

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Homer

QUEST

ILIAD Quest dominates the whole epic, for the Greek forces have assembled in the first place, as a quest team attempting to recover Helen, their lost honor, or—depending how you look at it—shipping control over valuable cargo passing along the Dardanelles. What took precedent, among these alleged motives, is by now part of the imagination that made telling about all this of world historical importance. A wide variety of ancillary themes, as one can expect of any war, flare out around the center. Achilles, arguably the most complex and deeply inward of the Greeks—he is, after all, the child of a goddess, and the lover of a serious hero, Patroklos—is torn down the center of his being by the loss of Patroklos, who has stormed fatally into the fray, representing Achilles himself, and slaughtered by that representative. The wild bull unleashed in him, Achilles pours out across the enemy lines, searching for his love. The quest he puts on the line, in his struggle to guaranteed the soul of Patroklos, is carried over into the fury that Achilles will soon focus on Hector. That final fury is pure quest to eradicate the foes of his own lover's beauty.

ODYSSEY *The Odyssey* is built around an individual quest, Odysseus'. Unlike the multileveled quest of the Greek army, to capture Troy and return Helen to her husband, the quest that pervades the *Odyssey* is built around one man's intense and protracted struggle to return home to his wife and son. That quest, which is the central theme in the *Odyssey*, is encased in a broad westward postwar world, which involved all the Greek forces from Troy, as they made their ways homeward. True it is, that the path home was studded with obstacles, which make for the richness of theme which pervades the Greeks' homecoming. It is not Odysseus' part to hurry his passage, for it is by savoring and overcoming them that this hero earns the right to quest. The picaresque in Odysseus' drive makes his individual struggle different from, say, those of Aeneas or of Dante (in *The Divine Comedy*), one of whom was driven toward empire building, the other toward overcoming himself into a cognitive spirituality, aligned with the higher insights of theology. The Odyssean picaresque carries inside it the potential for an irony at its own expense, for to yield to such temptations as the Laestrygonians, the Lotos Eaters, the Cyclops or Scylla and Charybdis, is to subscribe to a life fascination which was indulging itself at the expense of a lonely island queen, who was however as willing as her husband to do one day after another willing to do or undo life all over again.