

The Importance of Hospitality in Greek Mythology

In Greek mythology, a person is not treated justly unless they are welcomed into another's home. The relationship between host and guest is considered sacred, as the gods enforce the laws of hospitality and punish those who disregard them. By equating hospitality with justice, the gods ensure that people treat each other fairly, and with respect.

To humans, the laws of Olympus are clear when it comes to the host's responsibility - a host should welcome and honor their guests in order to give them justice. When Athena visits the house of Odysseus' for the first time, Telemachus is "mortified / that a guest might still be standing at the doors" (Homer 1:140-141). Telemachus understands that a host should never neglect a guest, as this is considered an injustice. Thus he goes out of his way to welcome Athena, telling her that she will receive "a royal welcome," (Homer 1:145) despite the presence of the suitors. Since the host is in charge of his or her domain, it is his responsibility to provide for his guests during their stay, even during challenging times. The host should also treat the guests lavishly, if they have the resources to do so. Clytaemnestra welcomes a disguised Orestes into her house, explaining that "we've all you might expect in a house like ours", such as "warm baths and beds to charm away your pains" (Aeschylus Libation Bearers 650-651). Because they provide what is expected, Clytaemnestra believes that "the eyes of Justice look on all we do" (Aeschylus Libation Bearers 652). To host a guest is a great honour, so much that Telemachus tells the suitors that he would "rather die" than see "guests treated to blows" (Homer 20: 353, 355), a sign of how sacred the guest is to his host.

At the same time, the guests who are unjust towards their hosts face harsh consequences. Aegisthus, Clytaemnestra's lover, was warned by the gods not to murder Agamemnon and court his wife, as he would be desecrating the house of Atreus. By doing so, Athena says that he "goes down to a death he earned in full" and that Zeus should "let them all die so, all whom do such things" (Homer 1:78-79). A guest that takes advantage of a host is punished accordingly. Thus, Athena has no love for the suitors that court Penelope while exploiting Odysseus' home - another injustice in the eye of the gods. Instead of stopping Odysseus, she goads him on, asking him how he can "bemoan the loss of [his] combat strength in a war with suitors?" (Homer 22:240). Menelaus compares the suitors to "newborn sucklings" (Homer 4:375) that take advantage of a lion's den only to be rightfully dealt a "ghastly bloody death" (Homer 4:378) when the master returns. The guest who dishonours his host can expect the worst of punishment, as the suitors are sent to Hades long while in their prime. Clytaemnestra's ghost, too finds she wanders "in disgrace, I feel the guilt . . . from all the outraged dead" (Aeschylus, Eumenides 100-104) because she conspired to kill the lord of her house. Those that break the laws of hospitality are doomed to suffer.

While humans are held accountable for their hospitality, the gods must be just with their suppliants, those who make heartfelt pleas to them. When deciding to help Orestes, Apollo explains that "I will defend my suppliant" for "the outcast's anger" is a "terror to gods and men." (Aeschylus Eumenides 230). The relationship between suppliant and god is akin to that between guests and hosts; violating it is unacceptable. The gods must consider any pleas towards them before dealing any kind of judgment. As Odysseus tells the Cyclops, "Zeus of the Strangers guards all guests and suppliants" and that "Zeus will avenge their rights" (Homer 9:270-271) if that person is mistreated. Even if the person has committed a crime, they can still come before the gods to plea their case. Apollo explains that "outlaws have rights that Zeus reveres," (Aeschylus Eumenides 95) since they are considered suppliants and can ask the gods for protection. Athena allows Orestes to seek refuge in her temple because "a suppliant, cleansed, you bring my house no harm." (Aeschylus Eumenides 88). By accepting even outlaws into their protection, the gods show fairness towards all and set examples for mankind.

It could be argued that the gods only enforce their brand of justice when it seems convenient to them. Zeus complains that "the way these mortals blame the gods" is "shameless" (Homer 1:37) while Athena asks him if he has "no care for [Odysseus] in your lofty heart?" (Homer 1:72). Despite the fact that Odysseus' house is besieged by suitors, the gods do not punish them immediately - it takes years before they meet their fates. The gods seem slow acting, even reluctant to deal with such problems. Athena takes up Orestes' case

not because he is a suppliant, but because the Furies will spread "the venom of their pride, plague everlasting blights of our land" (Aeschylus Eumenides 493-494) if they "fail to win their day in court." (Aeschylus Eumenides 492). She also stops Odysseus' plan to kill the army of elders, even though she had just helped murder the suitors. The Furies point out these inconsistencies, saying that "the laws of god may veer from north to south / we Furies plead for Measure" (Aeschylus Eumenides 540-541). But despite these contradictions, the gods actually have an interest in seeing justice dealt fairly. Athena's actions prevent Odysseus from slaughtering an innocent group of men and end the cycle of violence that plagued the house of Atreus. The gods are designed like mortals and therefore aren't perfect, but their actions show that their goal is to assist mankind, not subjugate it.

In a society that prided itself on democracy and free-thinking, it is no wonder that the Greeks embraced the laws of hospitality - they allowed for people to treat each other justly and without prejudice. Homer and Aeschylus understood the power of the laws, which is why they are referenced in the *Odyssey* and *Oresteia*. Perhaps modern society should think more like Menelaus, who tells his servant to help Telemachus because "of all the hospitality we enjoyed / at the hands of other men before we made it home" (Homer 4:38-39).

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