Odyssey Lecture 3: Odysseus and his Antagonists; The Kharis of the Phaeacians

Part I: Odysseus and his Antagonists

A) Odyssey 5.148ff: On this he took his leave, and Calypso went out to look for Odysseus, for she had heard Zeus’ message. She found him sitting upon the beach with his eyes ever filled with tears, his sweet life wasting away as he mourned his nostos... “Odysseus, noble son of Laertes, so you would start home to your own land at once? Good luck go with you, but if you could only know how much suffering is in store for you before you get back to your own country, you would stay where you are, keep house along with me, and let me make you immortal, no matter how anxious you may be to see this wife of yours, of whom you are thinking all the time, day after day; yet I flatter myself that I am no whit less tall or well-looking than she is, for it is not to be expected that a mortal woman should compare in beauty with an immortal.”

“Goddess,” replied Odysseus, “do not be angry with me about this. I am quite aware that my wife Penelope is nothing like so tall or so beautiful as yourself. She is only a woman, whereas you are an immortal. Nevertheless, I want to get home, and can think of nothing else. If some god wrecks me when I am on the sea, I will bear it and make the best of it. I have had infinite trouble both by land and sea already, so let this go with the rest.”

B) Odyssey 1.63-75: And Zeus said, “My child, what are you talking about? How can I forget Odysseus than whom there is no more capable man on earth [in regard to noos], nor more liberal in his offerings to the immortal gods that live in heaven? Bear in mind, however, that Poseidon is still furious with Odysseus for having blinded an eye of Polyphemus king of the Cyclopes. Polyphemus is son to Poseidon by the nymph Thoosa, daughter to the sea-king Phorkys; therefore though he will not kill Odysseus outright, he torments him by preventing him from his homecoming [nostos].”

C) Odyssey 5.282-312: But lord Poseidon, who was returning from the Ethiopians, caught sight of Odysseus a long way off, from the mountains of the Solymi. He could see him sailing upon the sea, and it made him very angry, so he wagged his head and muttered to himself, saying, “heavens, so the gods have been changing their minds about Odysseus while I was away in Ethiopia, and now he is close to the land of the Phaeacians, where it is decreed that he shall escape from the calamities that have befallen him. Still, he shall have plenty of hardship yet before he has done with it.” Thereon he gathered his clouds together, grasped his trident, stirred it round in the sea, and roused the rage of every wind that blows till earth, sea, and sky were hidden in cloud, and night sprang forth out of the heavens. Winds from East, South, North, and West fell upon him all at the same time, and a tremendous sea got up, so that Odysseus’ heart began to fail him.

“Alas,” he said to himself in his dismay, “what ever will become of me? I am afraid Calypso was right when she said I should have trouble by sea before I got back home. It is all coming true. How black is Zeus making heaven with his clouds, and what a sea the winds are raising from every quarter at once. I am now safe to perish. Blest and thrice blest were those Danaans who fell before Troy in the cause of the sons of Atreus. Would that I had been killed on the day when the Trojans were pressing me so sorely about the dead body of Achilles, for then I should
have had due burial and the Achaeans would have honored my name [kleos]; but now it seems that I shall come to a most pitiable end.”

D) Odyssey 3.1-61: But as the sun was rising from the fair sea into the firmament of heaven to shed light on mortals and immortals, they reached Pylos the city of Neleus. Now the people of Pylos were gathered on the sea shore to offer sacrifice of black bulls to Poseidon lord of the Earthquake. There were nine guilds with five hundred men in each, and there were nine bulls to each guild. As they were eating the inward meats and burning the thigh bones [on the embers] in the name of Poseidon, Telemakhos and his crew arrived, furled their sails, brought their ship to anchor, and went ashore...

Nestor’s son Peisistratos at once offered his hand to each of them, and seated them on some soft sheepskins that were lying on the sands near his father and his brother Thrasymedes. Then he gave them their portions of the inward meats and poured wine for them into a golden cup, handing it to Athena first, and saluting her at the same time. “Offer a prayer, sir,” said he, “to lord Poseidon, for it is his feast that you are joining... As he spoke he handed her the cup. Athena thought that he was just and right to have given it to herself first; she accordingly began praying heartily to Poseidon. “O you,” she cried, “who encircle the earth, deign to grant the prayers of your servants that call upon you. More especially we pray you send down your grace on Nestor and on his sons; thereafter also make the rest of the Pylian people some handsome return for the goodly hecatomb they are offering you. Lastly, grant Telemakhos and myself a happy issue, in respect of the matter that has brought us in our to Pylos.”

E) Odyssey 5.424-435: While he was thus in two minds a wave caught him and took him with such force against the rocks that he would have been smashed and torn to pieces if Athena had not shown him what to do. He caught hold of the rock with both hands and clung to it groaning with pain till the wave retired, so he was saved that time; but presently the wave came on again and carried him back with it far into the sea—tearing his hands as the suckers of an octopus [poulupodos] are torn when some one plucks it from its bed, and the stones come up along with it—even so did the rocks tear the skin from his strong hands, and then the wave drew him deep down under the water.

F) Odyssey 5.43-57: Thus he spoke, and Hermes, the messenger, slayer of Argos, did as he was told. Forthwith he bound on his glittering golden sandals with which he could fly like the wind over land and sea. He took the wand with which he seals men’s eyes in sleep or wakes them just as he pleases, and flew holding it in his hand over Pieria; then he swooped down through the firmament till he reached the level of the sea, whose waves he skimmed like a cormorant that flies fishing every hole and corner of the ocean, and drenching its thick plumage in the spray. He flew and flew over many a weary wave, but when at last he got to the island which was his journey’s end, he left the sea and went on by land till he came to the cave where the nymph Calypso lived.

G) Homeric Hymn to Hermes 13-18: And then she bore a child of many turns [polutropos], crafty of counsel, a robber, a driver of cattle, a leader of dreams, a watcher at night, a thief at the gates... Born at dawn, at mid-day he played the lyre, in the evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo.
Part II: The Khāris of the Phaeacians
A) Odyssey 6.255-272: “Stranger,” said she, “rise and let us be going back to the town; I will introduce you at the house of my excellent father, where I can tell you that you will meet all the best people among the Phaeacians. But be sure and do as I bid you, for you seem to be a sensible person. As long as we are going past the fields - and farm lands, follow briskly behind the wagon along with the maids and I will lead the way myself. Presently, however, we shall come to the town, where you will find a high wall running all round it, and a good harbor on either side with a narrow entrance into the city, and the ships will be drawn up by the roadside, for every one has a place where his own ship can lie. You will see the market place with a temple of Poseidon in the middle of it, and paved with large stones bedded in the earth. Here people deal in ship’s gear of all kinds, such as cables and sails, and here, too, are the places where oars are made, for the Phaeacians are not a nation of archers; they know nothing about bows and arrows, but are a sea-faring folk, and pride themselves on their masts, oars, and ships, with which they travel far over the sea.”

B) Odyssey 7.81-132: Odysseus went on to the house of Alkinoos, and he pondered much as he paused a while before reaching the threshold of bronze, for the splendor of the palace was like that of the sun or moon. The walls on either side were of bronze from end to end, and the cornice was of blue enamel. The doors were gold, and hung on pillars of silver that rose from a floor of bronze, while the lintel was silver and the hook of the door was of gold. On either side there stood gold and silver mastiffs which Hephaistos, with his consummate skill, had fashioned expressly to keep watch over the palace of king Alkinoos; so they were immortal and could never grow old. Seats were ranged all along the wall, here and there from one end to the other, with coverings of fine woven work which the women of the house had made. Here the chief persons of the Phaeacians used to sit and eat and drink, for there was abundance at all seasons; and there were golden figures of young men with lighted torches in their hands, raised on pedestals, to give light by night to those who were at table. There are fifty maid servants in the house, some of whom are always grinding rich yellow grain at the mill, while others work at the loom, or sit and spin, and their shuttles go, backwards and forwards like the fluttering of aspen leaves, while the linen is so closely woven that it will turn oil. As the Phaeacians are the best sailors in the world, so their women excel all others in weaving, for Athena has taught them all manner of useful arts, and they are very intelligent.

Outside the gate of the outer court there is a large garden of about four acres with a wall all round it. It is full of beautiful trees—pears, pomegranates, and the most delicious apples. There are luscious figs also, and olives in full growth. The fruits never rot nor fail all the year round, neither winter nor summer, for the air is so soft that a new crop ripens before the old has dropped. Pear grows on pear, apple on apple, and fig on fig, and so also with the grapes, for there is an excellent vineyard: on the level ground of a part of this, the grapes are being made into raisins; in another part they are being gathered; some are being trodden in the wine tubs, others further on have shed their blossom and are beginning to show fruit, others again are just changing color. In the furthest part of the ground there are beautifully arranged beds of flowers that are in bloom all the year round. Two streams go through it, the one turned in ducts throughout the whole garden, while the other is carried under the ground of the outer court to the house itself, and the town’s people draw water from it. Such, then, were the splendors with which the gods had endowed the house of king Alkinoos.
C) Odyssey 7.186-206: “Aldermen and town councilors of the Phaeacians, hear my words. You have had your supper, so now go home to bed. Tomorrow morning I shall invite a still larger number of aldermen, and will give a sacrificial banquet in honor of our guest; we can then discuss the question of his escort, and consider how we may at once send him back rejoicing to his own country without toil or inconvenience to himself, no matter how distant it may be. We must see that he comes to no harm while on his homeward journey, but when he is once at home he will have to take the luck he was born with for better or worse like other people. It is possible, however, that the stranger is one of the immortals who has come down from heaven to visit us; but in this case the gods are departing from their usual practice, for hitherto they have made themselves perfectly clear to us when we have been offering them hecatombs. They come and sit at our feasts just like one of ourselves, and if any solitary wayfarer happens to stumble upon some one or other of them, they affect no concealment, for we are as near of kin to the gods as the Cyclopes and the savage giants are.”

D) Odyssey 8.244-253 “We have an hereditary aptitude for accomplishments of all kinds. We are not particularly remarkable for our boxing, nor yet as wrestlers, but we are singularly fleet of foot and are excellent sailors. We are extremely fond of good dinners, music, and dancing; we also like frequent changes of linen, warm baths, and good beds; so now, please, some of you who are the best dancers set about dancing, that our guest on his return home may be able to tell his friends how much we surpass all other nations as sailors, runners, dancers, and epic poets.

E) Odyssey 7.308-328: “Stranger,” replied Alkinoos, “I am not the kind of man to get angry about nothing; it is always better to be reasonable; but by Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo, now that I see what kind of person you are, and how much you think as I do, I wish you would stay here, marry my daughter, and become my son-in-law. If you will stay I will give you a house and an estate, but no one (heaven forbid) shall keep you here against your own wish, and that you may be sure of this I will attend tomorrow to the matter of your escort. You can sleep during the whole voyage if you like, and the men shall sail you over smooth waters either to your own home, or wherever you please, even though it be a long way further off than Euboea, which those of my people who saw it when they took yellow-haired Rhadamanthus to see Tityus the son of Gaia, tell me is the furthest of any place—and yet they did the whole voyage in a single day without distressing themselves, and came back again afterwards. You will thus see how much my ships excel all others, and what magnificent oarsmen my sailors are.”

F) Odyssey 8.454-468: When the servants had done washing and anointing him with oil, and had given him a clean cloak and shirt, he left the bath room and joined the guests who were sitting over their wine. Lovely Nausicaa stood by one of the bearing-posts supporting the roof of the room, and admired him as she saw him pass. “Farewell stranger,” said she, “do not forget me when you are safe at home again, for it is to me first that you owe a ransom for having saved your life.” And Odysseus said, “Nausicaa, daughter of great Alkinoos, may Zeus the mighty husband of Hera, grant that I may reach my home and see my day of nostos; so shall I bless you as a goddess all my days, for it was you who saved me.”