

# Odysseus in Democratic Athens

## Aara Suksi, Classical Studies

### Blinding of Polyphemus

Amphora. (675-650 BC)



### Blinding of Polyphemus

Late fifth-century Calyx-Krater



### The Reception of a Hero

- This project explores the varied forms in which the early Homeric epic hero Odysseus re-appears in the culture of democratic Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.
- During this period, the Athenian democracy maintained a remarkable stability in the midst of enormous stresses.

### Mass and Elite

- A fragile harmony of diverse socio-political tensions bound, on the one hand, the egalitarian interests of the majority of citizens and, on the other, the opposing concerns of an aristocracy recently deprived of exclusive access to privilege, but still vital to the existence of the *polis*.
- These tensions of course resonate in the city's cultural products.

### Odyssean *polytropia*

- An important vehicle for expressing and reflecting on this ideological dynamic is the Athenian revision of traditional myths and their heroes.
- Odysseus' most defining quality in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is his *polytropia* or flexibility.
- His many-faceted character may reflect and mediate many different and even conflicting values and concerns.

### Odysseus & Athens

- Like Odysseus, Athens itself was characterized by its own writers, for better or for worse, as versatile and polytropic. The city and the hero share qualities of resourcefulness, eloquence, enterprise, and adaptability.
- Like Odysseus, Athens in texts from the Athenian democracy is sometimes admired as a model of culture and civilization for the rest of the world, at others reviled for blood-thirsty ambition.
- The terms used in this debate about the *polis* are often the same ones used in conflicting presentations of the hero.

### Odysseus: a contested figure

- Just as a main feature of Odysseus' traditional *character* is his versatility, so too his *characterization* by writers in the culture of democratic Athens appears in many different forms.
- We thus find him being presented as a civic hero in some texts, while in others, even within the corpus of the same author he is portrayed as a fast-talking and opportunistic villain (e.g. Compare him in Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*).

### Tragedy and Philosophy

- My book focuses mostly on Odysseus' appearances as a character in Greek tragedy, a cultural product of the Athenian democracy and its institutions, directed at an audience made up of all sectors of the voting public.
- For comparison, I also consider Plato's diverse uses of Odysseus as a mythological example in a number of his dialogues, texts which are written exclusively for an audience which is arguably much more elitist in its interests than the majority of spectators in the Athenian theatre.

### Terms of Debate

- The divergent characterizations of Odysseus in texts from democratic Athens have long been problematic for scholars of Greek literature.
- The interpretation of his contradictory presentations as a reflection of conflicting ideological concerns in Athens offers a new response to this problem.
- Such an interpretation also sheds light on some of the key terms by which those concerns are negotiated. These include: trade, persuasion, ambition, and education, along with their negative twins: theft, deceit, greed, and corruption.

### Other Current Research

- "Death, Goodness and the Lost Daughter: The Homeric Hymn to Demeter and Carol Shields' *Unless*"
- "*Sic et Europe*: Horace Odes 3.27"
- "The Robe and the Girl: Love and Death in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*"
- "Socrates and Marsyas in Plato's *Symposium*"