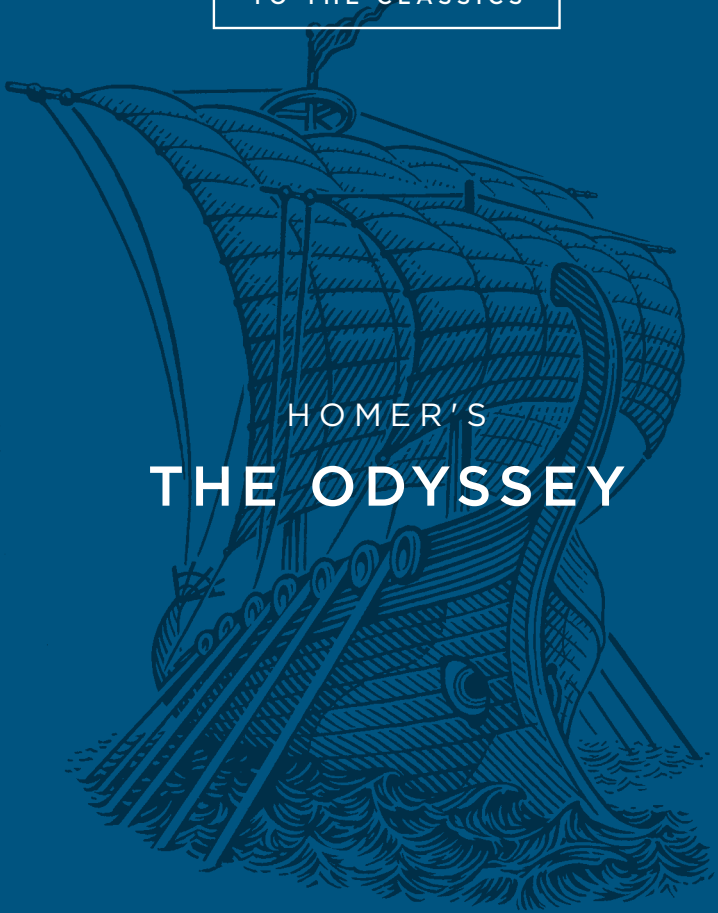
CHRISTIAN GUIDES TO THE CLASSICS



HOMER'S THE ODYSSEY

LELAND RYKEN

HOMER'S

THE ODYSSEY

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Contents

The Nature and Function of Literature

We need to approach any piece of writing with the right expectations, based on the kind of writing that it is. The expectations that we should bring to any work of literature are the following.

The subject of literature. The subject of literature is human experience, rendered as concretely as possible. Literature should thus be contrasted to expository writing of the type we use to conduct the ordinary business of life. Literature does not aim to impart facts and information. It exists to make us share a series of experiences. Literature appeals to our image-making and image-perceiving capacity. A famous novelist said that his purpose was to make his readers *see*, by which he meant to see life.

The universality of literature. To take that one step further, the subject of literature is *universal* human experience—what is true for all people at all times in all places. This does not contradict the fact that literature is first of all filled with concrete particulars. The particulars of literature are a net whereby the author captures and expresses the universal. History and the daily news tell us what *happened*; literature tells us what *happens*. The task that this imposes on us is to recognize and name the familiar experiences that we vicariously live as we read a work of literature. The truth that literature imparts is truthfulness to life—knowledge in the form of seeing things accurately. As readers we not only look *at* the world of the text but *through* it to everyday life.

An interpretation of life. In addition to portraying human experiences, authors give us their interpretation of those experiences. There is a persuasive aspect to literature, as authors attempt to get us to share their views of life. These interpretations of life can be phrased as ideas or themes. An important part of assimilating imaginative literature is thus determining and evaluating an author's angle of vision and belief system.

The importance of literary form. A further aspect of literature arises from the fact that authors are artists. They write in distinctly literary genres such as narrative and poetry. Additionally, literary authors want us to share their love of technique and beauty, all the way from skill with words to an ability to structure a work carefully and artistically.

Summary. A work of imaginative literature aims to make us see life accurately, to get us to think about important ideas, and to enjoy an artistic performance.

Why the Classics Matter

This book belongs to a series of guides to the literary classics of Western literature. We live at a time when the concept of a literary classic is often misunderstood and when the classics themselves are often undervalued or even attacked. The very concept of a classic will rise in our estimation if we simply understand what it is.

What is a classic? To begin, the term *classic* implies the best in its class. The first hurdle that a classic needs to pass is excellence. Excellent according to whom? This brings us to a second part of our definition: classics have stood the test of time through the centuries. The human race itself determines what works rise to the status of classics. That needs to be qualified slightly: the classics are especially known and valued by people who have received a formal education, alerting us that the classics form an important part of the education that takes place within a culture.

This leads us to yet another aspect of classics: classics are known to us not only in themselves but also in terms of their interpretation and reinterpretation through the ages. We know a classic partly in terms of the attitudes and interpretations that have become attached to it through the centuries.

Why read the classics? The first good reason to read the classics is that they represent the best. The fact that they are difficult to read is a mark in their favor; within certain limits, of course, works of literature that demand a lot from us will always yield more than works that demand little of us. If we have a taste for what is excellent, we will automatically want some contact with classics. They offer more enjoyment, more understanding about human experience, and more richness of ideas and thought than lesser works (which we can also legitimately read). We finish reading or rereading a classic with a sense of having risen higher than we would otherwise have risen.

Additionally, to know the classics is to know the past, and with that knowledge comes a type of power and mastery. If we know the past, we are in some measure protected from the limitations that come when all we know is the contemporary. Finally, to know the classics is to be an educated person. Not to know them is, intellectually and culturally speaking, like walking around without an arm or leg.

Summary. Here are four definitions of a literary classic from literary experts; each one provides an angle on why the classics matter. (1) The best that has been thought and said (Matthew Arnold). (2) "A literary classic ranks with the best of its kind that have been produced" (*Harper Handbook to Literature*). (3) A classic "lays its images permanently on the mind [and] is entirely irreplaceable in the sense that no other book whatever comes anywhere near reminding you of it or being even a momentary substitute for it" (C. S. Lewis). (4) Classics are works to which "we return time and again in our minds, even if we do not reread them frequently, as touchstones by which we interpret the world around us" (Nina Baym).

How to Read a Story

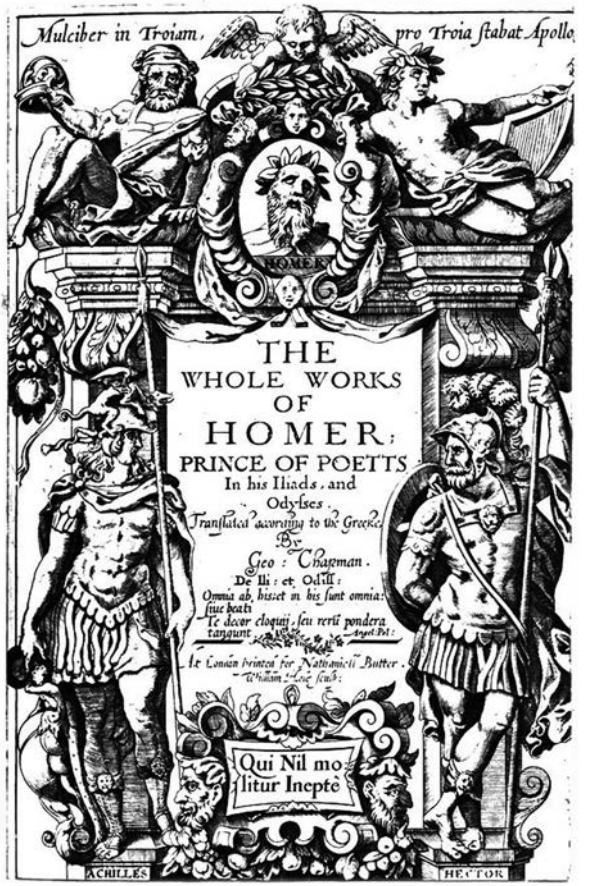
The Odyssey, like the other classics discussed in this series, is a narrative or story. To read it with enjoyment and understanding, we need to know how stories work and why people write and read them.

Why do people tell and read stories? To tell a story is to (a) entertain and (b) make a statement. As for the entertainment value of stories, it is a fact that one of the most universal human impulses can be summed up in the four words *tell me a story*. The appeal of stories is universal, and all of us are incessant storytellers during the course of a typical day. As for *making a statement*, a novelist hit the nail on the head when he said that in order for storytellers to tell a story they must have some picture of the world and of what is right and wrong in that world.

The things that make up a story. All stories are comprised of three things that claim our attention—setting, character, and plot. A good story is a balance among these three. In one sense, storytellers tell us *about* these things, but in another sense, as fiction writer Flannery O'Connor put it, storytellers don't speak *about* plot, setting, and character but *with* them. *About what* does the storyteller tell us by means of these things? About life, human experience, and the ideas that the storyteller believes to be true.

World making as part of storytelling. To read a story is to enter a whole world of the imagination. Storytellers construct their narrative world carefully. World making is a central part of the storyteller's enterprise. On the one hand, this is part of what makes stories entertaining. We love to be transported from mundane reality to faraway places with strange-sounding names. But storytellers also intend their imagined worlds as accurate pictures of reality. In other words, it is an important part of the truth claims that they intend to make. Accordingly, we need to pay attention to the details of the world that a storyteller creates, viewing that world as a picture of what the author believes to exist.

The need to be discerning. The first demand that a story makes on us is surrender—surrender to the delights of being transported, of encountering experiences, characters, and settings, of considering the truth claims that an author makes by means of his or her story. But we must not be morally and intellectually passive in the face of what an author puts before us. We need to be true to our own convictions as we weigh the morality and truth claims of a story. A story's greatness does not guarantee that it tells the truth in every way.



Title page of first English translation
(George Chapman, 1616)

The Odyssey: The Book at a Glance

Author. Legendary poet Homer

Nationality. Greek

Date of writing. Unknown

Approximate number of pages. 350 (varies from one translation to another)

Available editions. Modern translations abound; some names of translators and the publisher of each are as follows: W. H. D. Rouse (Signet); Edward McCrorie (Johns Hopkins University Press); Richmond Lattimore (Harper & Row); Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam); Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux); Robert Fagles (Penguin)

Genres. Epic; myth; fantasy; hero story; adventure story; travel story

Setting for the story. The Mediterranean Sea and its coast, especially Ithaca (home of Odysseus), perhaps in the eleventh century BC (approximately contemporaneous with the Old Testament judges)

Main characters. Odysseus, protagonist of the story, whose journey to his home in Ithaca after the battle at Troy is the main action; Odysseus's wife, Penelope, who has waited for her husband to return from what becomes a twenty-year absence; a hundred villainous suitors who devour Odysseus's goods as they attempt to win Penelope as a wife; Telemachos, son of Odysseus, who comes of age during the course of the action; the goddess Athena (wisdom), who aids Odysseus in his ordeals; the god Poseidon, who instigates the trouble that Odysseus endures on his journey home

Plot summary. After fighting in the Trojan War for ten years, Odysseus sets sail for his home in Ithaca with a crew of shipmates. Poseidon pursues a grudge against Odysseus by making the sea voyage a continuous series of ordeals lasting ten years by the time Odysseus reaches home. After triumphing in a series of twelve adventures (which are also temptations and tests), Odysseus returns home, the only one of his men to survive. Odysseus joins forces with his son Telemachos to slaughter the suitors in the hall of his palace, after which Odysseus is reunited with his wife, Penelope.

The structure of the story. (1) Because a convention of epic is to begin *in medias res* (the Latin phrase meaning "in the middle of things"), the story line noted above gets rearranged in the actual plot of the story. *The Odyssey* has a firm, three-part plot: the Telemachia (Books 1–4, which narrate the travels of Telemachos to find his father and describe the disorder that has

engulfed Odysseus's home in Ithaca); the wanderings of Odysseus (Books 5–12); the return or homecoming of Odysseus (Books 13–24, narrating what happened when Odysseus returns home). (2) The story is structured as a quest for the hero to return home. Like all quest stories, the story presents the hero with a series of obstacles that must be overcome before the quest can end successfully. (3) The story has a U-shaped comic plot in which events descend into tragedy but rise to a happy ending.

Cultural context. *The Odyssey* belongs to ancient classical culture, and it embodies the values that we call "classicism." One of these values is a human-centered focus known as humanism—the striving to perfect all human possibilities in this life. The ethical outlook is one that regards reason and intellect as the human faculties that lead to virtue. More specifically, classical ethics believed that it was the function of reason to control the emotions and appetites. There is no better illustration than the middle section of *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus is tempted to indulge his feelings and appetites and where ultimately his reason (partly represented by Athena, goddess of wisdom) is what rescues him from vice. Another facet of humanism is the urge for human action, exertion, and achievement.

The importance of Homer to the classical world. A modern scholar has offered the opinion that the important question regarding Homer is not *who* he was but *what* he was. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were a kind of Bible to ancient Greeks. Plato in his *Republic* says that some Greek citizens thought that a person should regulate all of life according to what Homer said. Referring to Homer was a standard way to answer a philosophic or moral question. Professionals known as Homerids gave recitals of Homer accompanied by commentary.

Tips for reading. (1) An epic is a special kind of story, and the kind most governed by literary conventions (understood "rules" that a composer is expected to incorporate). These will be noted in the remainder of this book. The preliminary point to be made is that an epic storyteller expects readers to relish the specific version of an epic motif that he reenacts for their enjoyment. (2) Epics were originally oral performances. At the beginning of Book 9 of *The Odyssey* we are given an account of how an ancient epic was actually performed, and it is a picture of what we know as after-dinner entertainment. This means that we should read *The Odyssey* first of all for its entertainment value. (3) On the other hand, for the cultures who produced epics, an epic summed up what a whole age wanted to say. After enjoying the author's virtuosity in reenacting epic conventions, therefore, we need to ponder the world view and sense of life that the story embodies.

The Author and His Faith

Homer and his culture belong to what is commonly called paganism—a religious belief system that exists apart from Christian influence. At the heart of that religion is mythology. Strictly defined, a myth is a story about the gods, but by extension it refers to stories with a heavy reliance on the supernatural, even if some characters in the story might be superhuman rather than divine. We can say of Homer's worldview that it is religious in orientation, with the gods and goddesses playing a prominent role in human affairs.

Mythology as religion. After a mythological system such as Greek mythology ceases to be believed as an active religion, it becomes a purely literary phenomenon, which is what Homer's mythology is for modern readers. But as we read *The Odyssey* we need to assimilate it as Homer and his audience did—as a religious system. That religion was *polytheistic*, with dozens of gods and goddesses making up the pantheon ("all the gods") of Greek religion. The portrayal of these deities was thoroughly *anthropomorphic* (portraying deity in human form)—so anthropomorphic, in fact, that the gods and goddesses seem to be little more than amplified humans. It is important to know, therefore, that there is one essential feature of the gods and goddesses that sets them apart from humans: they are immortal. Once alerted to this, we can pick up numerous clues of it in Homer's story.

Did the Greeks really believe in these gods? Plato was scandalized by Homer's portrayal of the gods, believing it to be unbecoming of deity. G. K. Chesterton has written with good sense on the subject in *The Everlasting Man*, claiming that even in Greek antiquity the mythological stories were regarded as trailing off into the domain of fairy stories. Certainly people did not say, "I believe in Zeus," the way Christians recite the Apostles' Creed.

Pagan parallels to Christianity. A notable feature of Greek mythology is that it contains numerous parallels (called "analogues") to the Christian religion—stories about divine intervention in people's lives, for example, or a description of a paradisal garden and a realm of afterlife to which people go after they have died. G. K. Chesterton said that these analogues are purely human attempts to arrive at religious truth by means of the imagination alone. C. S. Lewis speaks of "good dreams" that God sent to the human race as a foreshadowing of the reality found in the Bible and in Christ. Renaissance historian Walter Ralegh called these myths "crooked images of some one true history"—fallen humanity's unaided and only partially true version of a history found in its accurate form in the Bible.

How common grace figures into the equation. An important Christian doctrine is the idea of common grace—the belief that God endows all people, whether Christian or not, with a capacity for the good, the true, and the beautiful. Within this framework, wherever Homer's thinking agrees with Christianity, Christians can affirm it.

The Odyssey as Epic

The Odyssey belongs to a small, elite group of stories known as epics. Epics are long narrative poems (though some translations print Homer's poems as prose). Epics are the most exalted kind of story, and they are accordingly written in what is called the "high style." Starting with Homer, moreover, all epics incorporate a set of conventional patterns or motifs. Some of these conventions will be noted in the running commentary that follows, but here are six epic features to note at the outset:

- Epics are hero stories in which the action is dominated by a central character who embodies (despite imperfections) the ideals of the author's culture.
- The plot focuses on an epic feat, which in classical epic is always a battle. The hero's main achievement is winning a battle and earning a kingdom as his reward. Within this framework, the hero is automatically a warrior.
- Accordingly, the value structure of classical epic elevates physical strength, skill in warfare, and earthly success to a position of supremacy.
- The setting of action in an epic is so broad that it goes by the name of "epic sweep." It encompasses the whole earth, a supernatural world, and the afterlife.
- The story material of epic is mythology—a story about gods and superhumans, with supernatural or marvelous events in abundance.
- Stylistic traits include epic similes (extended comparisons using the formula *like* or *as* and having the effect of doing justice to the exalted nature of the material); circumlocution or periphrasis (taking more words than necessary to express something); and epithets (titles for persons or things).

The World of *The Odyssey*

Whenever we read a story, we enter a whole world of the imagination. Knowing the main features of that world is a good organizing framework within which to assimilate the story. The leading features of the world of *The Odyssey* include the following:

- A *domestic world* in which home and family are elevated to the highest human values. Hospitality and loyalty to home and family are prime virtues.
- A *mythological world* in which some of the characters are gods and goddesses, in which some of the human characters perform superhuman

actions, and in which many of the events and settings are supernatural (more than earthly).
- A *heroic world* in which warriors perform feats of battle and are motivated by a desire for fame, success, and material prosperity.
- An *aristocratic world* in which the important characters belong to the ruling class (which is also a warrior class).

BOOK 1

What Went on in the House of Odysseus

The titles for the successive books of *The Odyssey* are additions to Homer's text supplied by editors or translators. Some translations do not supply titles. The titles used in this guide are from the Rouse translation. Examples of what other translations provide for Book 1 are "Trouble at Home" and "Athene Visits Telemachus." It is also helpful to know that various translators spell some of the Greek names differently.

Plot Summary

Every story begins with exposition, and so does *The Odyssey*. Homer begins by reenacting the epic ritual of invoking the muse and stating the epic theme (that is, story material). The action then begins with an epic council of the gods in which the gods and goddesses decide what to do in human affairs. As we listen to the deliberations, we get the background information that we need for the story to follow.

The divine council in Book 1 of *The Odyssey* is occasioned by the sorry situation of the epic hero. Odysseus has been held captive on the island of the goddess Calypso for seven years. Meanwhile, Penelope, wife of Odysseus, is besieged by suitors who want her to declare her husband dead and marry one of them. The decision reached by the council involves a twofold action: (1) Athena (goddess of wisdom) is assigned to go to Odysseus's home in Ithaca and nudge Odysseus's son Telemachos to go on a journey in search of his father; (2) Hermes, messenger of the gods in classical mythology, is dispatched to the island of Calypso to announce the verdict of the gods that Calypso must let Odysseus depart.

All formal public events begin with ritual. The more formal the occasion, the more abundant is the ritual that accompanies it. Homer's opening invocation to the muse (goddess of inspiration) is a ritual event—the expected way for an epic poet to begin his performance. We can profitably compare this formal ritual with the ritual beginning of an important ballgame or a wedding that uses the Anglican marriage ceremony. A sense of formality and importance accompany all such rituals, including the invocation to the muse at the beginning of an epic.

Commentary

Everything in this packed opening book is important, starting with the invocation (which is our entry into the story). Even the detail that this is the story *of a man* is important, since epics always

Starting with the Middle Ages, it has been customary to call stories about the Trojan War "the matter of Troy." That total collection of story material can be divided into subcategories, such as preparation for battle, the battle of Troy, and the sack [destruction] of Troy. *The Odyssey* belongs to the category of return stories—stories of Greek heroes who returned home after helping Menelaos win the war that he undertook to reclaim his wife, Helen.

For Christian readers, the first encounter with Homer's portrayal of the gods and goddesses surely comes as a shock. Initially it is hard to know what to make of these freakish creatures that are more human than divine and yet are referred to as deities. The best thing to do is accept that these gods and goddesses are the best that the Greek person on the street could muster in a conception of God. In the Bible we read about God's taking his place among the gods (e.g., Ps. 84:1), and about his being superior to those gods. The song of Moses asks rhetorically, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?" (Ex. 15:11). Homer's portrayal of the gods gives substance to such claims.

focus on universal human experience. When this particular epic hero is said to be "never at a loss" (or something equivalent, depending on the translation), we are alerted to Odysseus's two leading traits—his cleverness and his resourcefulness in mastering every obstacle. When Odysseus is said to have traveled far, we know that we have embarked on a travel story—such a famous travel story that the word *odyssey* has become a synonym for a journey of discovery. Other motifs to unpack in the opening invocation are the ideas of enduring hardships (so extreme that all of Odysseus's sailing companions have died), and home as the object of highest devotion.

So many details pass before us in this opening book that the effect resembles an ever-changing kaleidoscope. One way to organize the material is to be aware that *The Odyssey* as a whole synthesizes five story lines: (1) the story of Telemachos's coming of age (being initiated into adulthood); (2) the story of Penelope and the suitors; (3) the story of Odysseus's wanderings; (4) the story of the gods (including their "family" squabbles); (5) the story of Odysseus's homecoming and revenge. As the kaleidoscope turns during our trek through Book 1, we can find references to all five threads of action.

Another way to make sense of Book 1 is to operate on the premise that Homer intends to begin by placing before us the goal of the quest that underlies the story as a whole. Exactly what is it that propels Odysseus to endure ten years of ordeals? Book 1 answers that question by picturing three things—a wife, a son, and a kingdom. Homer manages the description of these things in such a way as to assure us that they are (a) things of great

value and (b) things in great danger. The world of *The Odyssey* is consistently portrayed as a world in crisis (itself an epic convention). In Book 1 we are made to *feel* what Odysseus's absence from his kingdom means.

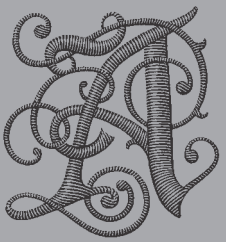
Finally, this book of exposition introduces us to the main characters of the story, and their essential nature is laid out for us to view—faithful Penelope, immature Telemachos, the villainous suitors, the humanlike gods and goddesses. We also learn a lot about Odysseus, even though he does not enter the story directly until Book 5. This narrative strategy is known as the delayed entrance of the hero.

It is in the nature of storytelling that the primary business that is transacted in the early phases of the story is to introduce the reader to the world of the story and the details about the plot and characters that we need to know before the story can proceed. This early material is known as "exposition" ("explanation"). It would be wrong to start looking for themes and religious meanings at the outset of the story, and we should not feel guilty when we simply focus on the story as a story at this early point. The details that Homer gives us in Book 1 are the materials from which he will eventually mold the deeper meanings of his story.

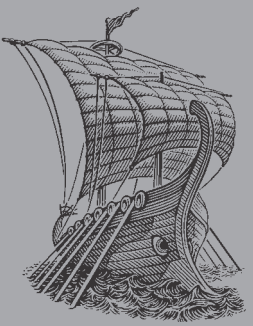
For Reflection or Discussion

First, the commentary above names things that can be traced in the text; exactly where and how do these motifs surface in Book 1? Second, part of the excitement of the opening chapter or book of any story is that it is the reader's initiation into what is to follow, with the result that we need to make a mental note of what grabs our attention. Additionally, the opening unit of any story is our introduction to things that will become increasingly important and familiar to us as we progress through the story, so we need to read with the same alertness and expectation that we experience when being introduced to an important person for the first time. Finally, Book 1 of *The Odyssey* assembles a gallery of memorable characters for us to observe; we need to start to assemble a mental profile for each one.

ENCOUNTER THE CLASSICS
WITH A LITERARY EXPERT



HAWTHORNE'S
THE SCARLET LETTER



HOMER'S
THE ODYSSEY

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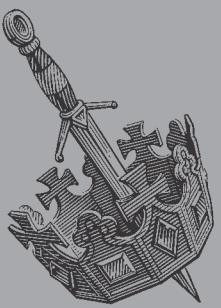

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LELAND RYKEN (PhD, University of Oregon) served as professor of English at Wheaton College for over 45 years and has authored or edited nearly 40 books.

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