The Epic Tradition 2015-16: Assignment One

Write a brief comparison of these two passages. You should identify those themes in the two passages that are central to the epic tradition. You may also comment on any other features that are important to the epics you have so far studied.

Hand a printed copy of your commentary to your tutor during your seminar in week 7.

Iliad VI.212–31

He spoke, and Diomedes of the great war cry was gladdened.
He drove his spear deep into the prospering earth, and in winning words of friendliness he spoke to the shepherd of the people:
‘See now, you are my guest friend from far in the time of our fathers.
Brilliant Oineus once was host to Bellerophontes the blameless, in his halls, and twenty days he detained him,
and these two gave to each other fine gifts in token of friendship.
Oineus gave his guest a war belt bright with the red dye,
Bellerophontes a golden and double-handled drinking-cup,
a thing I left behind in my house when I came on my journey.
Tydeus, though, I cannot remember, since I was little when he left me, that time the people of the Achaians perished in Thebe. Therefore I am your friend and host in the heart of Argos;
you are mine in Lykia, when I come to your country.
Let us avoid each other’s spears, even in the close fighting.
There are plenty of Trojans and famed companions in battle for me to kill, whom the god sends me, or those I run down with my swift feet,
many Achaians for you to slaughter, if you can do it.
But let us exchange our armour, so that these others may know how we claim to be guests and friends from the days of our fathers.’

Odyssey I.178–194, 206–212

Then in turn the goddess gray-eyed Athene answered him:
‘See, I will accurately answer all that you ask me.
I announce myself as Mentes, son of Anchialos the wise, and my lordship is over the oar-loving Taphians.
Now I have come in as you see, with my ship and companions sailing over the wine-blue water to men of alien language,
to Temese, after bronze, and my cargo is gleaming iron.
And my ship stands near by, at the country, away from the city,
at the harbor, Rheithron, underneath wooded Neion.
Your father and I claim to be guest-friends by heredity from far back, as you would know if you went to the aged hero Laertes, who, they say, no longer comes to the city now, but away by himself on his own land leads a hard life with an old woman to look after him, who serves him his victuals and drink, at the times when the weariness has befallen his body from making his toilsome way on the high ground of his vineyard.
Now I have come. They told me he was here in this country […]
But come now tell me this and give me an accurate answer.
Are you, big as you are, the very child of Odysseus?
Indeed, you are strangely like about the head, the fine eyes,
as I remember; we used to meet so often together
before he went away to Troy, where others beside him
and the greatest of the Argives went in their hollow vessels.
Since that time I have not seen Odysseus nor has he seen me.’

The Epic Tradition: Christmas Vacation Essay 2015-16
First year undergraduates: Write an essay of 2,500 words on one of the
subjects below. A printed copy should be handed to your tutor during your
usual seminar in week one of term 2.
Honours-level students: Write an essay of 5,000 words on one of the subjects
below. An electronic version of the essay must be submitted via tabula by
noon on Tuesday 12 January 2016.

1. What functions do the gods fulfil in The Iliad?
2. Discuss the role of disguise and duplicity in The Odyssey.
3. ‘Epic codifies the values handed on in society from father to son, and the father-son
relationships in the poem reflect this.’ Discuss with reference to The Iliad and The
Odyssey.
4. ‘Mortal females in epic often appear merely to obstruct and confuse the endeavours
of their male counterparts, but if looked at carefully they provide a searching critique
of the value of those endeavours.’ Discuss with reference to the Homeric epics.
5. ‘Homer portrays the best sort of men’ (Aristotle). Do you agree?
6. With reference to both Homeric epics discuss ONE of the following topics: the
quest; the underworld; war; sex; the temptress.
7. Discuss the treatment of shame OR fame in The Iliad and The Odyssey.
8. Discuss the theme of journey and travel in one of the Homeric epics.
9. How does The Iliad address the issue of the justification or lack of justification of
Achilles’s anger?
10. What are the similarities and differences in the culture and value systems depicted
in The Iliad and The Odyssey?
11. How are epic heroes portrayed as being different from, and yet similar to other
mortals?