

Ulysses and the Odyssey, Homer's epic poem, have been treasured throughout the centuries; even more so in our own age with so many books and exhibitions of artefacts from diverse periods illustrating the story of Ulysses. That is somewhat of a miracle. Ulysses' adventures continue to attract and delight the young in particular thanks to their exceptional freshness and modernity. So this miracle needs further explanation. Firstly, these adventures and misfortunes, as recounted by Homer, show Ulysses' extraordinary eagerness to know Man and the world. It is true that after the siege of Troy (the Iliad) Ulysses did not prolong his voyage by choice; his one desire was to get home to faraway Ithaca. But his voyage turned out to be terribly long and arduous, often perilous! So he travelled on through different countries, encountering people of all sorts and conditions and embarking on multiform enterprises. He had to face unknown or strange peoples, creatures and lands and he discovered fascinating ways of life, like that of the Lotus Eaters. His curiosity will cause him to undertake hazardous ventures deliberately, as when he lands on the Cyclops' island. As we sail with him along the length and breadth of the Mediterranean we are delighted to come across familiar countries.

If we look more closely at Ulysses' world we see two features rarely found together and which are remarkably complementary.

The first feature is the existence of a world of fantasy: Ulysses meets nymphs and sorceresses with supernatural powers like Calypso and Circe who can transform men into animals – and these creatures will lose their hearts to him. He will pass by the Sirens whose spellbinding song is fatal for unfortunate seamen. In this fantastic universe the reader wonders in each episode how Ulysses will manage to circumvent the traps set for him; and in this world of fantasy no-one is surprised when Ulysses converses on equal terms with Athena, the goddess to whom he is dear.

But even if the supernatural is all-pervasive in Homer's poem, we must notice the second remarkable feature of the tale: Ulysses is but a man, like all men. He is neither a superman nor a hero. It is true that he is brave and tenacious but he is above all intelligent, a man of twists and turns and a consummate warrior. When he fends off the sacred (the gods of Olympus) and the monstrous, his actions are those of a man. I love the first word of Homer's epic: *andra*, meaning "a man", and we can even read in the poem how Ulysses, in the face of misfortunes, wept, wept like any man. And when, after so many adventures, Ulysses reached his home at last, he found his wife, his son, his old serving maid and his dog Argos too, the first living creature he met on Ithaca, his native soil.

In this book, in this fantasy world, Ulysses is a familiar friend, a close friend, even today.

This presentation of the Odyssey by Emmanuèle Blanc will help to make Homer's epic familiar to all young readers: a worthwhile and fundamental achievement. Sharing one's life with Ulysses, even for a short time, does not only provide wonderful entertainment; it also encourages readers to make some of his qualities their own or at least to understand and to appreciate them.

The adventures of ULYSSES

Emmanuèle Blanc

Illustrated by
Christian Gace

With a preface by
Jacqueline de Romilly

Jacqueline de Romilly
Of French's Academie

