

NAXOS  
AudioBooks

Homer  
**The Odyssey**

Read by **Anton Lesser**

POETRY



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<b>1</b>	<b>Athene Visits Ithaca</b>	7:18
<b>2</b>	Saying this, Telemachus led Pallas Athene into his home.	6:39
<b>3</b>	In her upper room, the daughter of Icarus, wise Penelope...	5:25
<b>4</b>	<b>Telemachus Prepares for his Voyage</b>	6:24
<b>5</b>	Telemachus spoke and soon dissolved the meeting.	5:26
<b>6</b>	<b>Odysseus Leaves Calypso's Island and Reaches Phaeacia</b>	6:50
<b>7</b>	As soon as rose-fingered early dawn appeared...	6:04
<b>8</b>	<b>Odysseus and Nausicaa</b>	4:52
<b>9</b>	With these words, lord Odysseus crept out of the thicket...	6:21
<b>10</b>	<b>Odysseus at the Court of Alcinous in Phaeacia</b>	5:52
<b>11</b>	<b>Odysseus is Entertained in Phaeacia</b>	6:16
<b>12</b>	<b>Ismarus, the Lotus Eaters, and the Cyclops</b>	6:04
<b>13</b>	'As soon as rose-fingered early dawn appeared...'	7:22
<b>14</b>	'As soon as rose-fingered early dawn appeared...'	4:46
<b>15</b>	'As he said this, he collapsed and toppled over...'	5:37
<b>16</b>	With these words, he pushed the ram away from him...	5:42
<b>17</b>	<b>Aeolus, the Laestrygonians, and Circe</b>	5:55
<b>18</b>	She quickly pointed out her father's lofty home.	6:19
<b>19</b>	After saying this, the killer of Argus pulled a herb...	6:54
<b>20</b>	Meanwhile, Circe had been acting kindly...	6:14
<b>21</b>	<b>Odysseus Meets the Shades of the Dead</b>	6:17
<b>22</b>	After saying this, the shade of lord Teiresias returned...	6:01
<b>23</b>	Alcinous then answered him and said...	7:28
<b>24</b>	'And I saw Tityus, son of glorious Earth...'	4:47

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<b>25</b>	<b>The Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, the Cattle of the Sun</b>	6:52
26	Circe finished speaking. When dawn came up...	6:37
27	But when three-quarters of the night had passed...	7:32
<b>28</b>	<b>Odysseus Leaves Phaeacia and Reaches Ithaca</b>	4:23
29	Athena spoke, and much-enduring lord Odysseus...	4:30
<b>30</b>	<b>Odysseus Meets Eumaeus</b>	4:49
<b>31</b>	<b>Telemachus Returns to Ithaca</b>	1:30
<b>32</b>	<b>Odysseus Reveals Himself to Telemachus</b>	4:57
33	Once he'd said this, he sat down, and Telemachus...	4:09
34	So the two men talked about these things together.	4:55
<b>35</b>	<b>Odysseus Goes to the Palace as a Beggar</b>	5:23
36	Meanwhile Odysseus and the loyal swineherd paused...	5:40
<b>37</b>	<b>Eurycleia Recognizes Odysseus</b>	5:00
38	Wise Penelope then answered him and said...	5:16
39	Odysseus Prepares for his Revenge	3:19
<b>40</b>	<b>The Contest with Odysseus' Bow</b>	7:08
41	After he'd said this, Odysseus went into the stately home...	7:12
<b>42</b>	<b>The Killing of the Suitors</b>	6:28
43	Then Agelaus spoke, calling all the suitors...	6:41
44	After Odysseus spoke, the two men went away...	6:50
<b>45</b>	<b>Odysseus and Penelope</b>	5:55
46	Penelope said this to test her husband.	6:42
<b>47</b>	<b>Zeus and Athene End the Conflict</b>	6:29
48	Meanwhile, Rumour the Messenger sped swiftly...	7:50

**Total time: 4:43:31**

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Homer

# The Odyssey

*The Odyssey*, one of our oldest, most popular, and most influential epic poems, was originally created in the eighth century (c. 750 BC) as an oral composition for public recitation. It was later codified in written form and became an essential part of classical Greek civilization and, beyond that, of the traditions of European literature. Later cultures in the West, from the Romans right up to modern times, have always found *The Odyssey* an astonishingly rich source of inspiration and delight. Apart from certain Biblical texts, it would be difficult to find another work which has exerted such a long and decisive influence on our culture.

According to ancient Greek traditions, *The Odyssey* was composed by the poet Homer, who also created *The Iliad* and a number of hymns to the gods. However, we

have no reliable evidence about anyone called Homer, and there has long been speculation about whether the name refers to a single person or to a group or family. The old notion that Homer was a blind singer almost certainly owes a great deal to the portrait of the poet Demodocus in *The Odyssey*.

In modern times many people have questioned the idea that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* could have been created by the same person. Given the very different visions of the world in the two poems and the much more sophisticated narrative structure in *The Odyssey* one can understand the basis for such a view. There is, however, no external evidence to support or refute such a thesis.

*The Odyssey* is, most famously, about the return of Odysseus from

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Troy, the sequence of adventures he has during the ten years it takes him to reach his home in Ithaca and gain control of it once again. These are not presented to us in a simple chronological sequence, for when we first meet Odysseus (in Book 5) most of his adventures have already taken place, and he has by this point lost all his comrades and his warrior identity, a fact which casts an ironic shadow over those earlier adventures when we do learn about them.

In the sequence of his adventures, Odysseus has to confront and deal with a wide variety of perilous circumstances, from storms at sea, to cannibal monsters, alluring temptresses, and seductive distractions. As a result his character is constantly tested in many different ways. Will he have the ability to cope and resume his journey home? His success at winning through is a celebration of the extraordinary resourcefulness of his character, which uses a full range of human qualities not merely to endure, but to prevail. In that sense, Odysseus is our

first great comic hero, a pattern for all those who follow.

The perils Odysseus faces, generally speaking, fall into three groups: the physical dangers he must overcome with wit, courage, and intelligence (e.g., the episode with the cannibal cyclops Polyphemus), the temptations to surrender to the attractions of exotic people and places (e.g., the Lotus Eaters, Circe, Calypso), and, most importantly, the desire simply to give up and surrender his body to the sea. But his wide-ranging heroic qualities, which include his ability to endure suffering and humiliation and to use deception and lies effectively, combined with his innate vitality and his fierce desire to get home, enable him to continue his journey, even in the face of offers of immortality in a natural paradise with a beautiful goddess. At the same time, of course, his enduring curiosity about the world and his desire to be known as an important man continue to get him into new difficulties.

One can see in the sequence of

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Odysseus' adventures a significant transformation from the warrior leader who fought at Troy into a hero with a different sense of priorities. For Odysseus gradually loses all the trappings of a warrior (his ships and men) and is finally tossed up naked on Calypso's island. From that point on, he has to create a new identity for himself in Phaeacia and Ithaca and, when he does so, that identity is based on a series of relationships with his servants, son, wife, and father. By the end of the poem, the warrior leader in Troy has become fully reintegrated in his own family and society, in a way that gives him an identity significantly different from that of a heroic Achaean warrior-leader who has abandoned his family and home to seek glory at Troy (in that sense, there is a strong sense that *The Odyssey* must have been composed after *The Iliad*).

This sense of a transition away from the heroic qualities celebrated in *The Iliad* is strongly reinforced by Odysseus' encounters with the shades of the dead warriors,

especially of Agamemnon and Achilles. The glory of these dead warriors, the poem suggests, is now less important than the ability to survive and enjoy life inside the peaceful human community. One of the most startling moments in *The Odyssey* comes when Achilles, the supreme example of the heroic warrior in *The Iliad*, expressly repudiates that old death-before-dishonour way of life and endorses the values of life itself, no matter how humble. And there are a number of moments in the poem when the Trojan War is celebrated as a great achievement, but one which Odysseus must now put behind him.

But *The Odyssey* is about a good deal more than Odysseus himself. For while he is striving to get back to Ithaca, his wife, Penelope, faces a crisis at home, as wealthy young suitors seek to win her hand in marriage and through their arrogance and waste threaten the future of her family and the life of her son. She has to deploy her own resources to make sure that Odysseus

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has a home and family to return to, and Penelope's skill in deceiving the suitors and her faith in her family are an essential part of the story, without which there would be no successful resolution. It is fitting that among Odysseus' final tests are the challenges Penelope sets up for him with the bow and the story of their marriage bed. In the same way, Telemachus, the only child of Odysseus and Penelope, must learn to act decisively and intelligently in order to contribute what he can to the preservation of his family and his home. He must, in other words, make the important transition from childhood into responsible (and dangerous) adult life.

The importance of home and family is constantly emphasized in *The Odyssey*, for the home makes possible the richest and most rewarding human interactions with others. The gods themselves repeatedly point out that violations of a person's home deserve the sternest punishments, and throughout the poem the conventions of hospitality, which dictate how one

should receive strangers into one's home and, conversely, how all guests should respect their hosts are brought out again and again. Such conventions make possible many of the most important joys of life.

Hence, we find in *The Odyssey* a constantly delightful attention to hospitable banquets, warm baths, excellent wine, entertaining conversation, fine singing and dancing, comfortable beds – all the finest aspects of enjoying human company. In the same way, the poem often brings out the aesthetic beauty of particular objects and places in a celebration of beauty for its own sake (a sight which often leaves the viewer lost in wonder). The properly functioning family, and especially the women in the home, who are the source of so much creativity, make such things possible, and those who contravene hospitality are a direct threat to these important values.

If the family is finally restored by the end of the poem, there is nothing complacent about such a conclusion

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(which requires the intervention of the gods). For we have learned that human life is a matter of protecting and honouring the home but also of having to leave home to learn about the world and gain the experience that will enable one to defend it. Odysseus, after all, will be continuing his wandering ways soon enough.

Tracing the influence of *The Odyssey* on Western culture is a complex question. Greek and Roman writers drew extensively on the poem and celebrated Homer's achievement as the greatest of poets. However, the Romans were deeply distrustful of Odysseus (or, as they called him, Ulysses), largely because for them he was far too keen to use deception and lies to win through (a characteristic incompatible with the Roman sense of virtue). The Christian tradition inherited this attitude. Hence, in much of early Western literature, Ulysses is seen as at best a knave and at worst an evil villain. Dante places him deep in hell (in the *Inferno*), and Shakespeare turns him into a cynical Machiavellian deceiver

(in *Troilus and Cressida*).

Such a view of Odysseus/Ulysses developed all the more easily once Homer's text was no longer available in the West. Hence, although Homer's name was celebrated and many of the famous episodes of *The Odyssey* were well known, the poem itself was not available. Once Homer's text reappeared in the fifteenth century, however, this tradition began to change, and since that time the direct influence of the *The Odyssey* has grown, especially in the last two hundred years. It is comparatively easy to trace the direct impact of the poem in many areas of our culture, from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to the popular culture in Hollywood (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) and on television (*Xena the Warrior Princess*).

### Notes by Ian Johnston

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**Ian Johnston** was born in Valparaiso, Chile, in 1938, and educated in England and Canada. He graduated from McGill with a BSc in Chemistry and Geology, from Bristol with a BA in English and Greek, and from Toronto with an MA in English. He taught for many years in the British Columbia post-secondary system: at the University of British Columbia, the College of New Caledonia (in Prince George), and at Malaspina University-College (in Nanaimo). He is now retired and lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia, where his main preoccupation is maintaining and adding to his internet collection of lectures, essays, and translations.



**Anton Lesser** is one of Britain's leading classical actors. He has played many of the principal Shakespearean roles for the Royal Shakespeare Company including *Petruchio*, *Romeo* and *Richard III*. His career has also encompassed contemporary drama, notably *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter. Appearances in major TV drama productions include *The Oresteia*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Mill on the Floss*. He also reads Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Homer's *The Illiad* and *A Tale of Two Cities*

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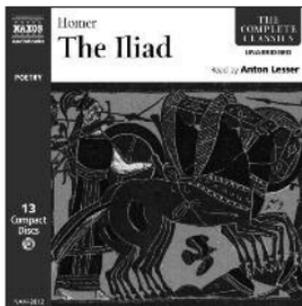
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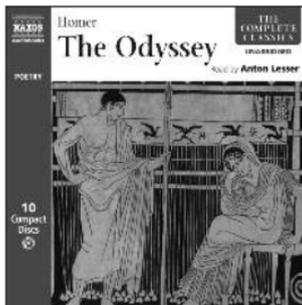
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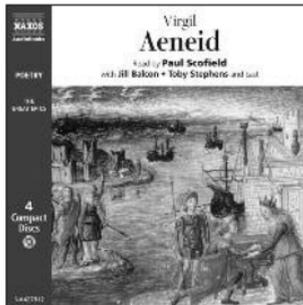
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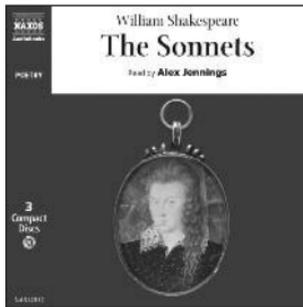
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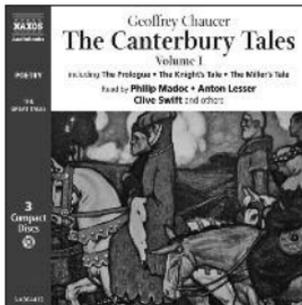
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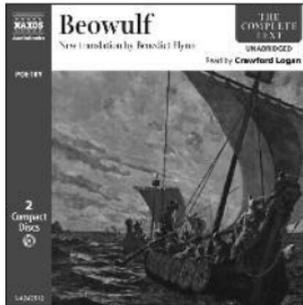
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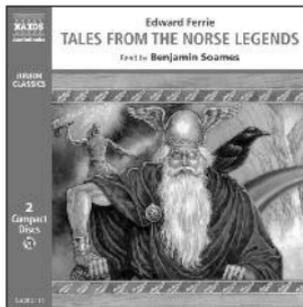
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# Homer

# The Odyssey

Read by **Anton Lesser**

A new translation by **Ian Johnston**

The Trojan War is over and Odysseus, the cunning King of Ithaca, sets out for home, his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus. It proves a long, 10-year journey fraught with danger: he encounters Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops, the seductive Sirens and is trapped by the love of Calypso on her all-too-comfortable isle. When he arrives in Ithaca, he has to contend with an aggressive group of suitors who have been pressing his wife to forget about her husband, admit she is a widow, and marry one of them.

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