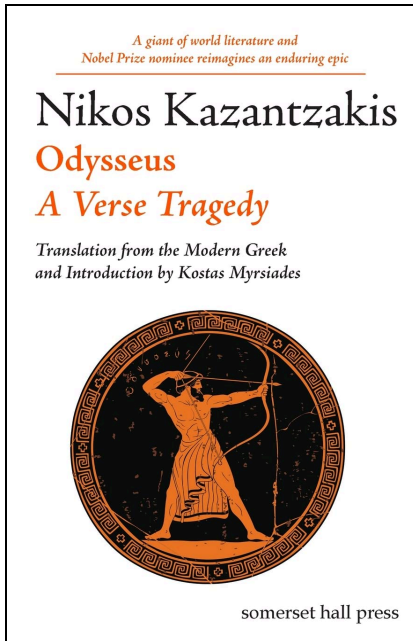


Odysseus: A Verse Tragedy

A play by Nikos Kazantzakis

Translated by Kostas Myrsiades



Νίκος Καζαντζάκης:

- b.1883 in Heraklion, Crete (Ottoman: Kandiye)
- Modern Greek writer: plays, novels, poetry, essays, translations, travel writing
- Wrote novel adapted into movie *Zorba the Greek* (1964)
- Translated the Iliad, Odyssey into modern Greek

Historical Context:

- Greek (1832) & Cretan Independence
- Rebordering former Ottoman territories, nationalism
- wrote *Odysseus* during and after WWI
- Translated the Iliad during WWII

Odysseus:

- Published in 1922, revised 1955
- Recounts events of Books 13-22

- Concludes as Odysseus is about to kill the suitors
- Characters from Homer and original to play
- Prominent themes: Fate vs. Freewill
- Divided into two acts:
 - I: set in Eumaeus's hut
 - II: set in Odysseus's palace

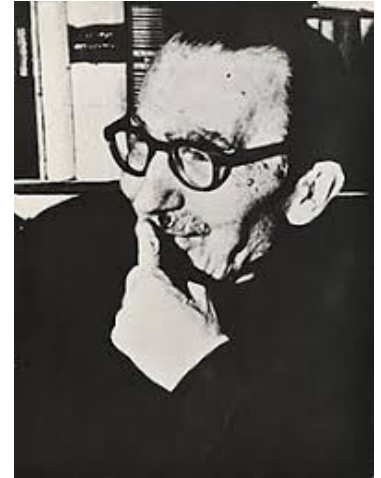
Summary:

Part I:

- Penelope receives dreams from Aphrodite, prompted to hold a contest to find a husband amongst the suitors
- Odysseus returns in disguise, encounters Eurynome/Athena
- Goes to Eumaeus's hut, claims to be Daedalus
- Laertes walks past hut, Odysseus tells him his son will soon return
- Telemachus returns, recounts visiting Sparta and seeing Helen
- Odysseus convinces Telemachus to plot against the suitors

Part II:

- Beggar/Odysseus enters to beg for food from the suitors
- The contest for Penelope's hand begins,
- Telemachus conspires with Odysseus, Telemachus renounces dependence on the father, Odysseus reveals his identity
- Odysseus offers libation to Athena, her altar fire spontaneously ignites
- Odysseus strings his bow, reveals his true identity



“I’m Odysseus; my trusty bow/ recognizes me, and in my hands, it longs for action./ Exultingly, the bowstring hums like a swallow. /In my ponderous hands, death brings/ peace like a thunderbolt in the hands of justice.” (Kazantzakis, 185)

Reception Studies:

Appropriation: taking an ancient image or text and using it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices (explicitly or implicitly)

- Kazantzakis uses the story of Odysseus’s homecoming to communicate his perspective on the personhood and national identity, as well as how they intersect
- Kazantzakis’s Odysseus is imbued with philosophies contradictory to those of Homeric Greece due to the influence of the author’s worldview, which in turn was shaped by the shifting geopolitics and philosophies of the period.
- Including *Odysseus*, many of Kazantzakis’s works explore experience of human suffering, and how to deal with suffering. (contrasting the rational vs. irrational self)

Themes:

Fate vs. Freewill

- Theme mostly discussed through the character of Odysseus
- Odysseus proclaims action is part of what makes a man, and is the only way to achieve a higher purpose, condemns inaction/resignation to fate
- Slightly altered relationship with Athena: less of divine intervention as it is divine inspiration/ guidance [Athena: “It’s time to cast your willpower/ like a spear on Fate’s scale,/and it will tip your way,/ since mortal’s heart holds the reins.” (64)]
- Fear of fate, Odysseus’ lack of this fear (possibly hubristic?)

Rational vs. Irrational self

- Athena vs. Aphrodite (Aphrodite does not appear as a character, Athena does)
- Suitors and Aphrodite
- Penelope and Aphrodite → devotion out of fear
- How the mind and control over oneself aid humanity’s “ascension to Olympos”, and ability to “surpass mortality” (enlightenment through suffering)
 - Odysseus: “Heroic deeds I find overtly selfish;/ gods and men shudder at the mind/ that wisely looks both ways/ and holds life and death the same./ Speak unflinchingly goddess of new trials/ unleashed to be numbered among my own.” (71)
- Indulging in earthly pleasures because it is an easier way to deal with the horrors (escapism)

Stages of life/immortality through lineage:

- Laertes, Odysseus, Telemachus
- Telemachus must renounce his dependence on his father for Odysseus to reveal himself to his son - self sufficiency
- Laertes and cognitive decline in old age, Athena describes Laertes to be “an infant again”(74), and the improvement of his condition once Odysseus returns
- Odysseus descriptions of Ithaka, as land of his ancestors, that hold his ancestors graves
- Other older characters conveying wisdom/prophecy: Eurycleia and Eumaeus

Works Cited

- 1.Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily R. Wilson, W.W. Norton & Company, 2018.
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- 3.Myrsiades, Kostas. “A Reading of Nikos Kazantzakis’s *Odysseus: A Verse Tragedy*.” *Odysseus: A Verse Tragedy*, Somerset Hall Press, Boston, MA, 2022, pp. 17–48.
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- 5.“Níkos Kazantzákis.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 20 July 1998, www.britannica.com/biography/Nikos-Kazantzakis.
- 6.“War of Greek Independence.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 1 Mar. 2025, www.britannica.com/event/War-of-Greek-Independence.

Images

[*Portrait of Nikos Kazantzakis*](#). Heraklion, Crete.

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