

# Media Portrayals of Migrants and Refugees: Public Opinion and Policy Reform

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I am not a policy specialist in any way, nor do I normally think of myself as someone who works on “the media”. I was honored to be asked to participate in this panel, and curious about what I might learn. I would like to acknowledge at the start that I am an outsider to this field, though I hope there is at least a chance that my perspective might be useful in some way.

I am a classicist, and I recently published a new verse translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*. I hope and believe that my translation itself, as well as my introduction, brings out more clearly than many previous translations have done the fact that this poem is itself very much engaged with issues of migration, diaspora, colonization, trafficking, and the repercussions of war, including PTSD as well as people forced from their homes by war and violence. These aspects of the *Odyssey* have sometimes been made somewhat less visible, because translators and scholars, in their reverence for Homer, have been eager to heroize and euphemize the poem, for instance by translating words for “slave” with such terms as “servant” or “maid”. I’ve used the word “slave”, and the word “migrant” too. I believe we can see more clearly what is both distinctive and similar in the Homeric and modern social worlds, if we avoid representational modes that obscure what’s going on, or that shut down critical response by bombastic or archaic language.

I would like to distinguish between two different ways that my project could be relevant for the question at hand, the question of media portrayals of migrants and public policy. First, the original Greek poem can itself be seen as a piece of media that presumably shaped public opinion in its own time, in archaic Greece. In an era at the dawn of literacy, poetry, music and the visual arts were the closest thing to a modern “media”. Secondly, we can and should ask how the contemporary work of scholars and translators responding to this archaic but still

ultra canonical poem might shape current public understanding and public policy.

Classicists would likely hesitate to apply the term “political” to the archaic period, since there was no polis and no fixed legislative system in archaic Greece. But we can see how the *Odyssey* is certainly invested in framing certain questions that are ideological and proto-political. As William Thalmann has argued (*The Swineherd and the Bow*, 1998), the poem can be seen to provide an idealized representation of master-slave relationships that serves the emergent aristocratic class. The archaic period in Greece was a time of massive cultural and economic change, after the fall of Mycenaean civilization, as Greek speakers spread out across the Mediterranean world, colonizing, fighting, enslaving, raiding and looting as they went. For Thalmann, the *Odyssey* is an example of media portrayals designed to serve a problematic ideological agenda: to valorize an emergent class system propped on a growing slave population. But in my view, there are interesting contradictions and double standards visible in the poem, in terms of the representation of slaves, migrants, refugees and the homeless poor -- four inter-related but distinct categories in the world of this text.

I think it may be useful to turn back to this very old poem, firstly, to remind ourselves that migration and “global shifts” are not entirely new phenomena, although the scale of the current global crises is of course quite different from that of the small pre-polis settlements of archaic Greece. And secondly, it may be useful to turn back to this poem to consider whether some of the psychology and some of the ideological tensions visible in Homer might also operate in our own media, and also affect our own policies surrounding migrants and refugees.

I will here touch on 6 points of the poem that seem relevant for our discussion.



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1. In Book 8, Odysseus has washed up on the island of Scheria, on his way back from the war at Troy to Ithaca. He asks the singer there, Demodocus, to sing about Troy, and Demodocus complies, and sings of Odysseus' own great accomplishment, devising the Trojan Horse with which the Greeks managed to take the city. But Odysseus responds in a strange way to the tale of his own triumph:

Odysseus was melting into tears;  
his cheeks were wet with weeping, as a  
woman  
weeps, as she falls to wrap her arms  
around  
her husband, fallen fighting for his home  
and children. She is watching as he gasps  
and dies. She shrieks, a clear high wail,  
collapsing  
upon his corpse. The men are right  
behind.  
They hit her shoulders with their spears  
and lead her  
to slavery, hard labor and a life  
of pain. Her face is marked with her  
despair.  
In that same desperate way, Odysseus  
was crying.

The slippage between the experience of the woman, the victim, being taken into slavery, and the victor, hearing of her plight and his own triumph, could go different ways. Does it suggest he feels guilty? Does it suggest an equation between his experience and hers? Do refugees suffer no less than those who rape them, enslave them or force them from their homes? What does the passage suggest about how people lose their homes and their freedom in the aftermath of war? Whose fault is it?

2. Remember that Odysseus himself is, for a good chunk of the poem, a kind of migrant. He leaves Troy and is blown off course, shipwrecked and blocked from his home. He says to Eumaeus (15. 343ff):

The worst thing humans suffer  
is homelessness; we must endure this life  
because of desperate hunger; we endure,  
as migrants with no home...

The passage suggests deep empathy towards homeless people and migrants. On the other hand, we're also shown that this speech is part of Odysseus' long-con: it's part of his disguise as a beggar, and part of his pitch to Eumaeus, to test him and weasel good hospitality out of his own noble slave. So, is Odysseus really a migrant, and are real migrants really pitiable? And if people are ever, even temporarily, migrants, how exactly does this happen, and how can it end? The poem again seems to suggest a complex, contradictory picture about how and why forced migration happens. On the one hand, as the mythological background consistently suggests, the Greeks/ the Achaeans suffered on the way home, and in some cases did not reach home, because they violated the temple of Athena. A bad homecoming (nostos) is your own fault; it's divine punishment for idiotic or evil behavior. The poem also suggests that Odysseus is Athena's favorite, and in certain respects, we are invited to view him as an admirable and relatable protagonist; he's rewarded with an ultimately good homecoming, because he has pleased the gods. Is this an image of good luck and the right patrons, or something like justice (as Odysseus himself, but not necessarily the narrator, assert)? Can being a migrant or a refugee happen to anyone, even the most heroic, strongest and smartest of us?

3. In book 14, we get a heart-breaking first-person story of trafficking and forced migration, from Eumaeus, the swineherd slave with whom Odysseus, in his disguise as an old beggar/ migrant, is staying. This passage shows vividly how anybody, of any original class and social status, can be trafficked into slavery and forced from his or her home. But it also suggests some



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representational collusion with the slave owners and slave buyers. The traffickers, the Phoenicians, are the bad guys (as are most slavers in ancient literature); but the buyer, Laertes, Odysseus' father, is the good guy who gives his slave a home that is supposedly even better than that of his original family. There is a further interesting contradiction surrounding the "right" or "wrong" way to fulfil the role of slave. Eumaeus provides Odysseus-in-disguise with good hospitality, showing that even a slave can be morally better than the rude elite suitors. But on the other hand, Eumaeus' story shows he's from an originally aristocratic background. So, are the "good" slaves the ones who aren't slaves by birth? Maybe it can happen to anyone, but only some (elite) slaves or refugees are "good" enough to fulfil the role in an ideal way -- in contrast to Melanthe and Melanthius, the "black flower" slaves who align themselves with the suitors -- submitting to the "wrong" masters and failing to bow to the right ones.

4. This set of double standards and ideological tensions is echoed by those surrounding the depiction of Iros, the real, career beggar, a real life homeless person, and Odysseus, the fake homeless person. We are told, at the start of book 18:

Then came a man who begged all  
through the town  
of Ithaca, notorious for greed.  
He ate and drank non-stop so he was fat,  
but weak, with no capacity for fighting.

Iros wrestles with Odysseus, in disguise as a beggar, and Odysseus beats him up and humiliates him, and is rewarded by the suitors with food -- significantly, an animal-stomach packed with meat (like a haggis). The conflict is over the belly, over hunger and class. The real beggar, Iros, supposedly deserves beating up, because his hunger and need are real, material, and therefore illegitimate. By contrast, Odysseus' hunger

for honor and for a name and for power is valorized by the narrative, even though it, too, is ultimately based on possession of material foodstuffs (the animals which the suitors are eating; the house, the furniture, the slaves, the wife, the bed). Whose mouths get fed? Who gets to be at home in the house? That question is correlated with, Who gets to speak? The elite warrior gets the best food, and deserves it, even when he's disguised as a beggar. Notice, again, the double standard: it's presented as a terrible black mark against the suitors that they are mean to Odysseus, when he's the beggar in their midst. But it's also not at all represented as a black mark against Odysseus himself, that he beats up the real beggar. There are two kinds of homeless/ migrant person, representing two entirely contradictory cultural notions about how to deal with what might be, in real life, the same population.

5. The archaic notion of *xenia*, hospitality, offers in some ways an inspiring model for how we in the wealthy countries of the modern world might aspire to treat refugees and migrants. For instance, when the prophet Theoclymenos shows up at Telemachus' ship, having been forced into refuge from his land after killing a man, Telemachus welcomes him, feeds him and helps him on his journey -- and in so doing, forges a bond. This is clearly presented as the right choice; Telemachus worries not a whit about the fact that his guest is a killer, and that blitheness proves his correct behavior. But notice: *xenia* only really works between men, and elite men at that (we've seen how exceptional the slave Eumaeus is, as a host; like a woman, he can never hope to reciprocate the relationship, because he's not likely to be able to go anywhere). Policy implication: maybe we need to think in terms of what humane policies about refugees, migrants and immigration might do for quid pro quo, in preventing war and forging relationships that may be beneficial in the future.



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6. How are migrants and refugees dangerous? When Odysseus visits the Cyclops, Polyphemus asks him if he's a "pirate". Odysseus skips the question, but the narrative somewhat confirms that the answer is a qualified yes: after all, he's just invaded, slaughtered, robbed and enslaved the population of the Cicones. What's the difference between a migrant and a pirate? Might they be the same? How many migrants are, like Theoclymenus, murderers at home, on the run? How many are, like Odysseus, city-sackers who've slaughtered and enslaved whole populations? How many are potential invaders of another person's home -- like Odysseus in the cave of the Cyclops, where he comes uninvited and maims his host; or like the suitors, who similarly enter uninvited and abuse the privilege? And the poem prompts us to ask: if migrants or refugees or immigrants enter your home uninvited, what are you justified in doing? Can you, like Odysseus, slaughter them, and claim the justice of Zeus on your side? What's the cost to doing that, in terms of the community -- like, the fathers and brothers who fight, in book 24, for vengeance for their dead boys? Is there a way to avoid having all your own place taken over by strangers, but also avoid an escalation of violence that may pose just as much of a threat to your home? I don't know if there's a policy answer in all this, but I do think that this complex tangle of issues is very much still with us in thinking about contemporary global policy.

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