

Three Generations of Manhood in Homer's "The Odyssey"

Today I finished reading *The Odyssey*, that complex, brilliant, violent, old, relevant epic poem about the journey home of Greek hero Odysseus.

I have many thoughts about this book ("why is the ending so abrupt?" "Wow, Odysseus is wily and violent." "These feast descriptions make me hungry." "Athena is one super-cool lady.") here at the ending, but one scene in particular stands out.

(READ NO FURTHER IF YOU DON'T WANT TO HAVE THE STORY SPOILED.)

Odysseus and his son Telemachus, having slain the abusive suitors of Odysseus's wife Penelope, flee Odysseus's home in Ithaca and come to the home of his father, Laertes. Laertes has missed and then mourned his son for 20 years, so the reunion is one of the most touching of this book of reunions.

Later, when some men of Ithaca come in pursuit of Odysseus (wanting to avenge their fallen sons and brothers), all three generations of Greek heroes suit up for battle: Odysseus, Telemachus, even old Laertes. A friendly banter of bravado strikes up as Telemachus and Odysseus prepare for battle, prompting Laertes to celebrate:

"What a day for me, dear gods! What joy-

My son and my grandson vying over courage!"

Then the goddess Athena grants Laertes strength and skill beyond his age and he:

". . . Lifted a mighty prayer to mighty Zeus's daughter

brandished his spear a moment, winged it fast

and hit Eupithes. . ."

Laertes, after 20 years of waiting and many years of decrepitude and aging, comes back into his own (even if briefly) and fights alongside his son and grandson in the final battle of the story.

It is a beautiful thing when three generations of men can experience their manhood

together. We see in this scene something that must have been especially valued and especially rare in the ancient world. Even if the violence is not so attractive now, the cooperation of three generations is still a magnificent thing.

Laertes of course makes me think of my own grandfather, who would have turned 92 yesterday. I did have the chance to let him see me come into manhood, but I do wish that we could have been men together: him, my father, and me. We would have been a formidable team, not fighting vengeful Greeks but certainly in making things grow, keeping up our farm, and taking care of others in our lives with our full energies and powers.

I hope that my father lives well enough to work alongside me and his grandson(s) one day. This was a fitting ending to *The Odyssey* and a fitting plot point to any good life of men.