What Pains are Fated to Fill Your Cup: The Role of Food, Drink, and Xenia in the Homeric Epics

Amanda Urban (Liberal Arts)

Prof. Scott Rudd (English and Philosophy), Faculty Sponsor

ABSTRACT

Greek mythology states that the value of xenia - or hospitality and friendship towards guests - is guarded over by Zeus, the king of gods. Often this guest friendship meant an exchange of gifts or the occasion for a feast. Fittingly, the Odyssey, the epic of a wandering man relying on xenia for food and shelter, features an extremely large number of massively elaborate feasts. The Iliad also has a fairly large number of feasts, often between characters who are already friends, showing that xenia was not simply a formality that fell away when people had forged a relationship. While the Iliad primarily concerns itself with the execution and the etiquette of war, the Odyssey explains the expectations of a man in civil Greek society. Both epics repeatedly illustrate the consequences of being a poor host or a poor guest, while also showing the rewards for those who do not violate the social code. The Iliad and the Odyssey carefully articulate the proper behavior expected in this extremely important social ritual.
The cohesive quality of ancient Greek society relied heavily on the tenet of xenia—hospitality and friendship between guests and hosts. It was of such great importance that the Greeks believed it was presided over by Zeus, the king of the gods. This crucial moral principle was often exercised through the sharing of feasts, wine, and gifts between guests and their hosts. It is unsurprising then that The Odyssey is rich with examples: Odysseus, the wandering man, must rely on xenia for food and shelter for the majority of his journey. The Odyssey could be read as a parable impressing upon the ancient Mycenaeans the normative principle that Zeus rewards those who show hospitality and punishes those who deny it as the poem has several examples of poor guests and hosts who are almost always punished. The Iliad is not as heavily reliant on xenia but also contains a fair amount of feasts, often between characters with standing relationships; the consistency between behavior with new acquaintances and long-time friends indicates that xenia was not a mere formality but a way of conducting all of one’s actions toward others.

The Homeric epics demonstrate what is expected from guests and hosts in war and in travels, with strangers and with friends. The Odyssey illustrates a fine line in the ancient Greek zeitgeist between indulgence and gluttony, which is completely foreign to the majority of modern cultures. It appears that the Greeks did not consider simply eating too much to be gluttony but instead frowned upon eating when it is inappropriate to do so. The Iliad does its part in amplifying the impact of violating xenia, portraying a ten-year war resulting in a plethora of deaths as a direct consequence of one poor guest.

Historian James Wright, in his paper “The Mycenaean Feast: An Introduction,” lists nine reasons for the Greek feasts that The Iliad and The Odyssey allude to the profound significance of:

1. Mobilize labor;
2. Create cooperative relationships within groups or, conversely, exclude other groups;
3. Create cooperative alliances between social groups (including political support between households);
4. Invest surpluses and generate profits;
5. Attract desirable mates, labor, allies, or wealth exchanges by advertising the success of the group;
6. Create political power (control over resources and labor) through the creation of a network of reciprocal debts;
7. Extract surplus produce from the general populace for elite use;
8. Solicit favors; and
9. Compensate for transgressions. (Wright 126)

The list seems to be missing several significant motives to feast that are shown in the Homeric Epics, as well as adding a few that are absent; this incongruity indicates a schism between the mythical and idealized Greece that Homer wrote about and the true Mycenaean society. It is reasonable to infer that the myth of Zeus’ protection of the wanderer sprung from Wright’s social necessities, but it is also reasonable to assume that a fraction of feasts took place for altruistic and religious reasons.

The Odyssey begins with one such religious feast devoted to Poseidon, and they continue to appear throughout the poem. In the epics, even feasts not directly initiated in honor of a god prominently feature a ritual animal sacrifice; while it is difficult to know for sure if this actually happened outside of fiction, it is consistent with the behaviors of many ancient cultures. The religious sacrifice preceding the feast was described in the most detail when characters wanted favor from the gods, as in Book One of the Odyssey when Athena says to Zeus “Didn’t Odysseus/ Please you with sacrifices beside the Greek ships/ At Troy?” (Homer 1.66-68) Feasting in the honor of the Pantheon extends even to feasts shared between gods, such as Calypso and Hermes in Book Five of the Odyssey.

The Odyssey clearly illustrates what being a good host entails and the consequences for not behaving as such. In Book Nine, Odysseus pleads, “Now we are here, suppliants at your knees/ Hoping you will be generous to us/ And give
us the gifts that are due to strangers” (Homer 9.258-260). Odysseus then addresses Polyphemus invoking Zeus' protection of the stranger and guest in the following lines. When Polyphemus instead begins to eat Odysseus' men, he adds “How do you expect any other man/ Ever to visit you after acting like this?” (Homer 9.348-349), which implies that Greek hosts eagerly awaited and hoped for guests. This shows a social networking aspect of the tradition that seems to go beyond the mostly self-serving reasons listed in Wright's article.

The plot of the Iliad revolves around xenia far more subtly than the Odyssey. The ancient set of poems known as the Epic Cycle, which survives only in fragments recounting, among other things, the initiation of the Trojan War. The section titled “Cypria” tells the story of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, father and mother of Achilles, and recounts the events of the judgment of Paris. Paris is promised the hand of the most beautiful woman on Earth, Helen, wife of the Greek Menelaus. Paris becomes a welcomed guest in Menelaus' home before running off back to Troy with Helen inciting the Trojan War, the conclusion of which is recounted in the Iliad. Every event of the Homeric epics is set into place by one man’s violation of Zeus’ most sacred commandment, relaying to the audience the notion that one man’s infraction upon xenia can end catastrophically, altering the course of the mythological fates forever.

Telemachus, who had not seen Odysseus since he was a very small child, proves himself to be the ideal host, when in Book Sixteen of the Odyssey he welcomes him into his home unaware that Odysseus is his father. He seems to be torn by his reluctance to let a guest into his house while it is filled with horribly rude suitors as he says “This makes my heart ache, Eumaeus./ How can I welcome this guest in my house?” (Homer 16.75-76). Yet he still welcomes Odysseus to stay with the workers unable to turn away a traveler while at the same time unable to make him susceptible to scorn from the suitors. Worn down by unwelcome guests, Telemachus is still kind enough to welcome, feed, and clothe another guest. On the opposite side of the spectrum Odysseus visits several creatures who completely disregard their duties as hosts. Often descendants of gods or gods themselves, they seem to think themselves above Zeus’ commands.

Polyphemus was punished for his violation of xenia, and Circe [daughter of the sun who was a sorceress best known for her ability to turn men into animals with her magic wand] was shown the error of her ways and came to pity Odysseus and his men, welcoming them as guests for as long as they wished.

The role of the guest in the epics is no less important than that of the host. The suitors vying for Penelope’s hand form a pivotal point in the plot and make the largest infraction against xenia and the responsibilities of the guest. They stay in Odysseus’ home, eat his food, and drink his wine without the permission of the host or his heir, Telemachus.

In Book Twelve it is Odysseus’ men who are deplorable guests. On the island of Thrinacia Odysseus’ men slaughter Helios’ cattle, disobeying orders, and violating xenia. While Helios was not a present host, the men were resting on his island, and they took what they had no right or permission to take. Zeus punishes them accordingly.

It can be reasonably inferred that it was the abuse of xenia, which was believed to be the determining factor in classifying gluttonous behavior. In the Iliad, it was considered far from gluttonous for Odysseus to feast twice in a night, because he was only being a good guest. It is the suitors and Polyphemus who are the particularly gluttonous characters, as they are examples of both a terrible host and terrible guests. As stated in Nicole Smith’s article “Food Imagery and Temptation in the Odyssey,” gluttony is almost always punished in the poem, and Odysseus is rarely the one to be tempted by it. It is his men, the suitors, and Polyphemus who commit the most egregious crimes against Zeus’ tenet of xenia.

Book Nine of the Iliad illustrates that the guest aspect of the guest-host relationship is as crucial as the duties of the host. Agamemnon hosts a feast for his ambassadors to Achilles, and Odysseus eats his fill, only to walk to Achilles’ hut, and feast again. In modern culture it would be perfectly acceptable to tell ones host that they have just eaten, but in ancient Greece the guest clearly ate regardless of how satiated they already were, showing juxtaposition between the modern
concept of gluttony and that of ancient Greece. Agamemnon’s feast also
encompasses several of Wright’s reasons for feasting, as Agamemnon feeds his
embassy in order to convince them to do him the favor of persuading Achilles to
come back to battle. This is in contrast to the feast in Achilles’ hut, as he asserts
“A larger bowl, son of Menoetius/ And stronger wine, and cups all around/ My
dear est friends are beneath my roof” (Homer 9.206-208), demonstrating another
crucial aspect of feasting that Wright’s list is missing—feasting as an act of
friendship and kindness. Achilles had nothing to gain by treating his friends to a
feast. He only wished to express his affection for them, and within the cultural
context, feasting was an ideal way of doing so.

Odysseus does prove himself to be something of a glutton in the Odyssey,
as he does not fall to the temptation of food unless it is presented by a beautiful
woman - in which case he is perhaps too eager of a guest for his own good.
Odysseus demonstrates a propensity to stay somewhere for far too long if there is
a woman involved, such as Circe or Calypso. In Smith’s article she observes, “For
Odysseus himself, however, his strength and god-like nature are beyond such base
temptations and he is instead prone to the double-temptation of exotic and richly
described foods coupled with a woman” (Smith), which is proven again and again
as Odysseus is repeatedly tempted not by food but by the women presenting it.
With the juxtaposition of Odysseus and his men, the text seems to subtly urge its
audience to take a proverbial middle road between disregard for hospitality and
being an overeager guest. Both Odysseus and his men are punished for their
infractions though, in the former, the punishment is far more subtle. While
Odysseus’ men suffered physical pain and death as retribution for their actions,
Odysseus suffers psychologically. Athena pleads with Zeus for Odysseus’ release
from Calypso’s island stating, “But Odysseus/ Longing to see even the smoke
curling up/From his land, simply wants to die” (Homer 1.63-65). In her plea she
illustrates the terrible misery of Odysseus’ self-sabotage in his journey home and
the gravity of the psychological torment he brings upon himself with his inability
to find middle ground.

Another role of the feast mentioned in the Odyssey has little to do with
xenia but is no less important. In Book Ten Odysseus briefly describes the island
of Aeolia, home of Aeolus. He says “He married his daughters off to his boys,/And
they all sit with their father and mother/Continually feasting on abundant
good cheer/Spread out before them. Every day/ The house is filled with steamy
savor” (Homer 10.8-12). This is an important aspect of culture that should not be
over looked. There is very little mention of this kind of feast in the Homeric epics
because both protagonists are away from their families, but here we see that a
family regularly feasting together indicated their level of contentment. Wright’s
view of ancient Greek society leaves out the familial structure accounting only for
the broader socio-economic structure. Another point that the epics make about
food comes in the form of Odysseus’ description of Polyphemus: “He was a freak
of nature, not like men who eat bread” (Homer 9.184), implying that the kind
of food one consumed was an indicator of their level of civilization.

While the Iliad subtly explains the etiquette of war, the Odyssey explains the
expectations of a man in relative peace. They show repeatedly the consequences of
being a poor host, and a poor guest, and also the rewards reaped by those who do
not violate the social code. Between the two epics, a myriad of relationships and
how to behave in them is portrayed in a manner that is still entertaining enough to
capture both an ancient and a modern audience. It cannot be determined whether
or not the epics are idealized or accurate views of Greece, but the Iliad and the
Odyssey seem to have set out to and succeeded in entertaining, passing down
history, and underlining the social norms of the society in which they were set.
Works Cited


