost in a strange wood of symbols and allegories that are remote from their educational background. What seems particularly inexplicable to them is the intermingling of actual historical characters and mythological figures. In their academic preparation, there is a rather strict division of history and literature, fact and fiction. We don't expect a story about the Vietnam War to include references to Apollo and Zeus. Indeed, the whole idea of mythological characters seems somewhat suspect. Shouldn't we be more concerned with real people and real events than fictional ones?

And for students who are serious about their Christian faith—the majority of my students at Samford—the inclusion of Greco-Roman mythology in a work about a Christian's progress from Hell to Heaven seems fraught with difficulties. Why should Vergil, a pagan poet, be our guide through the Underworld? And, perhaps more to the point, why does Dante get to invent a Hell that seems his own fanciful creation? Shouldn't our knowledge of Hell be limited to what we know from the Bible? I am not saying that students vocally object to reading Dante, but I do think, especially for Protestant students in the South, there is a sense that all of this is just a little bit silly—certainly not on par with courses in physics or management or occupational therapy where you are learning to do something real.

1. The Noumenal Essence of the Classical Myth

What is necessary, then, is for students to have some understanding of why Dante, and by extension, all those writers who use mythological foundations for their work, from Sophocles to James Joyce, are worthy of our time and energy. Dante is certainly fanciful, if by that we mean that he creates a mythological framework that does not have any real-world equivalent. What must become apparent

to students is that it is almost impossible to talk about spiritual truth, and I am using this term in its broadest sense, without some kind of symbolic structure.

For instance, when a man or a woman wears a ring on the fourth finger of the left hand, we all know that this has a special meaning that goes beyond just ornamentation. Given a little time, students can usually identify a host of meanings associated with the wedding ring. Its circular shape is symbolic of the pledge to spend eternity together (and thus, it suggests a belief in eternal life). The gold of the ring often signifies virtue and purity. The diamond, permanence and beauty. The exchange of the rings is a way of demonstrating their commitment to love and honor one another. This simple act of exchanging rings is thus laden with deeper theological truth.

On further examination, we might observe that the exchange of rings was also conducted in pre-Christian cultures. We might note as well that the fourth finger was selected because it supposedly contained the *vena amoris*, the vein of love. In other words, the symbolism of the wedding ring has been appropriated by Christian cultures in ways consistent with biblical beliefs about monogamy and fidelity. This stacking of Christian truth on pagan foundations can be seen in numerous social customs from candlelight ceremonies to Christmas pageants. Dante is not an exception to this tradition, but simply a highly visible example of it.

Helping our students understand mythology as a means of expressing human values is a fundamental goal of our core curriculum. As the example of the wedding ring demonstrates, some of our most sacred beliefs are deeply tied to symbolic expression. In *The Divine Comedy* we encounter whirlwinds of passion and the pits of despair. Although the physical object which expresses such a belief may be fanciful—even in Dante's case, a bit grotesque—the value of the symbol, and by extension, the value of myth–is in its noumenal, rather than physical, presence. We fear those things that go bump in the night even when we can't put a name to the things themselves. We can appreciate Dante's point that the human spirit is diminished by sin without necessarily believing in the instruments of retribution described in *The Inferno*.

One way of exploring the noumenal essence of mythological references is by examining their manipulation over time. For my purposes, the example of Odysseus is particularly useful because it shows how comfortable Dante is with bending the mythological story to advance his own poetic and theological purposes. And the changes he makes are not subtle renderings of character, but a complete inversion of the Homeric account. My goal in discussing these changes with students is not to make them scholars of medieval alterations to classical texts, but to help them understand the nature of myth as fluid and malleable. Rather than being bound by classical precedents, medieval writers felt free to adapt the myths for their own purposes.

2. The Homeric Hero and Odysseus' Return to Ithaca

In Book XII of *The Divine Comedy* Dante borrows from a classical story that has been circulating for some 2000 years. Before we take a closer look at Dante's use of the story, it is helpful to know how and why the story was originally told. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a heroic character, famous for his exploits in war and particularly for his stratagem of the Trojan Horse. In Book VIII of *The Odyssey*, while at a banquet on the island of Scheria, a bard named Demodocus recounts stories of Odysseus and his prowess in battle. Athena herself has invited the islanders to come hear the stories of their famed guest, and a great crowd of people have gathered at King Alcinous' palace. It is clear that Odysseus' fame has preceded him even on this remote island. As Tennyson would later observe, Odysseus has "become a name" (Tennyson 2013, p. 124).

But Odysseus is not only famous for his feats in war; he is known to us primarily as a mariner who spends ten years trying to return to his home in Ithaca. Indeed, the desire to return home is the major theme of Homer's work. From the time that Odysseus leaves the shores of Troy, he is constantly being tempted to forget his home and family, and his ability to overcome these temptations is part of what makes him the hero of the epic. In this struggle between the call to adventure and the desire to return home, Calypso and Penelope represent the opposite poles.

> Calypso the lustrous goddess tried to hold me back,
> deep in her arching caverns, craving me for a husband.
> So did Circe, holding me just as warmly in her halls...
> But they never won the heart inside me, never.
> So nothing is as sweet as a man's own country. (Homer 1996, p. 212)

The events leading up to Odysseus' falling under Calypso's spell on the island of Ogygia all reveal this inner tension between the thrill of exploration and the desire to return home to family and social responsibilities. The first island that Odysseus reaches on his journey is the land of the Lotus-Eaters. Odysseus and his men are on their way home to Ithaca on the western coast of Greece and have just rounded the Cape of MELEA when a terrible storm drives them off course for nine days, finally landing them on this dangerous island. Here, for the first time, Odysseus and his men are tempted to settle outside their native land. The Lotus-Eaters are described as a gentle people who subsist on the fruit of the lotus—a fruit so delightful that those who taste it lose all desire to return home:

> Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit,
> lost all desire to send a message back, much less return,
> their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters,
> grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home
> dissolved forever. (Homer 1996, p. 214)

It is only by imprisoning his men aboard his ship that Odysseus is able to avoid a general mutiny. The idea of an island so charming that it makes men forget their homes is a recurring theme in *The Odyssey*.

Sailing away from the land of the Lotus-Eaters, Odysseus and his men endure misfortune after misfortune. They are shut up in a cave by the dim-witted Cyclopes, devoured by the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, and turned into swine by Circe the sorceress. At one point, they are within sight of Ithaca, but are once again blown far away by contrary winds. But their longest layover (seven years) is on the island of Ogygia, the home of Calypso.

It is only on Ogygia that Odysseus seems to lose his desire to return home. Ogygia is described as an idyllic retreat from the world, an Edenic paradise where Odysseus is sheltered from his enemies and can live his out his days in tranquility. Furthermore, Calypso offers him the greatest gift than can be bestowed on mortals. As long as he lives with her, he will live forever. Why should he not want to end his striving? Why should he not dwell in such eternal bliss? This idea is so important to *The Odyssey* that it forms the connective tissue of the epic. In Book I of *The Odyssey*, we find the hero trapped on Calypso's island. In Book V, Hermes is sent to rescue Odysseus from his captivity. And in Book XII, we find out how Odysseus drifted to Ogygia after all his ships were destroyed and all his men drowned. But why is it necessary that Odysseus escape from paradise? Why must he leave Calypso's loving arms?

Homer's answer is clear. There is only one thing stronger than Calypso's promise of never-ending bliss—it is the return to his home and to his beloved wife. For Homer, not to return home is no different from death. The wanderings of Odysseus are often represented as the world's great tale of adventure, but for Homer they are something else. They are a story of continuous diminution. For Odysseus, to leave home, to leave his beloved Greece, is inevitably to become less than what he was. At the beginning of the war, Odysseus sets sail from Ithaca with a fleet of ships and an army of men. But by the time he arrives on Ogygia, he is alone and powerless. To live on the island of Ogygia is to lose his identity. Without his language, his people, his native lands, Odysseus becomes, in the Greek, *outis*, or nobody. In a prophetic moment early in the tale, Odysseus uses *outis* as his pseudonym when identifying himself to Polyphemus, the one-eyed son of Poseidon. By the time he arrives on Ogygia, the prophecy has come true.

As every reader of *The Odyssey* knows, Odysseus does eventually return home to his wife. And she, despite being pursued by a houseful of impatient suitors, never gives up on being reunited with the

great love of her life. When he arrives in his homeland of Ithaca, on the western edge of Greece, he returns not as the conquering hero, not as the mastermind of the Trojan War, but in the guise of a beggar. No one recognizes him except his old faithful dog. But it is only by coming home that Odysseus can once again be who he was: the King of Ithaca, the husband of a devoted wife, and the father of a loving son. It is only here that he can tell his tales of wandering and captivity in his language, to his people. Only by returning home can he once more become Odysseus. In teaching *The Odyssey*, it is important for students to realize that the stories about one-eyed giants and alluring sorcerers are devoted to Homer's poetic vision of what represents the highest good: to do one's duty, to serve one's country, and to live in the warm embrace of family in your native homeland.

Although the ending of *The Odyssey* finds the hero safely enveloped in the comforts of home and family, the myth of Odysseus does not end there. In Book XII, in the middle of his journey, Odysseus makes a visit to the Underworld. There he meets with the famous Theban prophet, Tiresias, the one who foretold the destruction of Oedipus and the death of his sons. Odysseus learns from the prophet that he must go on one last voyage before he can finally die peacefully at home.

> But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—
> by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—
> go forth once more, you must...
> carry your well-planed oar until you come
> to a race of people who know nothing of the sea. (Homer 1996, p. 253)

Although Homer makes no further mention of this final voyage, it looms over the final chapter of *The Odyssey* like a great, unanswered question, the unfinished business that demands a sequel to be made. And it is Dante who takes up that challenge, and in the process, turns Odysseus from a heroic warrior, and wanderer, into a wayward soul.

3. Dante's Re-Telling of Ulysses' Final Voyage

In taking up the myth of Odysseus' final voyage, Dante will create a vision of Odysseus and his journey that is radically different from the one foretold in Book XII of *The Odyssey*. By comparing the two accounts, students can begin to see the importance of myth in engaging readers in the discussions of value and meaning. For Dante, that meaning is derived from a proper relationship with God, rather than the familial values of Homer. Instead of returning home, Dante must leave home behind in pursuit of God. In fact, in *The Divine Comedy* Dante places Purgatory—the place where he will learn how to be in right relationship to God—on the opposite side of the Earth from Jerusalem. He imagines it as an enormous mountain that was created when Lucifer was cast out of Heaven and fell to the Earth. The distant sea that is the setting for his island of Purgatory is as remote from his Mediterranean world as Alpha Centauri is from ours. Its very remoteness makes it the ideal place for a place of penance and forgiveness, a place that, like the medieval conception of Heaven, must exist, but is beyond our ability to reach in an earthly body.

Perhaps to lend an air of authenticity to his imaginary island, Dante connects it with the Homeric myth about the last voyage of Odysseus. By foreshadowing the existence of this place in *The Inferno*, he sets the stage for his own journey there when Dante and Vergil make their way to Purgatory. In *The Inferno*, we learn that Odysseus ("Ulysses," as Dante knew his name in the Latinized form) sailed within sight of Purgatory while he was still alive. But Dante's Ulysses is different in both name and actions from Homer's creation. Lying deep within the circles of Hell, he appears as a flame and speaks to Dante with a tongue of fire. He explains to Dante that he never returned home to the island of Ithaca. For neither "fondness for my son, nor reverence for my aged father, nor Penelope's claim to the joys of love, could drive out of my mind the lust to experience the far-flung world." Ulysses' return to

Ithaca, so praised by Homer as the fulfillment of his quest, is now completely eliminated by Dante.[1] In *The Inferno*, Ulysses is literally enveloped in the flame of his unquenchable desire. He has ignored his duty as a father, a son, and as a husband in order to satisfy his wanderlust, and this is his punishment. In reading Dante's version of the Homeric myth, students can begin to understand how myth can be reinterpreted by a later poet in order to convey an entirely different noumenal truth than the one underlying the original version of the story. In telling his story to Dante, Ulysses describes a journey that corresponds to the prophesied journey that appears in Book XII of *The Odyssey*. On this voyage, Ulysses and his intrepid companions sail far beyond the bounds of the Mediterranean Sea to "a world beyond the sun" (Alighieri 2003, p. 207). This place, we will discover in the epic, is the island of Purgatory. Like some primeval interstellar traveler, Ulysses spies the island from afar, "dark in space, a peak so tall/I doubted any man had seen the like" (p. 207). This is it, the ultimate destination—the island beyond all islands—but reach it, he never shall. Just as a cheer goes up from the crew, a sudden squall overtakes the ship. They are spun about three times, and on the fourth revolution, sucked beneath the sea. Ulysses has sought for glory, but his end is oblivion. The sea closes over him, and he is never heard from again. This is a direct contrast with the prophecy of Tiresias, which predicts "a gentle painless death" for Odysseus; "far from the sea it takes you down... with your people there in blessed peace around you." Homer depicts a hero's death for Odysseus in the company of his family and devoted nation. To Dante, however, Ulysses is no hero, but a cheat and a liar. By means of the wooden horse, he cheats the Trojans out of their kingdom. By forcing Achilles to go to Troy, he cheats Greece out of its greatest warrior and Achilles out of his life. And in his final journey, he sacrifices the lives of all of his men in his own maniacal pursuit of adventure and glory. Moreover, because the island of Purgatory is an exclusively Christian destination, he, like Lucifer in Eden, has sought to enter a place where he does not belong.

But why does Dante imagine such a bitter end for Ulysses? After all, other pagan heroes are singled out for praise throughout the epic, and Vergil, the pagan Roman poet, serves as Dante's guide and interpreter as he journeys down through the Inferno and up the slopes of Purgatory. Why, then, is Ulysses treated with such disdain?

One answer is that there is a strong connection between the fate of the Trojans and Dante's Italy. It is Vergil who promulgates the myth that from Aeneas, the warrior who escaped burning Troy, would come the founders of Rome and the Julian emperors. Not surprisingly, Hektor, the greatest of the Trojan warriors, is placed in Limbo, a special place outside the torments of Hell where virtuous pagans reside. Thus, Dante's placement of Ulysses in the Eighth Circle of Hell does fit with his general repudiation of the Greeks in favor of the Trojans.

But it seems something more is at play here than simply Dante's scorn for the Greeks. The Eighth Circle of Hell is where those who have committed acts of fraud or deceit are punished. Here are thieves and corrupt politicians, simoniacs and hypocrites. Matt Wheeler notes that Ulysses' punishment is to be held within a "lingua" or "tongue" of fire (Wheeler 2014, p. 3). The connection between the instrument of punishment and the offense—Ulysses' deceptive tongue—is undeniable. Dante places those guilty of fraud deep in the pit of Hell because they have undermined the very concept of truth. Without mutual trust, it is impossible for civil society to exist. Dante prefaces his visit to this region with a jeremiad against the deceivers of his own day, the corrupt politicians of medieval Florence who have condemned him to a life of exile. Ulysses and his companion Diomedes must be consumed with an eternal flame because they have acted immorally in seeking victory above honor, and they have destroyed others in doing so.

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[1] It should be noted that there were alternate accounts of Odysseus' fate after leaving Calypso's island which were circulating during the late medieval era, and which also failed to include the happy homecoming described by Homer. Although these may have served as some inspiration for Dante, his own account varies in significant ways from the accounts given by Dictys Cretensis and other Latin sources (Rossi 1953, p. 195). The point remains that Dante has crafted a story of Ulysses that fits his own particular purposes.

4. Myth and the Search for Truth

As the story of Ulysses' quest demonstrates, myths are symbols that have noumenal meaning, but those meanings need not, and often do not, remain constant from generation to generation. Myths and the meaning they convey are subject to elaboration and alteration, even to the point—as Dante's retelling of *The Odyssey* so vividly demonstrates—of completely changing the outcome of the original story. By examining Dante's re-envisioning of Homer's heroic warrior, we can begin to focus the discussion not on the apparent contradictions between the two stories, but on the work that myth performs in helping us explore our own cultural values. How we tell Odysseus' story—and by extension how we tell any myth—is based in large degree on what we want the story to tell about us. Homer extolls the Odyssean hero who seeks to return to his home at all costs, not only to lead his people, but also to reclaim his own identity. Dante sees Ulysses as a moral failure who tramples on the rights of others in order to assure his own success. Indeed, John Guzzardo considers Ulysses' quest for the unknown to be the antitype of Dante's own quest for truth: "For Dante, as for St. Augustine, Ulysses represented the archetype of the presumptuous philosopher who would seek the truth unaided" (Guzzardo 1949, p. 58). And, whereas Dante's quest cannot be fulfilled without the assistance of divine truth in the form of Beatrice, Ulysses, in Dante's version of the story, leaves behind his Penelope in hope of achieving that which is beyond human striving.

But despite how dissimilar the two accounts of Ulysses turn out to be, both Homer and Dante recognize the power of myth to explore the deepest wellsprings of human nature. Mythology, rightly understood, is not about Golden Fleeces and three-headed dogs or mythical voyages and imagined islands; it is about exploring what it means to be human, and by studying poets such as Homer and Dante, our students can learn to value the noumenal truth that guides not only mythological accounts of ancient heroes, but the one that helps direct their own journey through life.

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