Odysseus visits Circe.

Why do they always have to go to Hell? Emma Cox 1991

One of the puzzling features of the Odyssey is Book XI, the Nukeia, which is strange even in a volume containing many traveller's tales. Is it just a convention that a hero must visit the land of the dead? Or does it have some meaning? We must start from the point that Homer - and, indeed, the great dramatic poets of the Classical period, and Virgil - were not mythographers and because they did not understand the meaning of myths, much less invent them, they included elements that would be familiar to their respective audiences, but are confusing inasmuch as they are out of context or out of order with one another. I believe that we can see in the story of Odysseus and Circe two themes; the first relates to a ritual which would be familiar to the Greeks and Romans in the times during which the literary works were created, and the second relates to the mythic content, which itself had historical validity and persisted until the suppression of the Pagan gods in the Christian era.

We will take the second theme, simply because it is older; in the introductory paragraphs to The Golden Bough, Sir James Frazer discusses the phenomenon of the King of the Wood which was described by the late Roman authors; put simply, there was at Nemi in Italy a grove sacred to the goddess Diana (the Greek Artemis) which was attended by a man, a strange mixture of priest and king, who could be killed with impunity by a runaway slave who would then assume his office - and the hazard that went with it; one assumes that only a runaway slave would think it worthwhile, the only reward being freedom from one kind of slavery, and the risk of death being ever present. The body of this monumental work is an exploration of related phenomena throughout the world in an attempt to make sense of this practice. Frazer implies that all religious ritual comes from rituals associated with the the agricultural cycle, even that religion is a by-product of agriculture and, without necessarily accepting all of his conclusions, we can summarise by saying that at one point in the development of man, worship, or religious observance (it is hard to find words that are free of modern connotations but which describe these ancient experiences) involved the selection of a man who, for a set period, or whilst he retained vigour (see Frazer), represented or personified the well-being of the community. At the end of his term he was killed - sacrificed - and his place taken by another, possibly his killer; in the late Roman period this practice was found at Nemi, and appears to have been quite random, really a hangover from an ill-remembered past. In some cases the priest/king married the "queen" and there is a reminiscence of this in the symbolic marriage of the wife of the Archon Basileus to the god Dionysos at the festival of the Anthesteria at Athens in the fifth century. We cannot date these rituals beyond saying that they seem to have been present in the Bronze Age, possibly originated in the Stone Age, and in modified form persisted into the Iron Age when mythologies were attached to them: myths offering contemporary explanations such as those of Orestes and Hippolytos at the shrine at Nemi.

We can find another feature which crosses from the Stone to the Bronze Age and, though it seems to have diminished in importance, was found in the Iron Age and has left traces in folk-lore up to the present; that is the Horned God. Cave paintings from the Stone Age show figures which seem to be a mixture of stag and man, but are more likely to represent a man clothed in a deer skin and wearing antlers, such a figure appears to be taking part in a ceremony of sorts, and one can only assume that this is some ritual connected with hunting, or possibly the activities of a hunter-gatherer peoples. Other archaeological evidence suggests that if a deity were considered, then it took female shape, it is a popular contemporary view that the notion of a 'god' came with the patriarchal societies of the Iron Age; most of the early statuettes to be found are, broadly speaking, female. This view may be slightly misleading as it suggests that mankind in those eras had ideas of divinity which are very like our own, and there is little evidence for that. One famous

Bronze Age artefact is the Gundestrop Cauldron which shows the Horned God, obviously very human in form, but wearing antlers and surrounded by other animal figures; it is possible that this is as much ornamental as having ritual significance, but the subject does follow a thread running back many generations.

The first point of reference was the rituals which I describe as familiar to the citizens of the Classical world (paragraph 1), and by this I mean the mystery religions, and particularly the Eleusinian mysteries. No record of the central rites has been left to us, there is probably no great significance in this - the many who were initiated kept the vow of secrecy, any who did not join were probably insufficiently interested even to enquire as to their nature (a bit like modern day Freemasonry) - but they involved some degree of transformation and a ritual death as a necessary prelude to rebirth. The myth explaining the ceremonies at Eleusis was that of the descent of Persephone to the underworld and the subsequent dispensation that she could return to spend three months of the year with her mother, Demeter; and this is connected with the cycle of the crops: Persephone is the original 'corn-dolly'. But Dionysos was connected with the mysteries; the myth here is similar to the story told by Euripides in the Bacchae and involves the death of the king, in this case at the hands of the queen, who is also his mother. In the Bacchae, the god appears horned, though the horns are those of a bull, and the king undergoes a transformation, though it is brought about by his adopting woman's dress rather than animal attributes; the death is real in the myth, but for obvious reasons is symbolic in the ritual. My point here is that there is a distinction between the underworld, or land of the dead, or Hades, and Hell, which is a later concept thought necessary as a counterpoint to 'heaven' and useful for keeping religious dissidents in line. We are dealing with societies which did not want to regard death as the end of everything but could no more envisage it as other than an extension of earthly life than can we; I believe that the myths do show a progression of beliefs, starting with mere 'immortality' and progressing through lack of aging to a choice of bliss or punishment. In considering these things, however, we must stick to the early stages because these were more or less contemporary with Homer.

Now it should be possible to tie these elements together; the results will be speculative and general and I do not suggest that a Bronze Age dweller, who was the real expert on these matters, would find nothing with which to disagree; at best we want a framework in which to fit later writings to try to explore unfamiliar elements. The queen is to be seen as being supreme, she represents fruitfulness; she requires a consort, but just as his seed is buried, undergoing a type of death, so he must die to provide fruiting. The king traditionally was a beast, the senior male of a herd of deer, and remained so even after animals had been domesticated; his death was nothing personal - the kingship lived on in his successor; his body may have been buried in a sanctuary - or a part of his body, such as his skull, and eventually his remains might attract devotion in their own right (as recorded, if that is the right term, in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonos). An early belief seems to have been that an afterlife was the prerogative of a few, the Pharaohs, god/kings of Egypt, the warriors among the Norsemen, whose ticket of entry into Valhalla was that they had died sword in hand, but eventually everyone wanted to live for ever, and it was useful to allow that, after all, one could tolerate the sufferings of others, indeed encourage them, if one could promise something better 'on the other side', and no-one had ever complained of the promises not been kept! So the rituals of what we call mystery religions develop, everyone, not just the king undergoes transformation, ritual death, and resurrection, and to maintain momentum, there are regular ceremonies. One feature of the ritual is that the 'death', which cannot be real must be convincingly frightening - the initiand is 'scared to death' rather than put to death.

Now we can imagine an audience which is familiar with the elements of ritual: transformation,

and symbolic death, and a knowledge of a central figure, priest or nominal king (that is to say one who serves the purposes of his people rather than commands them). This I suggest is Homer's audience, but Homer is telling a traveller's tale, his mythology need not be correct - indeed his story could not conclude if it were. We can attempt to reconstruct the myth, the story which was at one time historical, and later served as the rationale behind the rituals, as follows. The time has come for the king to die, he has all the kingly attributes; his subject have the attributes of subjects; one of them kills him; his body is eaten, perhaps only a few token morsels; the queen then accepts the slayer as separate from the rest of his fellows and initiates him as the new king before she marries him; he reigns with her until his turn for death comes. Later modifications, which would not be recognised as modifications, were the substitution of an animal as sacrificial victim for the king, and a surrogate death which would allow him to be reborn and continue to rule - the 'sacred' king is becoming secular, and possibly he is taking over the power from the queen.

Does this fit in with Books X and XI of the Odyssey? I believe that all the elements are present. On his arrival at Aeaea, Odysseus goes off alone and kills a great deer, the king, or his substitute; he and his comrades feast on its body; next, his men (only half of them in the story) are transformed into animals, but not stags, by the queen; Odysseus himself is able to resist, he has the magic plant - Moly - and is invited to consummate his marriage on the spot. When he leaves, after a year, he dies, for that is what visiting the underworld means, but he returns. In myth, he should continue to rule with Circe, 'dying', or visiting the underworld each year, but in a story, even an epic, he sails away to continue his journey. When Odysseus' men are restored, they seem younger - well, they have been reborn, like the initiates in a mystery religion, a feature of the ritual rather than the myth. We can compare Moly with two other features of later ritual, the first is the sprig of myrtle, the *bakkhoi,* carried at the Eleusinian Mysteries, and secondly the feature which inspired Frazer's title; in the Aeneid, Aeneas must pluck the Golden Bough before he can enter the Underworld, by the time that Virgil was writing his work, the mythology was probably of little concern to any except the priesthood, and they possibly got it wrong, but the ritual underlying Book VI of the Aeneid may refer to the centre at Cumae (discussed in "In the Footsteps of Orpheus" by R.F.Paget) which itself may have been only one of many subterranean sanctuary sites with similar practices. Two men are characterised in Homer's account; Eurylochus, he was afraid, just as we can assume that the tales of the initiation ceremonies would frighten off some would be initiates, and he stays by the ship; and Elpenor finds it all to much, he does not survive the experience, and no doubt the occasional 'person of weak or nervous disposition' did not survive initiation into the mysteries of some of the cults.

At risk of being accused of digression, I should say that I think that these elements can still be found today; the procedure has been sanitised, initiation takes place in infancy when the initiate cannot be afraid of his symbolic death; of course he pays the price for that for the rest of his life by being bound by the burden of original sin (St Augustine) or predestination, which means predestination for hellfire (John Calvin). The sacrifice of the king takes place more often than in more violent times, his body is still consumed, but it is all done in a remote - and rather refined - way. But enough of that.

Can I answer your question, Emma? The hero does have to go to hell, if I can use the term to mean the domain of the dead, on the other side of the Ocean Stream for Homer, and the underworld for Virgil; in history he was the sacred king whose function it was to die for the well-being of his people; later he was the warrior king born for death, but his death had to have nobility, even if posthumous; in a democratic age, when everyone is a hero, the true hero makes his mark not just by going, but by coming back again!