

Loyalty in the Odyssey - 2018

(iii) Loyalty is the virtue most valued in Homer's Odyssey and its absence is severely punished. Discussed this view with reference to the text.

As one of the main themes of the Odyssey, loyalty is demonstrated by a handful of characters throughout the poem. The most notable is that of Odysseus himself. Odysseus is the hero of the story so for him to demonstrate his loyalty so fiercely shows that loyalty is seen as a heroic attribute. Odysseus's main show of loyalty is to his home and to his family in Ithaca. Not to mention his loyalty to his comrades during their journey home.

During Odysseus's perilous journey, his loyalty to Ithaca proves not only to be a defining feature of his character but also the driving force of his journey. When Calypso offers him immortality on her island, he politely refuses, expressing how he yearns for his home and his family, despite the difficult journey that still lies ahead. When king Alcinous offers Nausicaa as a bride and a life among the Phaeacians, Odysseus's love for his wife and son prevails. Even throughout his journey, like when he stayed with Circe, he never shies away from his goal of reaching home.

His loyalty to his men is also something to be noted. Although they delay the journey by opening the bag of winds, Odysseus remains loyal to them and doesn't leave them behind. It's one of his great leadership qualities. He gathers as many as he can when he's leaving the Island of the Lotus eaters. When Polyphemus asks if he has anymore crew, he denies so, protecting them. When Calypso captures his men, he goes to confront her about it and help them, despite the risks. The return to her island to bury the body of Elpenor was also an incredible show of loyalty on Odysseus's part.

Meanwhile back on Ithaca, Penelope continues to stay constantly loyal to Odysseus. Agamemnon remarks to Odysseus that Penelope is a good woman remaining faithful to her husband unlike his own wife Clytemnestra or Helen of Sparta. The picture of a dutiful wife, Penelope's most virtuous and most obvious characteristic is her loyalty. She manages to come up with clever ways of deceiving the suitors to delay their advances. First, her trick with Laertes funeral shroud, saying she will choose suitor when she is completed it, but unwinds her work every night. Then the

arrangement of the contest of the bow, knowing full well no man but Odysseus could string it [perhaps representing only Odysseus is worthy of her hand] and shoot the arrow through all the axe heads. Finally, her trick with their bed, to make sure it truly is the man she waited 20 years for. When Odysseus explains no one can move their olive tree bed, she immediately embraces him. Penelope is rewarded for her faithfulness with the return of her husband.

However, she is not the only one still loyal. Eumaeus, the swineherd, remains incredibly faithful to Odysseus, despite ill treatment by the suitors. He expresses his love for his master to Odysseus, saying how he longs for his master's safe return. Not only does he stay loyal to Odysseus but to his son Telemachus as well, providing shelter for him upon his return to Ithaca. It is because of his loyalty that Odysseus reveals himself to him and recruits him in the battle against the suitors. Eumaeus plays a pivotal role, locking the main doors and capturing Melanthius. Both he and fellow herdsmen Philoetius are rewarded for their loyalty.

Eurycleia is another loyal servant. When she accidentally discovers Odysseus's true identity upon seeing his scar, she tells him she will aid his efforts all she can and reveals which maidservants deserve punishment. She previously aided Telemachus when he left for Pylos and Sparta, which proved important in Telemachus' growth. Even Argus, Odysseus's loyal dog, waits until he sees his master one more time before he finally dies.

On the other hand, there are those who are disloyal to Odysseus. Probably the most obvious one is the suitors. Not only are they rude cruel and horrible, but they are also disloyal. It is made clear that Odysseus was good to them and their families. So not only are they behaving disrespectfully, but they are also betraying the king they owe their loyalty to. In the end, all those who acted evilly or stood by and let them behave so were brutally punished. As loyalty is seen as such a virtue, the lack of such is severely punished.

The suitors are not the only disloyal characters harshly punished. Those of Odysseus's servants who encouraged and, in some cases, took part in the horrid deeds meet their end. The maid servants who serve the suitors or bedded them, were all hung by Telemachus. Melanthius, a vicious goatherd who wished death upon both Odysseus and his son, abused beggar Odysseus and attempted to aid the suitors, is brutally mutilated, his body parts fed to the dogs. Any of those who were disloyal to the hero, received their fate as per the will of the gods and it was not merciful.

The message of loyalty given by the odyssey is clear; those who remain loyal are regarded as admirable and deserve reward. Those who are disloyal should receive an unmerciful death and deserve their punishment in the eyes of the gods and society.