Edith Hall is Professor of Classics and Drama at Royal Holloway, University of London. She is the author and editor of several books – including the Penguin Classics translation of Sophocles’ Antigone, Odyssey to Song and Silence – and regularly contributes to TV, radio and professional theatre.

Only Edith Hall could have written this richly engaging and distinctive book. She covers a breathtaking range of material, from the highest of high culture to the comic, unsavoury, and frankly weird, from Europe to the USA to Africa and the Far East, and from literature to film and opera. Throughout this tour of the huge variety of responses that there have been to the Odyssey, a powerful argument emerges about the appeal and longevity of the text which results in all the critical and political fear that we now come to expect of this author. It is all conveyed with the infectious excitement and clarity of a brilliant performer. The Return of Odyssey represents a major contribution to how we assess the continuing influence of Homer in modern culture.

Edith Hall’s The Return of Odysseus undertakes the formidable task of surveying the cultural reception of the Odyssey from its epic infancy to the present. By tracing echoes of the poem in literature, painting and music, noting its impact upon discourses of race, class, gender, and colonization, and identifying reflections of the myth in modern philosophical and psychological thought, the author shows that it is arguably the founding text of Western civilization. Today, the Odyssey has lost none of its cultural power or resonance. Having found a new home in popular culture and contemporary media, it seems with equal capacity to move Westerningers into a culturally fragmented world. Hall’s rich appraisal will be greeted as the definitive investigation of a fascinating and many-sided phenomenon.

Therewith they focus on the bewitching song of the Sirens, his cunning escape from the clutches of the terrifying one-eyed Cyclops, or the painful staying of the nature of his beautiful wife Penelope, the stirring adventures of Ulysses/Odysseus are amongst the most durable in human culture. The famously cerebral hero of Homer’s epic has thrilled generations of readers and listeners, who for almost three millennia have enthusiastically followed his voyage from the ‘ringing plains of windy Troy’ to his triumphant return to the fragrant isle of Ithaca. The picturesque return of the wandering prince-king is one of the most ubiquitous tales of all time, crossing East–West divides and inspiring poets and film-makers worldwide: from the Latin and the Maoris to artistic interpreters as widely dispersed as India, Uganda and Japan. Song by minstrels, read out loud, projected on to cinema screens or acted on the stage, Odysseus’s story, perhaps more than any other tale, forms the backdrop to our own narratives of love, loss and meaning. But why has the Odyssey’s appeal proved so remarkably resilient and long-lasting?

Edith Hall explores the enduring fascination of Homer’s epic in terms of its extraordinary susceptibility to adaptation. Not only has the narrative reflected a myriad of intellectual and aesthetic agendas, but it has seemed perhaps uniquely fertile in generating new kinds of artistic media. Art forms created in direct response to the Odyssey include the tragedies of classical Athens and the baroque of Antiquity, as well as more recent genres such as television, science fiction, the novel, opera, film, children’s books and detective stories. The author explores Odyssean key themes in the Odyssey which illuminate the innumerable ways it has impacted on the cultural imagination. Cultural texts as diverse as Joyce’s Ulysses, Aristophanes’s A Raisin of the Sun or Pericles, Suzanne Vega’s Cycle, the Coen Brothers’ O Brother Where Art Thou?, David Vigne’s Le Retour de Martin Guerre, Jon Amiel’s Sommersby, Anthony Minghella’s Cold Mountain, Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey and The Angelopoulos’ Ulysses’ Gaze all show that Odysseus is indeed a tale-widely told.

The travels of this intrepid wayfarer across the waters of the wine-dark Aegean are journeys not just into the heart of one of the most brilliantly creative and inspiring of all the ancient Greek poets. They are also a voyage into the many paths leading from and back to the boundaries of a narrative which, perhaps more than any other, can lay claim to being the quintessential global phenomenon.