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INTRODUCTION

HOMER'S *ODYSSEY* TELLS A SIMPLE AND FAMILIAR STORY: the return of a hero, a veteran of the Trojan War, who has spent ten trial-filled years wandering in exotic lands. Arriving at last in his homeland, Ithaca, he finds that domestic and community affairs have gone badly wrong in his absence. His wife, Penelopeia, is surrounded by aggressive suitors who presume her husband has perished abroad; his son, Telemachos, on the brink of manhood, lacks the authority to expel these unruly interlopers, who are eating him out of house and home. In this power vacuum, where lowly swineherds and housekeepers try to fill the roles vacated by their masters, Odysseus, slowly and painfully, begins to recover his position as master of his household and patrimony. Using first guile, and then force, he ultimately takes vengeance on those who are seeking to displace him, restores his household and reclaims his wife.

If the story is simple, Homer's narrative is brilliantly complex. Its opening is a notorious tease, a deliberate play on audience expectations and a taste of what this convention-breaking song will offer. The poem's first line springs a double surprise: where Homer's *Iliad*, the predecessor and countermodel to the *Odyssey*, begins by announcing in resounding fashion both the name of its protagonist, "Achillēs, son of Peleus," and the prime mover of its story—the cosmic wrath that drives Achillēs to destroy his nearest and dearest, and himself too—the second composition tells us only that it is about a man, "one who was never at a loss." From the outset then, Odysseus is a hero with a difference; alone among those celebrated in epic by the ancient bards, he allows himself

to remain incognito, and the suppression of his identity proves key to his resourceful nature and survival. It will be nine books before Odysseus declares who he is and the source of his renown: no Achillēs-like rage or battle prowess, but a “readiness for any event.”

Nor do the novelties end there. Our poet has a supremely compelling story to tell: Odysseus’ adventures on his journey home include encounters with the one-eyed cannibal Polyphemos and a visit to a land where the mind-altering lotus is the food of choice: fresh dangers come in the form of the drug-dealing Circē, whose potions turn Odysseus’ crew into swine, a visit to the land of the dead, singers whose voices are so alluring that seafarers linger to listen until their bones rot, and battles with sea-swallowing monsters. But instead of leading with these famous episodes, which Homer’s audience would have been expecting, for the first four books of the poem, the poet says nothing of the travels that make Odysseus a paradigm for contemporary Greeks embarking on their first colonizing ventures. Instead we accompany Telemachos, a somewhat backward youth, on his own mini-odyssey; roused from inaction by a visit from his father’s patron goddess, Athena, he sets out to discover news of Odysseus, visiting veterans of the Trojan War in the hope of learning whether his father is alive or dead. In postponing the main event, the poet knows exactly what he is about. For a hero whose best hope of salvation depends on his remaining unknown, an oblique introduction is required, and we, members like Telemachos of the post-heroic age, must encounter Odysseus indirectly before meeting him face-to-face.

As we realize later on, Telemachos’ seemingly low-key journey also proves a dress rehearsal, in which the son’s experiences hold up a mirror to those that his father, in the poem’s multilayered chronology, simultaneously undergoes. Here too Homer flirts with audience expectations, making us think ourselves embarked on a typical coming-of-age story, where a young man achieves manhood and a sense of who he is by virtue of the ancient equivalent of a Grand Tour and his initiation into family

lore. But ultimately the poet discards this first trajectory: were Telemachos fully to join the rank of heroes, what role would be left for his father? The *Odyssey* charts no Oedipal struggle in which the son displaces the paternal figure (although the poet occasionally nods toward that scenario); instead, when father and son do find each other in the poem’s second half, the youth gamely consents to play second fiddle to his illustrious progenitor.

The master story resumes in book V, when Athena engineers our hero’s release from the nymph Calypso’s too warm attentions (not for nothing does her name mean “the concealer”). Within this larger narrative, a smaller one is inscribed. Washed up naked and destitute on the island of the Phaiacians, Odysseus is rescued by another seductive and nubile maiden, and treated to the choicest hospitality in a land whose luxuries would have answered to the fantasies of the elite among the poet’s audience. But there is something sinister about the entertainment the Phaiacians supply, and when Odysseus inserts his own story into the poet’s larger tale in books IX–XII, bringing us up to the point at which Homer began his song, he designs his narrative as a warning to his hosts. As the adventures he relates demonstrate, two criteria distinguish good hosts from bad: poor hospitality means feeding off your guest (instead of treating him to a meal) and/or detaining him against his will. Fortunately the Phaiacian king, Alcinous, understands the message. After hearing the spell-binding story of the hero, whose compositional powers equal those of a poet and whose audience responds with all the generosity the ancient singer would hope to receive, the king completes the duties of the ancient host: where a stranger’s arrival demands the provision of a bath, food and maybe some clean clothes, departure requires gifts and conveyance home. The Phaiacians come up trumps: their magical, self-propelled ships can travel in wintertime, when no real-world Greek would risk seafaring, and they deposit the sleeping Odysseus on his native shore when hibernal cold still holds the site in frozen inactivity. The chronology and nature of the hero’s homecoming shows Homer’s

novelistic skill and the archetypal nature of his story. Odysseus' recovery of his home and kingdom will coincide with the springtime season of renewal, and his passage back to reality from the supernatural realm—this encompassing all Odysseus' experiences after leaving Troy and including his sojourn in Phaiacia, a halfway house mingling fairy tale elements with details familiar to those acquainted with actual Greek colonies—occurs in the unconsciousness of sleep.

Like all good storytellers, Homer then seals off his magical world. When we last glimpse the Phaiacians, Poseidon, whose wrath against Odysseus stems from the hero's blinding of his son Polyphemos, has turned their ship to stone and threatens to cover their island with a mountain (an original "cliff-hanger" that the poet never resolves). With all means of conveyance gone, no one can repeat the journey Odysseus achieved or verify whether the stories our hero and poet have told are true.

Many have found the early stages of the poem's second half something of a letdown. For much of four books, we linger in a humble swineherd's hut, where Odysseus, now disguised as a filthy beggar at a tap of Athena's wand, is treated to an almost comic form of rustic hospitality while he trades hard-luck stories with Eumaios, his kindly if obtuse host. But here too design underlies the poem. Not only does Homer sound several of his central themes—the importance of a scrupulous observance of hospitality; the fact that the suitors have so corrupted the urban sphere that the usually dispraised countryside is now the more ethical realm—but he also offers a fascinating window onto his own art. Through the fictitious stories that Odysseus tells, we see how poets such as Homer worked. Reusing material from the story he told the Phaiacians, Odysseus also helps himself to characters and motifs from the *Iliad* and to the alternate stories of his own wanderings that bards contemporary with Homer would be singing. Because the poet flags these accounts as mendacious, he simultaneously deauthenticates rival singers' narratives and makes us retrospectively wonder about the veracity of the seaman's yarn Odysseus spun for the Phaiacians; we

recall that his story—unlike Homer's own—came without an opening appeal to the Muses, guarantors of the truth of ancient poets' tales.

Disguise, of course, begs for recognition, and the second half of the poem is structured, as ancient critics already observed, as a series of recognition scenes. The first of these features the also disguised Athena, the only "reunion" in which the hero does not hold all the cards. The tables are turned when Odysseus, now enjoying the omniscience and impenetrability that Athena earlier possessed, reveals himself to the baffled Telemachos in book XVI. Book XVII varies the scheme with the meeting between the hero and his faithful hound, Argos: impervious to the disguise that works only on humans, the dog, like the goddess, immediately "sniffs out" his master without any sign or prompt. The loyal housekeeper and retainers are made party to Odysseus' identity in books XIX–XXI, and the suitors' almost willful blindness in the face of the visual and verbal clues given them abruptly ends when the hero declares himself just moments before delivering his enemies to their deaths. Still more tantalizingly postponed is the episode in book XXIII when Penelopeia finally acknowledges Odysseus as her husband even as she proves herself his faithful wife. The hero's father, Laërtès, completes the sequence that has restored Odysseus to every facet of his pre-Trojan identity, repositioning him as father, husband, son and master of his patrimony. These reunions observe a neat arc: beginning with the son's acknowledgment of the father, they close with the father's recognition of the son.

Patterning is also apparent at the more microcosmic level. The poet plots the recognition episodes on a spatial trajectory that brings Odysseus ever closer to his goal: from the seashore he advances to the extra-urban realm, from the palace courtyard to its banqueting hall, and from the hearth to the innermost chamber, which houses the marital bed. The signs and tokens through which the revelations come about follow another intricate scheme. Each fills in a period in the hero's life: his childhood, his adolescence, and the moment he brings

his bride to his home. These tokens are crucial to our full understanding of Odysseus' nature: when the house-keeper Eurykleia discovers the scar that the hero received in the course of the hunt that constituted his "initiation" into manhood, the poet includes a flashback telling how the infant Odysseus received his name: derived from the Greek verb meaning "to be a source of and/or target of pain," it styles Odysseus nothing other than "Trouble." Little wonder that characters sympathetic to the hero do best to use circumlocutions when describing or addressing him. (Recall that Odysseus' name brought disaster on his own person: had he not revealed himself to Polyphemos in a parting act of bravado that belies his circumspection elsewhere, the giant would have been unable to bring Poseidon's curse down on the hero's head.) The bed, which the husband built for his wife, fittingly serves as the sign that reunites the marital pair. Probably Homer's innovation, it symbolizes the essential properties of the participants in the scene: Odysseus as a craftsman whose products carry more conviction than his too crafty words; Penelopeia as the chaste wife who has remained as "fixed" in her home as the unmovable and inviolate bed. The olive wood post that anchors the bridal chamber not only recalls the mast to which Odysseus had himself bound so as to resist the Sirens' beguilement but also looks forward to the final token, the fruit trees in the orchard that Odysseus must enumerate by way of "fixed signs" for Laërtēs. Again the objects join the poem's two worlds of the fantastic and the familiar into one: both evocative of and different from the trees that produce fruit throughout the year in the magical garden of Alcinous, they also symbolize the hero's recovery of the land on which he stands and whose fertility he guarantees.

Interrupting this orderly progression is Odysseus' act of vengeance, and all the problems it poses. For the better part of twenty books, the poet has reiterated a theme of obvious importance for our probably itinerant performer: hospitality for strangers is a cardinal virtue and retribution falls on renegade hosts. Book XXI opens with a fresh reminder. When Penelopeia goes to fetch

the bow that will prove the instrument of her husband's revenge, the poet pauses to give the object's genealogy: Odysseus received it from one Iphitos, whom Heraclēs killed while he was a guest in his home, a crime the poet condemns in his harshest terms. The parallels between the criminal and our hero are unmistakable: an encounter in the Underworld underscored the similarities between Odysseus and Heraclēs, the latter the Bowman par excellence. As the audience knows, Heraclēs first encountered Iphitos when he competed in an archery contest to win Iphitos' sister for his bride. The fact that the remarriage of Odysseus and Penelopeia depends on Odysseus' success in just such a sporting event compounds the problematic nature of the act. As numerous Greek myths and historical episodes suggest, athletic-cum-courtship competitions properly serve to resolve elite conflicts over status and prestige (exactly the problem in Odysseus' halls) without bloodshed; but here that conflict-averting device becomes the catalyst for internecine violence instead.

But from the song's outset, our partisan poet has been subtly exonerating his hero. Already in the prelude, Homer evokes the destruction of Odysseus' crew on account of their sacrilegious consumption of the god Helios' cattle. What seemed a gratuitous detail proves critical, not just because the crew's behavior presages the suitors feasting off Odysseus' herds, but also because the poet's editorial comment that the men "perished by their own madness" introduces the precise term that repeatedly describes the suitors as they wantonly carouse in Odysseus' home. When Odysseus clears his halls, he is thus, within the value system the poem has set up, guiltless: as he claims in book XXII, the suitors are victims of their own "madness." Homer also has a second line of defense. Interwoven with the account of the hero's penetration of his home is a very old story pattern, involving a divinity who comes to earth, frequently in humble disguise, in order to test the worth of mortals by requesting hospitality. At several points, particularly when Odysseus' self-revelations resemble divine epiphanies, the poet hints that his hero might be such a god,

whose purpose is to dole out rewards and punishment. The suitors perfectly fit the role of the wicked and/or benighted individuals of the traditional tale, and their destruction proves a case of divine retribution in which sinners meet their just deserts.

But for all Homer's whitewashing of his hero, the composer does not allow us to forget the darker aspects of the vengeance. In a marvelous simile at the close of book XXI, the poet likens the seeming beggar effortlessly stringing the bow that has stymied all the suitors to a musician who "stretches a new string on his harp." If that comparison folds poet and protagonist and reality and representation into one, it also raises questions about the nature of Odysseus' "song." Since the poet's lyre is designed to dispense delight and harmony, Odysseus' death-dealing shafts inevitably pervert the instrument's true purpose.

No account of the *Odyssey* can be complete without mention of the figure who dominates the poem's final portions, and whose makeup and behavior continue to charm and puzzle. When we first meet Penelopeia, she appears the perfectly faithful spouse, using every means at her disposal (particularly the web that, some scholars think, is cognate with her name) to keep the suitors at bay while hoping against hope that Odysseus will return. But in books XVIII and XIX, this exemplary lady, initially so different from the countermodels the poem proposes, the faithless Clytemnestra and Helen, no longer proves so true to type. Why, presented with compelling indicators that Odysseus is on his way home, does she decide to show herself to the suitors in a seductive move that looks awfully like the actions of the adulterous goddess Aphrodítē featured in an intermezzo in book VIII? Worse still, why does she reject the disguised Odysseus' unequivocal assurance that her husband will destroy the suitors, and go on to set up a contest designed to produce her marriage to one of those whom she claims to detest? And why, when the suitors lie dead in her halls, and the truth is literally staring her in the face, does she still withhold recognition? Where earlier critics faulted Penelopeia for inconsistency, obtuseness and irrational

behavior (so like a woman . . .), or thought an inattentive ancient editor had clumsily cobbled together two different tales, modern explanations propose everything from a canny plotter who, like her husband, manipulates those around her, to an ethically right-minded agent trying to do her best in a situation beyond her control. Is Penelopeia a site for the poet to play complex narrative games designed to keep an audience on its toes, or an enigma whose indecipherability reflects the problems the female gender poses for the Greeks?

If the poet declines to tip his hand, most readers will find their doubts laid to rest in the compelling moment of reunion between husband and wife. As Odysseus encircles his long-lost wife in his arms, Penelopeia is likened to a "shipwrecked mariner" reaching dry land, the very experience the hero has actually undergone. By the time the simile ends, Odysseus has imperceptibly become the object of the embrace, and Penelopeia assumed the position of the land to which the beleaguered seafarer comes home. No wonder Athena holds back dawn's advent so that the two can enjoy a magically prolonged night in which—most fittingly for this poem so preoccupied with storytelling, its seductions and lures—husband and wife enjoy not so much the pleasures of the nuptial bed as the narratives with which they entertain each other.

In conclusion, a word about the nature of our song. Most scholars agree that the *Odyssey*, as we have it today, was composed sometime in the second half of the eighth century BCE, in a region of Greece called Ionia and by a poet to whom later antiquity assigned the probably made-up name "Homer." We also recognize the *Odyssey* as a product of an oral tradition, a technique of poetic composition developed over hundreds of years by bards who preserved and transmitted their repertoire from one generation to the next, all without the knowledge or aid of writing. This tradition included an artificial poetic dialect and a stock of conventional verbal expressions, called "formulas," uniquely suited to the hexameter in which the poet chanted his song to the accompaniment of a lyre; also available was a repository

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of larger building blocks, the episodes, themes and motifs integral to the epic poems. Thus equipped, and schooled through listening to other bards, the oral poet composed extempore, improvising an original song on each occasion by expanding, curtailing and modifying the preexisting material so as to suit the time, place and nature of his audience and the imperative of offering a new and arresting account (remember Telemachos' praise for the singer who tells the most recent story in book I of the *Odyssey*, as Homer advertises his own excellence!). What distinguishes the skilled individual from the hack is this capacity for innovation: relying less on prefabricated elements and familiar scenarios, he weaves a fresh narrative that may, as the poem presented here does, challenge canonical stories and advance new values and ideologies.

How this oral composition achieved written form remains a much-debated issue: did the poet dictate his song to a scribe, or write it down and edit it following a particularly successful performance? Did the poem continue to circulate in oral form in multiple versions until a powerful and wealthy patron of the arts chose, several centuries later, to assemble a more canonical *Odyssey*? But the puzzles that surround the work's genesis and transmission merely enhance its enduring wonder. Whether heard in performance in the archaic age in the halls of a local king or at a religious festival, or encountered today in the pages of a book, the *Odyssey* offers a piece of consummate artistry to which we still succumb—much as the Phaiacians did when they sat enthralled, late into the night, listening as Odysseus related the tale of his wanderings.

—DEBORAH STEINER

PREFACE

THIS IS THE BEST STORY EVER WRITTEN, AND IT HAS BEEN a favourite for three thousand years: not long since I heard its far-off echo in a caique on the Aegean Sea, when the skipper told me how St. Elias carried an oar on his shoulder until some one called it a winnowing-fan.* Until lately it has been in the mind of every educated man; and it is a thousand pities that the new world should grow up without it. Indeed it enchanteth every man, lettered or unlettered, and every boy who hears it; but unless some one tells it by word of mouth, few are likely to hear it or read it unless they know Greek. They cannot get it from any existing translation, because all such are filled with affectations and attempts at poetic language which Homer himself is quite free from. Homer speaks naturally, and we must do the same. That is what I have tried to do in this book, and I ask that it may be judged simply as a story. If the names are odd, they are not more so than what people are content to swallow in their Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky or Turgenieff. They are less so, indeed; for readers will soon become familiar with the Greek surnames and even welcome their musical cadences as Homer's audience did. Those who like thrillers and detective novels will find excitement enough here, and nothing they can find elsewhere will be as good as the fight with Penelope's pretenders. Those who like fairy tales will find nothing better than Polyphemus the Goggle-eye. Those who like psychology will find plenty to entertain them in the characters, both gods and men,

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