

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 honor, 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 dishonors 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.