

An Odyssean Parody: Epic Echoes in *Wind in the Willows*

Wind in the Willows is a richly layered tale owing much to a constellation of literary inspirations, including medieval ballads, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Malory, Tennyson, Browning, Lewis Carroll, and the Classics. Kenneth Grahame's debt to Greco-Roman epic is both overt and subtle. The book falls into a multiple of six chapters (here, twelve). The final chapter, tellingly entitled "The return of Ulysses," features an arming scene ("an irreverent take-off of the stock Homeric arming ceremony": Green 1959: 260) and *aristeiae* of the book's four heroes (the clever Mole, the confident River Rat, the wise Badger, and the impetuous Toad). Although many readers have long suspected "that Grahame intended the *Wind in the Willows* to mirror the plot of the *Odyssey*," (Gauger 2009: 284), it is surprising, then, that more has not been made of his debt to the Classics in general, and the Greek epic tradition in particular, aside from a small handful of scholarly articles, focusing on the liltingly beautiful "Piper at the Gates of Dawn" (Poss 1975; Harris-McCoy 2012) and Green's almost dismissive observations. "Most of Toad's adventures bear a certain ludicrous resemblance to Ulysses' exploits in the *Odyssey*," asserts Green who devotes a scant three pages to epic parody in *Wind in the Willows*. These allusions include plot, structure, context, characterizations, and verbal parallels.

The tale is essentially one of hospitality, adventure, and *nostos* (see Kuznets 1978) set within the framework of a strict heroic code. Mole leaves his burrow in search of glory, to return home briefly (chapter 5: "Dulce Domum"). And in the end, after a long absence, Toad must battle the stoats and weasels (transparently parodying Penelope's suitors) who are, as the Water Rat proclaims, "eating your grub, drinking your drink, and making bad jokes about you" in order to reclaim Toad Hall. The major players are nuanced creatures who dance around plot points and

character traits of the *Odyssey*. In “Wayfarers All” the Sea Rat recounts an alluring odyssey of travel and treasure, seducing Ratty to trek southward toward the sea. Only the intervention of the stalwart Mole saves Water Rat. “Grappling with him strongly, he dragged him inside, threw him down and held him”. The glassy-eyed Rat “struggled desperately” like Odysseus’ sailors hauled back to the ship after their encounter with the peace-loving, drugged-out Lotus Eaters.

Throughout the text, we see hints of Laertes, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and other secondary characters. Like Odysseus on Calypso’s island, Toad despairs of his imprisonment in gaol, and, like a post-Victorian Nausikaa or Athena, the gaoler’s daughter takes pity on poor Toad, feeding him and providing him with a means of survival and escape. Toad, in fact, is a parody of the *Odyssey*’s eponymous hero, a wealthy but fool-hardy animal who prides himself on his cleverness, as he never tires of reminding himself (or the reader). Like Odysseus, Toad employs disguises, persuasion, and deceit. But it is the diffident Mole who exhibits true Odyssean cleverness, much to Toad’s annoyance. The major characters, like Homeric heroes, are keenly aware of a code of etiquette, and the book’s action is set against a backdrop of adventure, feasting, and story-telling that parallels the formal context of Homeric epic.

In this paper, we shall explore Grahame’s allusions to the *Odyssey*, touching especially on the heroic code, story-telling within the framework of the epic banquet, and, as time may permit, the duality of Grahame’s representations of Odysseus.

Bibliography

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