

## The *Odyssey*, Part 2 by Homer

### Humanities Connection: Greek Gods

The Greek gods appear to be petty, judgmental, meddling, and prone to favoritism. They are also all-powerful, life-preserving champions of humans. In the myths, humans are seldom left to their own devices. Odysseus is a perfect example of a human who has one god's disfavor and one goddess's protection. The following information on Greek gods and goddesses will explain why certain gods took favor on Odysseus and why others wished him ill.

There is said to be a dwelling high atop a peak in the Olympus mountains of northeastern Greece. It is the residence of Zeus, father of the gods, and his wife and children. His name means "bright," and he is the sky god—the "cloud-gatherer"—who is associated with thunder and lightning. He is the defender of all that is right and just in the Greeks' idea of a "civilized" world. The eagle and the oak tree were sacred to Zeus. Though Zeus occasionally meddles in individual struggles during the Trojan War, he tries hard to stay neutral.

Poseidon is the primary god of the waters, and of the sea in particular. He is a brother to Zeus. Instead of a thunderbolt, however, he bears a trident—a three-pronged fork resembling a fisherman's spear. The trident is Poseidon's weapon as well as his trademark. He is seldom depicted in art without it. In the myths, Poseidon is called "the earth-shaker"; he is the god of earthquakes, by which he expresses his anger. Little did Odysseus dream of the damage he did when he blinded the cyclops Polyphemus, who happened to be Poseidon's son. From that point on, Poseidon was relentless in thwarting Odysseus' efforts to return to Ithaca.

One of Zeus' children is Athena, Odysseus' helper throughout Homer's story. Athena is the goddess of wisdom, and is also known for her prowess. She shares a connection to war with her brother Ares, the god of war. She is often depicted in ancient art with a helmet, spear, and shield. In addition to this military connection, however, she is also the goddess of a range of specific crafts and skills. She is a tamer of horses, interested in ships, and patroness of women's household arts, especially spinning and weaving. Animals often depicted with Athena are the owl and the snake.

Another child of Zeus is Apollo, god of archery, music, and medicine. He is also associated with the sun—his job is to drive the sun's chariot across the sky each day. He is sometimes called Phoebus (FEE bus), which means "bright." Odysseus calls upon him just before shooting the arrow that wins the contest Penelope has devised for the suitors.

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the preceding information to answer these questions.

1. What qualities or characteristics does Zeus have or display that help characterize him as the king of the gods? Why do you think so?

