

O Uncle, Who Art Thou? Basil's adoption of identities from Homer's *Odyssey*

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The events of the Trojan War and its aftermath were composed by the poet Homer during the 8th Century BC. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were revered throughout generations as religious and inspiring texts during the Greek and Roman periods, and they formed the basis of the ancient education system.

However, although Homer's poems were always respected for their antiquity,¹ Greek philosophers and other intellectuals began to take issue with the way that the divine characters were portrayed in them, and writers criticised the lustful, devious and war-like nature that Homer's gods displayed.² Consequently, traditional readings of the poems were adapted to enable Homer still to be read, despite theological or moral objections. These readings were often developed by different ancient schools of thought in order to make the works consistent with their own philosophical or moral ideas. The Stoic Heraclitus wrote the *Homeric Questions* in order to defend the poet from charges of blasphemy, and also to present an allegorical reading of his works, which expressed the gods as forces of nature, and the heroes as synonymous with moral virtues.³

Of all Homer's characters it was the figure of Odysseus, and the poem detailing his voyage home from Troy after the war, which was most ripe for adaptation and alternative interpretation. Odysseus' personality, which was full of conflicting qualities (wise or cunning, eloquent or crafty), made him an ideal subject for later writers to laud or vilify.⁴ Through the efforts of Heraclitus and other writers, the *Odyssey* became a kind of Stoic *Pilgrim's Progress*,⁵ presenting the moral ideal of 'manly virtue' endorsed by that philosophical school.⁶ On the other hand, for the Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists, the poem took on a 'metaphysical dimension' as it became an allegory for the soul's passage through earthly hardships to its final spiritual home.⁷

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¹ Criboire, R. (2001) *Gymnastics of the mind: Greek education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press., p. 194.

² The most notable of these was Plato in his *Republic* 10. He states that poets should be banned from the ideal state since they do not encourage the citizens to be good when they fabricate stories about the degenerate behaviour of some of the gods. Plato was followed by other writers, and later the Christians used the immorality of Homer's gods as fuel for the arguments against paganism. (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.24, 2.31, 4.52-3)

³ Heraclitus, Russell, D. A. and Konstan, D. (2005) *Heraclitus: Homeric problems*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

⁴ Stanford, W. B. (1954) *The Ulysses theme: a study in the adaptability of a traditional hero*. Oxford: Blackwell. 9 considers different writers' opinions of the character. C.f. Also Horace, *Satire* 2.5 which focuses on a more negative view of Odysseus' resourcefulness. See also MacDonald, D. R. (1994) *Christianizing Homer: the Odyssey, Plato, and the Acts of Andrew*. New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press., pp. 22-23.

⁵ Stanford (1954) p. 121.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 6.

⁷ See Pépin, J. (1982) 'The Platonic and Christian Ulysses', in O'Meara, D. J.(ed), *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*. pp. 4-18., p. 4 ff. for a fuller discussion. Also MacDonald (1994) p. 23.

In amongst this long line of allegorisers and adaptors stood the Christians, who had always had a complicated relationship with Classical literature. However, as Homer's poetry was always the staple reading material for schoolboys,⁸ they had to address the question of what to do with unsuitable stories, and 'since there was no avoiding Homer, the church decided to tame him'.⁹ This 'taming' sometimes took the form of proving that Homer was not original in things he wrote, but rather plagiarized from Moses, thereby expounding the Christian message but in a corrupted way.¹⁰ In addition, some writers interpreted episodes in the poems as a means of explaining Christian truths.¹¹

This paper is concerned with the way that Basil of Caesarea read and adapted the poetry of Homer, in particular Homer's *Odyssey*. Basil was a bishop of Caesarea in the 4th Century AD,¹² and came from a Christian family. He was, however, well-educated in the Classics, having received the traditional education of his day.¹³ He often alluded to literature in his correspondence with Christians and pagans alike, and Jerome includes him in his list of those writers who can be admired both for their 'secular erudition' and their 'knowledge of the scriptures'.¹⁴

Basil's address *To the Young Men on the Value of Pagan Literature*,¹⁵ written ostensibly to his nephews about the best way for them to benefit from their education, contains several references to the *Odyssey*, and Basil appears to identify with different characters as he takes on different roles in his interpretation of the poem.

⁸ Criboire (2001) p. 140.

⁹ MacDonald (1994) p. 20. The debate about whether pagan literature was appropriate for Christians had been considered throughout the life of the church. Arguments were made on both sides, with Tertullian conceding that children had to go to school and read the dangerous works, but Christians could not teach them (*On Idolatry* 10), while Clement of Alexandria advocated the study of Classics as a preparation for Biblical studies to follow (e.g. *Stromata* 1.5, 7.3). Whatever their position, the truth was that the Church Fathers were actually steeped in knowledge of pagan literature, which naturally affected their articulation of Christian doctrine. (See Angelov, D. G. (2009) 'Emperors and Patriarchs as ideal children and adolescents: literary conventions and cultural expectations', in Talbot, A.-M. M. and Papaconstantinou, A. (eds) *Becoming Byzantine: children and childhood in Byzantium*. Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, pp. 85-125.)

¹⁰ See e.g. Justin Martyr, *Cohortatio ad gentiles* 14.

¹¹ The 'Christianising' of Homer is discussed by MacDonald (1994) and Rahner, H. (1971) *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*. New York: Biblo and Tannen. 3. Lamberton, R. (1986) *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist allegorical reading and the growth of the epic tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press. suggests that the allegorical interpretations by the church and other writers were in part behind Julian's admonition that the 'Galileans' should leave Homer alone and expound the gospels in their own churches, since the Emperor was hostile to allegorical readings to begin with, and 'a Christian Homer was worse than no Homer at all' (p. 138).

¹² 370-379 A.D.

¹³ The basic curriculum and subject matter which was taught in schools did not change significantly from the 5th Century BC to the end of the Roman Empire. School-boys used the names of the Greek gods and heroes from mythology to practise writing letters, and their first reading exercises were taken from Homer's *Odyssey* (Marrou, H. I. (1956) *A History of Education in Antiquity*. New York,,: Sheed and Ward. p. 162). Basil would have read Homer and Hesiod as a boy, and he travelled to Antioch and even Athens to continue his education.

¹⁴ Jerome, *Letters* 70.4: To Magnus an Orator of Rome.

¹⁵ In Deferrari (1928) *Basil*, Vol. 4, L.C.L. The work was probably written towards the end of his life, and there has been much speculation about the intended audience. Deferrari suggests that the young men are seminary students about to enter the priesthood (p. 365). See also Moffatt, A. (1972) 'The Occasion of St Basil's *Address to Young Men*', *Antichthon*, 6, pp. 74-86.

Before he embarks on explaining how his nephews should read pagan literature, Basil begins his treatise by giving a justification for his address to the youths. In addition to citing family relationships and emotional ties, Basil states that he has ‘been trained already by means of many things’, and his participation in both good and evil circumstances has ‘made [him] fully acquainted with the ways of men’.¹⁶

These phrases echo the opening lines of Homer’s *Odyssey*, where the poet describes Odysseus’ experiences: ‘Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he learned, aye, and many the woes he suffered’.¹⁷ Basil seems to identify himself with Odysseus, since both men have experienced difficulties and encountered many types of people. A closer look at Homer’s initial invocation to the Muse will support this view as Odysseus’ efforts to get himself and his companions home can be seen to reflect Basil’s own aims:

*Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he learned, aye, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea, [5] seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades. Yet even so he saved not his comrades, though he desired it sore, for through their own blind folly they perished—fools, who devoured the kine of Helios Hyperion; but he took from them the day of their returning.*¹⁸

The purpose of Odysseus’ journey is to ‘win his own life and the return of his comrades’. In Homer’s context this means a return to the island of Ithaca, where Odysseus’ wife and son wait for him. For a Christian however, the word ‘life’ holds another meaning. In chapter 2 of his treatise, Basil exhorts his nephews that ‘we ... do not suppose that this human life is at all precious ... [and so] we complete all things as a preparation to another life.’ By this he means the hope of life in heaven, which he maintains should be the whole focus of Christian existence.¹⁹

Just as Odysseus was trying to save not only himself, but also his companions, so Basil presents his advice to his young relations in the expectation that they will embrace Christianity and eternal life. However, Odysseus fails in that aspect of his quest: ‘Yet even so he saved not his comrades’, because they ate the cattle of the Sun-god who then prevented the men from reaching their homeland. The whole aim of Basil’s treatise is to encourage his readers to take the Christian course when presented with something in Classical literature which could jeopardise their souls’ safety. Throughout the work Basil takes pains to imbue his advice with a sense that the nephews have autonomy over their actions, and are at liberty to reject what is

¹⁶ *To the Young Men* ch. 1. Unless stated translations of this text are my own.

¹⁷ *Odyssey* 1.3-4, trans. A.T. Murray, L.C.L.

¹⁸ *Odyssey*, Book 1, lines 1-9.

¹⁹ It has already been mentioned that the Neoplatonists and Pythagoreans read the *Odyssey* as a metaphor for the soul’s passage to heaven, and it is possible that Basil was influenced by this thinking. (See Rist, J. M. (1982) ‘Basil’s ‘Neoplatonism’: Its Background and Nature’, in Fedwick, P. J.(ed), *Basil of Caesarea: Christian Humanist, Ascetic: A Sixteen-Hundred Anniversary Symposium: Part One*. Vol. 1 Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, pp. 137-220.)

presented to them,²⁰ but he does also highlight the potential consequences if they do not listen to what he suggests, just as Odysseus' men did not listen to his warnings about the cattle.²¹

Basil's identification with the figure of Odysseus here is not the first time he engaged in such emulation. *Epistle 1*, written to Eustathius²² contains similar imagery. The letter was written in 357, shortly after Basil finished his studies, since he says that he left Athens and travelled around, seeking to meet Eustathius, but always missing the opportunity. He discusses the 'many varied experiences' which obstructed him, and rather than naming all the places he visited he refers to them euphemistically, as though wishing to conjure up a fantastic journey rather than just a factual one.²³

Interestingly, *Epistle 1* makes reference to a particular episode in the *Odyssey* which Basil makes use of again in *To the Young Men*. He states that he passed Constantinople quickly, 'as no Odysseus ever avoided the Sirens' songs'. This refers to book 12 of the *Odyssey* in which the hero had to sail past the dangerous rocks where the Sirens lived. He was warned in advance that these women would sing songs which lured sailors towards them, causing the seamen to destroy their ships on the rocks. Odysseus managed to successfully navigate this perilous part of his voyage by filling his crewmen's ears with wax so they could not be tempted by the delightful singing.²⁴ Putting the reference in this letter suggests that Basil, fresh from his student experience, was not averse to identifying himself with the pagan epic hero, even as he sought to make contact with a Christian clergyman and ascetic.

Basil's reference to the Sirens in *To the Young Men* has been much discussed by scholars because it seems to change Homer's text. In his discussion of poetry and the way that his nephews should read it, Basil states that when presented with examples of bad men the youths should 'flee these things, blocking [their] ears no less than ... Odysseus did, fleeing the songs of the Sirens'.²⁵ The problem is, while Odysseus filled his crew's ears with wax, he himself did listen to the music, although he took the precaution of having himself tied to his ship's mast so as to avoid the lure of the witches' words.²⁶

²⁰ Many of Basil's opening statements convey the notion that the nephews have a choice: he tells them that his words will be useful to them 'having chosen it for yourself', and 'if you will freely receive my words' they will show themselves to be the sensible characters (ch. 1). Indeed, the very fact that he addresses the students directly rather than their parents or teachers, as is the usual technique in such treatises, suggests that he credits them with the ability to make decisions. (in contrast see e.g. John Chrysostom, *Address on Vainglory and the Right Way to bring up Children*, in Laistner (1951) or Plutarch, *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry*, in *Moralia*, Vol. 1, trans. F. C. Babbitt, L.C.L.)

²¹ *Odyssey* 12.320 ff. Basil's paraphrase of Hesiod, *Works and Days* 293-97 in ch. 1 warns the youths that they are good-for-nothing if they ignore the sensible advice given to them, and in ch. 10 he hopes they will not be like the sick who fall so far into melancholy that they will not even see doctors when the medics come to visit them.

²² Probably Eustathius of Sebaste, a Christian ascetic who was one of the founders of monasticism in Asia Minor. However, the Byzantine editors of the letters suggested that Basil could be addressing a pagan because of his reference to 'Fate'.

²³ 'I hastened past the city on the Hellespont ... I marvelled at Asia's wonders ... hurried on toward the mothercity' etc. *Letter 1*, trans. R. Deferrari, L.C.L.

²⁴ *Odyssey* 12.37-200.

²⁵ *To the Young Men* ch. 4.

²⁶ A full discussion of the reasoning behind this change in text is beyond the scope of the present paper, but see e.g. Fortin's argument that Basil deliberately chose to represent the story inaccurately so as to suggest that Christian and pagan virtue are incompatible. (Fortin, E. L. (1981) 'Christianity and

Since Basil was a devoted student of pagan literature in his youth, his identification with Odysseus can enable him to be a role model for his nephews, as the man who can have an encounter with pagan literature, but go on his way unharmed, with his soul intact.²⁷

However, from a different perspective, Basil can be seen to take on another role from the *Odyssey*: that of the witch Circe.²⁸ If the Sirens' songs stand for the dangers in literature, then just as Circe warns Odysseus and advises him how to listen to the song safely, so Basil highlights the potential harm for the youths in studying their school-texts, and so forearms them against the immoral things they will encounter.

Both Circe and Basil offer their advice in a similar manner. Circe tells Odysseus, 'I will point out the way',²⁹ while Basil informs his nephews that he will 'show [them] ... the safest road'.³⁰

Circe also states that once Odysseus has successfully negotiated his way past the Sirens she will be unable to help him.³¹ Basil, although he maintains that he will continue to give his nephews advice throughout his life,³² is not really comprehensive in his exposition of Classical literature in this treatise. He essentially lays down principles by which the youths will be able to steer their way through their school lessons, keeping their Christian souls free from the taint of paganism and immorality. He anticipates that by continued association with his nephews he will be able to model the lifestyle he wishes them to aspire to.

Finally, Basil takes on the role of expounder of Homer in his address. He tells the youths that he has heard a teacher say that 'all poetry of Homer is a praise of virtue',³³ and relates the episode of Odysseus landing in Phaeacia as evidence for this fact. By saying this he predisposes his nephews to look for the good in Homer's poetry, while at the same time he has highlighted the potential bad elements and given them the means to avoid the dangers.

Hellenism in Basil the Great's Address Ad Adulescentes', in Blumenthal, H. J. and Markus, R. A. (eds) *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought, Essays in Honour of A. H. Armstrong* London: Variorum Publications, pp. 189-203.). Vredeveld, H. (2001) "'Deaf as Ulysses to the Siren's Song": The Story of a Forgotten Topos', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54, (3), pp. 846-882. suggests that the topos had become proverbial by this point, and Basil's reference here was adopted by later writers. The idea could be given credence by the fact that the reference in *Epistle 1* is the same. C.f. Plutarch, *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry (Moralia 15d)* for a similar episode, which makes reference to the 'Ithacans' who stopped their ears with wax, but does not mention Odysseus by name.

²⁷ This idea has increased resonance considering that despite his great learning, Basil rejected the successful secular career which was open to him, and instead chose to adopt an ascetic lifestyle before becoming a clergyman. Odysseus, likewise, was offered worldly fame and wisdom by the Sirens, but the pull of his homeland was of greater importance.

²⁸ *Odyssey* 12.

²⁹ *Odyssey* 12.25-7 ('I will point out the way and declare to you each thing, in order that ye may not suffer pain and woes through wretched ill-contriving either by sea or on land.')

³⁰ *To the Young Men* ch. 1.

³¹ 'I shall not fully say on which side thy course is to lie', *Odyssey* 12.56.

³² *To the Young Men* ch. 10.

³³ *To the Young Men* ch. 5. Wilson, N. G. (1975) *Saint Basil on the Value of Greek Literature*. London: Duckworth. p. 52 suggests that Basil may be referring to Libanius here, although the identity is by no means certain.

Basil does not choose to create a complete allegory of Homer's *Odyssey* to enable his nephews to read the poem with impunity, but instead he takes those parts which he considers beneficial and uses them for his own ends. He also implicitly identifies himself with certain characters, adapting his role as teacher, guide and epic hero role-model to try to preserve his nephews' souls and bring them to their heavenly home.

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