

Epicurus And Homer's Odyssey

Post by "Cassius" of July 24, 2026 at 10:34 AM

This below is going to be far from authoritative but the citations give a place to start answering the question: *How did the ancient Greeks view Odysseus? Hero, or deceiver? Give me ancient quotations with citations to back up your answer.*

(Chatgpt Search and Result)

The answer is **both**. There was never a single ancient Greek consensus about Odysseus.

In the **Homeric epics**, especially the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is one of the greatest Greek heroes. His intelligence (*mêtis*, "cunning intelligence") is treated as a heroic virtue alongside Achilles' strength.

By the **5th century BC**, however, several tragedians—especially Sophocles and Euripides—reinterpreted exactly those same qualities as dishonesty, manipulation, and moral compromise. Plato likewise treats Odysseus with considerable ambivalence.

So the ancient evidence shows a long evolution rather than a single view.

I. Homer: Odysseus as the ideal intelligent hero

Homer's first description immediately establishes his greatness:

Quote

"Tell me, Muse, of the man of many turns (*polytropos*), who wandered far after he sacked the sacred citadel of Troy."

— *Odyssey* 1.1-2

The adjective *polytropos* ("many-sided," "resourceful," "versatile") is entirely complimentary here.

Odysseus himself proudly declares:

Quote

"I am Odysseus son of Laertes, known among all mankind for my tricks (*doloisin*), and my fame reaches heaven."

— *Odyssey* 9.19-20

Notice that he does **not** apologize for his cleverness. It is presented as part of his glory.

Athena repeatedly praises his intelligence.

For example:

Quote

"You are the best of all mortals in counsel and speech."

— *Odyssey* 13.297-298

Later she says:

Quote

"Who could surpass you in every kind of craft, even if a god wished to contend with you?"

— *Odyssey* 13.330-332

Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is consistently Odysseus' divine patron.

Even in the *Iliad* he is admired.

Agamemnon says:

Quote

"No mortal is your equal in counsel."

— *Iliad* 10

Nestor likewise repeatedly relies upon Odysseus whenever difficult judgment is required.

II. Homer also shows his flaws

Homer is not blind to Odysseus' faults.

The most famous example is his boasting to Polyphemus.

After escaping, he cannot resist revealing his identity:

Quote

"Cyclops, if any mortal asks who blinded you, tell him it was Odysseus."

— *Odyssey* 9

This immediately brings Poseidon's curse upon him.

Thus Homer admires Odysseus but also shows that excessive pride can ruin even the cleverest hero.

III. Sophocles: Odysseus as the champion of deceit

By the fifth century BC the picture changes dramatically.

The opening of *Philoctetes* is astonishing.

Odysseus orders Neoptolemus:

Quote

"I command you to take Philoctetes **by deceit**."

— Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 101–102

Neoptolemus is horrified:

Quote

"Why by deceit rather than persuasion?"

— *Philoctetes* 103

Odysseus replies that lying is acceptable if it wins the war.

This is perhaps the clearest surviving ancient portrayal of Odysseus as morally compromised.

Neoptolemus also declares:

Quote

"I would rather fail honorably than succeed dishonorably."

— *Philoctetes* 94-95

Sophocles deliberately contrasts old heroic honor with Odysseus' political realism.

IV. Sophocles' Ajax

In *Ajax*, Odysseus is somewhat more sympathetic.

Although Ajax hates him, Odysseus eventually argues that Ajax deserves burial despite having been his enemy.

He says, in effect,

Quote

"I hated him while it was right, but now I pity him."

(*Ajax* approximately lines 1332 ff.)

This is one of the noblest speeches in Greek tragedy.

Thus Sophocles himself gives us **two** different Odysseuses:

- political manipulator (*Philoctetes*)
 - humane statesman (*Ajax*)
-

V. Euripides

Euripides generally presents Odysseus much more negatively.

In *Hecuba*, he appears as an expedient politician willing to sacrifice Polyxena for military necessity.

He argues essentially:

Quote

"The army's interests come first."

This reinforced the growing image of Odysseus as someone willing to sacrifice justice for success.

VI. Plato

Plato is also ambivalent.

In the *Lesser Hippias*, Socrates discusses whether the man who lies deliberately is actually superior in knowledge to the one who lies unintentionally.

Odysseus becomes the central example of the intelligent deceiver.

Rather than simply condemning him, Plato turns him into a philosophical problem.

Yet in the *Republic* (Myth of Er), Plato gives Odysseus an unexpectedly noble ending.

After all his sufferings:

Quote

The soul of Odysseus searched for a long time until it found "the life of a private man who minds his own business," and gladly chose it.

— *Republic* 620c–d

After a lifetime of glory, he finally prefers a quiet life.

VII. Why both pictures existed

The Greeks admired two different heroic ideals.

Achilles

- courage
- straightforwardness
- honor
- martial excellence

Odysseus

- intelligence
- adaptability
- persuasion
- strategy
- survival

As Greek politics became increasingly democratic and diplomatic during the fifth century BC, some writers began asking whether clever political intelligence easily becomes manipulation.

Odysseus naturally became the symbol of that question.

Overall ancient balance

Author	View of Odysseus
Homer (<i>Odyssey</i>)	Great hero whose cunning is admirable
Homer (<i>Iliad</i>)	Wise counselor and indispensable leader
Sophocles (<i>Ajax</i>)	Ultimately generous and humane
Sophocles (<i>Philoctetes</i>)	Master of deception and morally dangerous
Euripides	Frequently manipulative and politically ruthless
Plato	Brilliant but morally ambiguous; ultimately wiser through suffering

As to the Stoics in particular:

Display Spoiler

What did the Stoics think about Odysseus?

The Stoics admired Odysseus far more consistently than did the Epicureans. In fact, **Odysseus became one of the Stoics' favorite examples of the wise person confronting adversity.** They did not admire him because he won the Trojan War or because he deceived his enemies; they admired him because he endured hardship with intelligence, self-command, and perseverance.

That said, they did **not** approve of everything Homer says about him. Several Stoics explicitly reject Homer's portrayal whenever it conflicts with Stoic ethics.

Here are the principal sources.

1. Epictetus: Odysseus as the model of resilience

Epictetus refers to Odysseus dozens of times in the *Discourses*.

One of his favorite passages concerns Odysseus after being shipwrecked and meeting Nausicaa.

He asks:

Quote

"When Odysseus was shipwrecked and cast ashore, did he lose heart? No... He trusted not in reputation or riches or office, but in himself—in his judgments about what is in our power and what is not."

— **Epictetus, Discourses 3.26.33–35**

For Epictetus, Odysseus demonstrates that external circumstances cannot harm a truly wise person.

2. Epictetus rejects Homer's grieving Odysseus

One fascinating passage shows that Epictetus is willing to criticize Homer himself.

Homer repeatedly depicts Odysseus weeping for home.

Epictetus replies:

Quote

"Do not believe Homer if he makes Odysseus unhappy."

Then he continues:

Quote

"If Odysseus really wept, what was he but a miserable man? ... To desire what is impossible is foolish."

— Discourses 3.24

This is a remarkable statement.

Epictetus effectively says:

Quote

Either Homer is exaggerating...

or

Quote

Odysseus was not acting as a wise man at that moment.

For Stoicism, philosophy is the standard—not Homer.

3. Odysseus as the philosophical traveler

Epictetus also interprets Odysseus' travels allegorically.

Quoting the opening of the *Odyssey*,

Quote

"He saw the cities of many men and learned their minds."

Epictetus treats this as the philosopher's ideal:

travel not merely to see places, but to understand human nature.

4. Seneca

Seneca also admired Odysseus, though in a somewhat different way.

In one letter he dismisses scholarly debates over the geography of Odysseus' voyage:

Quote

"We have no time to hear lectures on whether Odysseus wandered between Italy and Sicily or beyond the known world; we ourselves are tossed about by storms every day."

— **Seneca, Letters 88.7**

His point is that the real voyage worth studying is the moral journey through one's own life.

Elsewhere Seneca interprets Odysseus' desire to return home not as mere homesickness but as fulfilling one's duties to family and country—a characteristically Stoic reinterpretation.

5. The Stoics and Odysseus' cunning

Unlike Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Stoic writers rarely celebrate Odysseus because he tricks people.

Instead they praise him because he:

- remains composed after disaster,
- adapts to circumstances,
- refuses despair,
- acts intelligently,
- survives without losing his dignity.

His famous *mêtis* ("cunning intelligence") becomes, in Stoic hands, practical wisdom rather than deception.