

NAXOS
AudioBooks

POETRY

THE
GREAT EPICS

Homer The Odyssey

Read by **Anton Lesser**



NA303112D

1	Telemachus in search of his father	2:11
2	Menelaus remembers	5:29
3	The suitors sport in the palace at Ithaca	7:54
4	Imprisoned on Calypso's isle	14:45
5	Nausicaa's dream	10:30
6	Odysseus arrives in Phaeacia	8:11
7	Alcinoüs proclaims his orders	8:42
8	Odysseus begins his story	9:12
9	Escape from the Cyclops	11:13
10	The Aeolian isle and Laestrygonia	9:00
11	Circe overcome	11:23
12	A canvas-stretching breeze to Hades	7:21
13	The shades of the underworld	12:56
14	Return to Circe's isle	13:48

15	The killing of the kine	7:18
16	Odysseus returns to Ithaca (prose summary)	1:32
17	Telemachus meets Penelope again	8:10
18	Odysseus begs from Antinoös	7:15
19	Irus, the arrogant beggar	10:56
20	Odysseus meets Penelope	5:44
21	Reassurance for Penelope	9:18
22	The dawn of confrontation	4:28
23	The trial of the bow and the rings	7:21
24	The suitors fail the test	7:48
25	The arrows find new targets and battle begins	13:46
26	Penelope receives proof	9:25
27	Conjugal endearment	9:48

Total time: 3:55:47

Homer

The Odyssey

The Odyssey is one of the two great epics of ancient Greece, the other being, of course, **The Iliad**. Of their author, Homer, we know almost nothing: he probably lived in the 8th century BC and it is almost certain that he composed his verse orally, its literary form not being settled until the 6th century BC. By this time, Homer's works had come to represent something like the Bible in the Judaeo-Christian tradition: they formed the artistic, moral and narrative basis of ancient Greek (and then Roman) culture. The two epics survived the Dark and Middle Ages, although they only became widely known again in the Renaissance period. Since then, they have been repeatedly translated.

The Odyssey tells the story of the wanderings and eventual homecoming of Odysseus, King of Ithaca, after the end of the Trojan War in which he had played such a conspicuous role – devising and carrying out, for instance, the winning stratagem of the Wooden Horse. The story is given in a cleverly varied form – partly consisting of flashbacks told by Odysseus himself and partly straight third-person narration: Odysseus' adventures are interwoven with the fortunes of his wife Penelope (at home

in Ithaca) and his son Telemachus (who sets off to find Odysseus just as Odysseus is about to return).

Throughout, human endeavour is mingled with divine intervention – for example, Odysseus enjoys the special favour of Pallas Athena, but must also contend with the wrath of Poseidon. Before he is able to reach his native shore, Odysseus is drawn into affairs with goddesses (Calypso and Circe); must outwit monsters like the Cyclops Polyphemus, and successfully evade the allure of the Sirens or the Lotus Eaters.

The second half of the story concerns the way in which Odysseus, disguised, retakes his own kingdom from the greedy suitors who beset Penelope: in this task, he is helped by Telemachus and two faithful retainers.

What is the enduring appeal of **The Odyssey**? First, there is the character of Odysseus himself. He is an interestingly complex figure in that he is widely admired by his contemporaries, brave and resourceful; yet he is also wily, self-seeking and capable of superbly inventive falsehood when the occasion requires. He is, above all, a survivor: he endures twenty years' absence

from home, and returns triumphantly to reclaim wife and kingdom – yet, as Tiresias foretold, he will not settle down but will once more set forth ‘to seek a newer world...to sail beyond the sunset’ (as Tennyson romantically expresses it). Odysseus, then, is the archetypal wanderer who speaks to that part of each of us that yearns for escape into the unknown.

The poem itself, of course, is the original adventure story, with its wide range of character, incident and setting, but its structure is cleverly controlled and its language haunting in its loving stress on the fresh, the beautiful and the awe-inspiring. Homer writes as one who looks at the world with a fresh wonder, where every dawn is rosy-fingered in its promise of new places and new exploits.

But **The Odyssey** is also full of sharp psychological insight – for instance, Homer’s depiction of Penelope’s pitiful devices for putting off the suitors; and touches of telling pathos – Odysseus, disguised, is first recognized in his palace by his faithful dog Argus, who is only able to wag his tail, unable to rise, and dies ‘as soon as he had lived to see/Odysseus in the twentieth year restored.’

Homer wrote in hexameters, while Cowper uses blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) for his version. Translations of

Homer by Dryden, Pope and others had been made throughout the Augustan period, generally using the rhymed couplet; but Cowper’s version seems to me to combine almost ideally the dignified music of Milton with the classical restraint and formality of 18th-century verse. In addition, there is a hint of the 19th century at a time when Wordsworth and Coleridge were already active.

William Cowper (1731-1800) was educated at Westminster and called to the bar in 1754. Bullied at school, he was subject to repeated bouts of severe depression which effectively destroyed his legal career and made his private life equally unsuccessful. This depression became strongly associated with his religious convictions, which made him acutely conscious of what he saw as his personal and moral inadequacy. He lived for some time with the Revd Morley Unwin’s family at Huntingdon, and later with John Newton, the Evangelical minister with whom he wrote some of the best-loved hymns in the English language (including ‘God moves in a mysterious way’). His best-known works are probably the discursive satires, such as **Conversation** and **The Task**, which display a sharp wit moderated by sensitive humanity and a love of the domestic. His translation of **The Odyssey** appeared in 1791.

Synopsis of The Odyssey

Book 1: The Gods decide to grant Odysseus a safe return to Ithaca. Telemachus is directed by Athena to seek his father abroad. Meanwhile, the suitors vie for Penelope's hand.

Book 2: Telemachus is refused a ship by the suitors, but is helped to one by Athena and he leaves in secret.

Book 3: Telemachus arrives at Pylus seeking news from Nestor of his father's fate. Nestor refers him on to Menelaus.

Book 4: Telemachus is welcomed by Menelaus and told that his father is rumoured to be detained by Calypso. The suitors lie in wait to ambush Telemachus on his return.

(This audiobook adaptation gives a prose summary of Books 1-3 and the first part of Book 4. The verse text begins at Book 4, line 379 of Cowper's version.)

Book 5: Hermes carries Zeus' command to Calypso that she release Odysseus. Odysseus departs, but is pursued by terrible storms sent by Poseidon. Eventually, he is washed up on the shores of Phaeacia.

Book 6: Odysseus is helped by Nausicaa, daughter of Phaeacia's king, Alcinous.

Book 7: Odysseus is well received by Alcinous who promises him safe conduct home.

Book 8: Odysseus is entertained by the Phaeacians. Questioned by Alcinous, Odysseus agrees to reveal his identity.

Book 9: Odysseus begins the history of his adventures, including the tale of the Cyclops.

Book 10: Continuing his narrative, Odysseus relates various exploits. His entire fleet is destroyed by the Laestrygonians, save his own ship and crew, who are driven to the isle of Circe.

Book 11: Odysseus tells of his voyage to Hades the underworld, where he meets the spirits of Tiresias the prophet, his own mother, and Achilles.

Book 12: The story continues with the adventures of the Sirens, of Scylla and Charybdis, and of the destruction by shipwreck of his remaining companions, who had eaten of the sacred cattle of the Sun. Odysseus arrives alone on Calypso's island.

Book 13: Odysseus finishes his narrative and is conveyed to Ithaca, where Athena helps him. Odysseus, disguised, repairs to the cottage of Eumaeus, his faithful swineherd, while Athena goes to Sparta to recall Telemachus.

Book 14: Odysseus is hospitably received by Eumaeus.

Book 15: Telemachus takes leave of Menelaus and journeys to Ithaca, evading the suitors' ambush. He arrives at Eumaeus' cottage also.

Book 16: Eumaeus goes to Penelope to tell of her son's safe return, while Odysseus reveals himself to Telemachus.

(Books 13-16 are given in the form of a prose summary. The verse resumes at the beginning of Book 17).

Book 17: Telemachus speaks to his mother, and Odysseus arrives also in the palace, unrecognised by all save his old dog.

Book 18: Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, defeats the beggar Irus in combat. The suitors all insult Odysseus.

Book 19: Odysseus and his son remove the weapons from the hall. He relates a fictitious narrative of his adventures. Odysseus' old nurse recognizes him, but he prevents her revelation of his identity.

Book 20: A feast in the hall, where the suitors are afflicted by Athena with a horrid frenzy and their destruction is prophesied.

Book 21: Penelope proposes a contest with the bow, herself the prize. The suitors are unable to bend the bow, but Odysseus succeeds.

Book 22: Odysseus, with the help of Telemachus, Eumaeus and Philoetius, slays all the suitors.

Book 23: Odysseus convinces Penelope of his identity and relates the true story of his adventures.

Book 24: Odysseus is reunited with his old father. Athena makes peace between Odysseus and the aggrieved supporters of the suitors.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside

**The music on this recording taken from
the NAXOS catalogue**

DEBUSSY La Mer/Nocturnes BRT Philharmonic, Brussels/Alexander Rahbari	8.550262
DEBUSSY Le Martyre de St. Sebastien/Images BRT Philharmonic, Brussels/Alexander Rahbari	8.550505

Homer The Odyssey

Read by **Anton Lesser**

Homer's **Odyssey** is the thrilling and moving tale of the wanderings of the hero Odysseus after the end of the Trojan war. For ten years he experiences storm, shipwreck and seduction as he tries to find a way home to Ithaca, contending with the wrath of Poseidon but protected by Pallas Athena. Meanwhile, his wife Penelope is beset by suitors who believe him dead...

William Cowper's 1791 verse translation captures both the touchingly human episodes and the adventurous sweep of Homer's original.



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*. Anton Lesser also reads *Paradise Lost* for Naxos AudioBooks.

"Better still is Naxos' four-hour version in which William Cowper's 1791 version is thrillingly read by Anton Lesser. It has a real beauty of a sort appropriate for Homer's epic poem."

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