HOMER

# The Odyssey

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# Contents

Chapter 1

# The making of the *Odyssey*

## 1 The background to the *Odyssey*

European literature springs into existence with two great poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, traditionally ascribed to the same poet. That, at least, is the way the Greeks thought of their own literary history, and the Romans adopted that view and transmitted it to the rest of the world. In reality, of course, such a story is impossible: works of massive scale and great sophistication do not come out of nothing, and there was a long history behind the Homeric epics. That history was dark to the Greeks, and we are obliged to use conjecture for much of it. The effort is worth making, because its results help to make many things about the poems intelligible.

The ancestors of the Greeks entered the country from the north about 1900 B.C. They belonged to the great Indo-European family of peoples, which also includes, among others, the Germanic, Celtic, Latin and Iranian peoples, and the Aryans who in the same millennium invaded and conquered Northern India. They brought with them their language and their religion. They came from a nomadic existence on the great plains; the world which they entered was one of an old and settled culture, with palaces, frescoes, writing, luxury artefacts. There was trade and correspondence between the princes of the Aegean, the Minoans as we call them, and the kingdoms of the East: Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Egypt. The incomers came face to face with new and impressive things. They began to worship new gods and, especially, new goddesses: in addition to the old, of course, not instead of them. Their sky-god Zeus acquired a new wife, the great goddess Hera of Argos and Mycenae, and a wonderful daughter, the goddess Athena of Athens. New forms of art and music were borrowed and adapted.

Like all the Indo-European peoples, they must have brought with them heroic tales: fierce legends of warfare, cattle-raiding, adventure, and revenge. The Icelandic sagas, the German Song of the Nibelungen, the English Beowulf, are among the surviving representatives of such poetry. The story of the hero who is dishonoured and avenges himself on his own companions, and the story of the hero whose wife is beset by other men while he is away on his adventures, so that he must return in time to reclaim her and take his vengeance: the basic plots of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are recognisable as being at home in that ancient tradition. But the new setting in Greece, in the midst of complex and alien societies, must have had the effect of changing and developing the old poetry, both in technique and to some extent in attitudes. We have only to think, for instance, of an *Odyssey* with no role for Athena, and showing little familiarity with ships and the sea.

Those ancestors of the Greeks set up fortresses and kingdoms, under the influence of the Minoans, at Pylos and Athens and other places; from the most spectacular of them, Mycenae in the Peloponnese, we call them Mycenaeans. They were able to amass treasures of gold and ivory, to trade with the East, and to have bureaucracies of surprising extent and complexity, whose clerkly records, the 'Linear B tablets', let us see something of the workings of centralised kingdoms where everything was listed and inventoried: the lists of chariot wheels, for instance, faithfully record the presence of broken ones. All this was swept away, and the art of writing was lost, in the disasters of the twelfth century B.C., in which the citadels, including that of Mycenae, were destroyed. A dark age followed, with reduced population, humble conditions of life (no more stone-built palaces), and sharp decline both in the arts and in overseas connections. The cause of this catastrophe is generally identified as the coming of the Dorians, another group of Greeks who were slower than the rest to enter Greece, having stayed behind somewhere up in the north west. Intercourse with the East resumed on an appreciable scale by about 850 B.C., and the next two centuries saw a great increase in oriental products, rituals, and techniques such as building and jewellery. It was at this time that the Greeks took from Phoenicia the alphabet, dramatically improving it by the device of writing out the vowels as separate letters, and so creating the ancestor of our

own alphabet. This new literacy of Greece was quite unconnected with the old, and the epic poets imagined their heroes as illiterate in a world without writing.

What is the relevance of all this to Homer? The Greeks knew nothing about the man, or the name, to which they ascribed the greatest treasures of their literature. They could not even agree where he had lived: in the words of the epigram,

> Seven rich towns contend for Homer dead,
> Through which the living Homer begged his bread.

The name 'Homeros' is an unusual though not unique one, and it may seem reasonable to suppose that the reason why it became attached to the great epics was because there was indeed a brilliant singer who was called by it. In the absence, however, of any reliable biographical data, we fall back with particular urgency on what can be known about the antecedents of these extraordinary poems.

It emerges, then, that three strands of influence can be detected, although they cannot always be separated: the Indo-European inheritance of stories of heroism; the impact of the sophisticated world of the Aegean and the Near East in the second millennium B.C.; and the atmosphere of the time of the actual creation of the poems, about 700 B.C. The last of the three was doubtless the most important. It was the time when Greece was first taking on what we think of as her classical form. In metal work, sculpture, architecture, pottery, the influence of Oriental and Egyptian motifs and skills led to the creation of imposing works on the grand scale. New Greek cities – 'colonies' – were being founded, all the way from Marseille to Cyrene, and from Sicily to the Black Sea. The influence of Oriental literature is more controversial, but the discoveries of the twentieth century strongly suggest that along with the alphabet the Greeks owed something to the poetry of the East. Yet, in the words of the *Epinomis*, a dialogue attributed to Plato but probably written by one of his pupils, 'Whatever Greeks take over from foreigners, they make it better in the end.'

Thus Oriental parallels can be found, especially in the literature of Phoenician Ugarit (in modern Syria), but also in Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian poetry, for the basic form of the Homeric poems, narrative in a long verse repeated (like blank verse in English)

*ad infinitum*, without any kind of stanza or refrain; for the fixed epithets ('the broad earth', and 'the father of gods and men' actually are fixed expressions in Oriental poems); for the typical scenes and the council meetings of gods; for the mountain of the gods which is 'in the North', like the Greek Olympus; for the exact repetition, when a speech is reported to a third party, of the whole of the speech. The very ancient Epic of Gilgamesh has parallels even for such things as the profound and pessimistic meditation of the *Iliad* on the inevitable doom of man and the tragic nature of heroism, and for the techniques, so striking in the *Odyssey*, of starting the poem with two main characters in separate places, who are then brought together, and of including in the poem a character who narrates events from an earlier past (Utnapishtim, the counterpart of Noah, who tells Gilgamesh the story of the Flood).

No one, we know, ever said anything for the first time. The poet of the *Odyssey* would certainly not have claimed to be the first poet in the history of the world. This brief historical sketch may serve to give some idea of the complex situation into which he came: a time when Greece was emerging from a dark age into a new and exciting period of progress, expanding horizons, adventures in all the art forms. Behind the dark period lay unforgotten memories of the great king in Mycenae rich in gold, and an age of great achievements and splendid heroism, magnified by nostalgia and glorified by song and story through the bleak centuries that had intervened. And above all, perhaps, a singer of genius had recently produced a great and original poem, the *Iliad* (see section 13 below).

## 2 The date of the *Odyssey*

The almost unanimous view of the Greeks was that *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed by the same man, the blind singer Homer. Only a few heretics, known as 'separators', *chōrizontes*, ascribed them to different poets. His date was as uncertain as his place, and we fall back on internal arguments from the poems themselves. They contain elements of high antiquity: the memory of Mycenae as 'rich in gold', for instance, which it had not been since about 1150 B.C., and of the great king Minos of Crete. They also contain archaic verbal forms and phrases, and a sprinkling of words whose meaning was

evidently obscure to singers and audience alike, but which were felt to belong to the dignity of heroic epic.

The reader who is surprised by this might try the experiment of reading a couple of pages of *Hamlet*, which sounds intelligible enough in the theatre, and seeing how many expressions they contain whose meaning, if it is to be made clear, requires recourse to explanatory notes or to a dictionary. Such words are *dasplētis*, used once of the avenging Fury (*Odyssey* 15.234) and conventionally translated 'fierce', or *audēessa*, 'speaking', used of goddesses in the strange phrase *deinē theos audēessa*, 'dread goddess with speech' (*Odyssey* 10.150 etc.). This is strikingly paralleled in the Gilgamesh epic, where the queen of the gods is called 'good at the shout'; perhaps a phrase already mysterious in the Oriental epic had entered the Greek tradition and remained there, hallowed if opaque?

In addition, the poems are consciously set in a past which was different from the singer's own time. In those days, for instance, men fought and chopped wood with bronze, not iron, and in both epics that practice is kept up pretty consistently. But at moments the reality of the Iron Age shows through. It is revealing that the most conspicuous slip is in the phrase, twice repeated, 'iron of itself draws men on to fight' (16.294, 19.13): that is evidently a proverb, and its familiarity has enabled it to slip under the poet's guard. Again, the epics are set in a world before the coming of the Dorians. Places which in the post-Mycenaean period were inhabited by Dorians, such as Argos and Sparta, are in the poems the home of Achaeans, and Dorians are unheard of. But very occasionally there is a slip. Listing the peoples who live on Crete, Odysseus sticks too close to the historic truth and includes 'Dorians who are *trichāikes*' (19.177) – another mysterious adjective, perhaps referring to their hair-style: while the *Iliad*, too, which never mentions Dorians, does once, in a digression, refer to a place called Dorion (*Iliad* 2.594), a name which presupposes Dorian inhabitants, as Sussex and Essex presuppose Saxons.

A few physical objects occur in the poems which seem to belong definitely to the second millennium B.C., such as the 'silver-studded sword', a regular phrase (e.g. *Odyssey* 8.406), which seems to have been in the poetic tradition ever since such swords were in regular use, in the fifteenth century B.C. Other examples are such things as Helen's silver work-basket on wheels (*Odyssey* 4.131), and the

unique helmet adorned with boar's tusks which is described – and described as if it were an heirloom – at *Iliad* 10.261. But it can be said that in general, despite the presence both of genuinely ancient elements and also of deliberate stylisation, the world assumed in the epics is that of the eighth century or so B.C. That will emerge in section 18. What must have taken time to evolve is the artificial dialect – 'Homeric Greek' – in which the epics are composed. It was never spoken, and while it presents a coherent appearance it contains elements from different dialects, mixed with some which were created within the epic tradition and never existed outside it. Moreover, two other types of evidence point in the same direction. One is the mention of such things as temples for the gods (e.g. *Odyssey* 6.10 and 12.346), in place of the old outdoor worship: temples begin to appear in Greece about 800 B.C. About 750 a new style of warfare came in, the solid phalanx of uniformly armed men ('hoplites') which was to be characteristic of classical Greece. The Homeric poems, which in general portray war as an affair of duels between individual aristocrats, show in a number of places familiarity with this sort of fighting and the new style of armour it required. The latest instances of such definitely datable items come from about 725 or 700 B.C., and it is striking that it is almost at the same time – 700 to 675 – that scenes from the epics begin to be frequent in vase painting. By 650 or so the poems were clearly in existence, and probably, as we shall see in section 13, the *Odyssey* was slightly later than the *Iliad* and strongly influenced by it. We shall not go far wrong if we think that the *Iliad* was composed not later than 700, and the *Odyssey* not later than 675 B.C. Fortunately, in the words of G. S. Kirk, 'In the light of our ignorance of so much that went on in the ninth and eighth centuries, and even in the first half of the seventh, it must be confessed that our inability to place the poems more precisely does not at present matter very much.'

## 3 Bards and oral poetry

Homer was imagined by later Greeks as a blind singer, travelling about and making a living by his songs. In the *Odyssey* we find a blind singer, Demodocus; the poet tells us that 'The Muse loved him exceedingly, and she gave him both good and evil: she robbed him of

his eyes, but she gave him sweet song' (8.63–4). That objective but pregnant account reminds us of other Homeric figures: the blind prophet Tiresias, whom Odysseus must consult in the world of the dead (10.493, 12.267), and the virtuous Amphiaraus, descended from a family of hereditary prophets: 'Zeus of the aegis and Apollo loved him exceedingly with all kinds of love, and he did not come to the threshold of old age' (15.245–6). In the *Iliad* there is another singer, Thamyris, who was so proud of his skill that he challenged the Muses themselves: 'and in their anger they maimed him and took away his lovely song and made him forget his music' (*Iliad* 2.599–600).

At one level there is an explanation of this pattern in the fact that in early society a blind man may make a living as a singer or as the possessor of hidden knowledge, a second sight which flourishes in the absence of the first, as a lame man may flourish as a smith – whence the lame smith-god Hephaestus; but also there seems to be implied the likelihood of an intimate connection between such gifts and special suffering. He whom the gods love dies young, according to a later Greek proverb, and unusual gifts, while they are a sign of divine favour, mark their owner out for grief. And while it is the function of song to give delight, *terpein* (1.347, 8.429), yet epic song can arise only out of suffering and sorrow.

Not all singers are blind, however: Phemius, who sings to the suitors while Odysseus is away, can see perfectly well. Singers, in the *Odyssey*, are in principle wanderers. 'Nobody invites beggars', says the good swineherd Eumaeus to the haughty suitor Antinous:

> Who does invite a stranger from elsewhere, except indeed for one of those who are skilled men, a prophet or a healer of the sick or a worker in wood, or an inspired singer who gives delight with his song? They are the men who are invited, all over the world. (*Odyssey* 17.382–6)

Phemius, pleading for his life when the suitors are slain, says

> It was not by my will that I would come into your house to sing to the Suitors at their feasts: they were more numerous and stronger, and they would bring me here by force. (22.351–3)

Even among the Phaeacians, rich and luxurious, the singer Demodocus is apparently not one of the king's household but summoned

from outside when he is wanted (8.43–5, 62). The *Odyssey* is interested in these professional singers, who are treated with respect. Phemius' prayer for his life is immediately granted, and Demodocus is actually sent, by Odysseus, the most highly regarded cut of meat, with the words

> There, give this meat to Demodocus to eat, and I greet him, for all my sorrows: among all men on earth singers receive honour and respect, for the Muse has taught them their songs, and she loves the race of singers.
> (8.477–81)

Perhaps a certain hint of propaganda is discernible on behalf of the poet's own kind. It is a more subtle touch when the hero Odysseus is himself compared to a professional singer, 11.363ff., cf. 17.518–21: fine promotion indeed for the performer! And Homer's listeners can feel an identification with listeners in the heroic world itself.

That the poet was a singer and not a writer is a fact of greater importance than was generally recognised before the twentieth century, in which the evidence already present in the text of Homer has been combined with detailed study of the ways of illiterate bards in other countries, to form an important theory about the nature of the poems. It is an obvious fact about the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that they behave differently from most other poetry in the matter of repetitions. Speeches begin with formal addresses and indications of utterance, some of which recur constantly. Thus when Odysseus meets the shade of Achilles among the dead,

> With a groan he uttered winged words: 'Zeus-born son of Laertes, Odysseus of many plans . . . ' So he spoke, and I addressed him in answer; 'O Achilles, son of Peleus, greatest by far of the Achaeans . . . '
> (11.471ff)

Here we have four lines, each of which recurs again and again. 'With a groan he uttered winged words' comes seven times in the *Odyssey* and three times in the *Iliad*, the line addressing Odysseus by his name and titles comes fifteen times in the *Odyssey*, and seven times in the *Iliad*, the next line fifteen times in the *Odyssey*, and the address to Achilles twice in the *Iliad*.

These lines marking the beginning and end of speeches are in fact rather a special case: the incidence of exactly repeated phrases in them is higher than in any other category of Homeric verse. Their function must have been to slow the pace of events and to mark a pause between one utterance and another. What the characters say is often emotional and usually contributes something new and interesting to the progress of events; these stately lines, recalling the heroic rank of the speakers and marking off their speeches, resemble the few stereotyped notes on the continuo between arias in an opera by Mozart. But every reader of Homer is struck by the regular return of fixed epithets – swift ship, unploughed sea, long-haired Achaeans, grey-eyed goddess Athena. It has traditionally presented difficulties that such epithets recur imperturbably in places where they seem more or less incongruous. That Achilles is 'swift-footed Achilles' even when sitting down, or a ship 'a swift ship' even when motionless, is less disturbing. We can talk of 'a fast car' even when it is not in motion, and that looks like a parallel: in reality it is not, as the English phrase distinguishes one sort of car from another, while an Odyssean line like 12.292 'Let us prepare our meal beside our swift ship' has no such implication, but means if pressed (as it is not intended to be pressed) something like 'beside our ship – which naturally possesses the qualities appropriate to a ship in a heroic epic'.

The next stage of oddity is the reappearance of epithets from narrative into speech. Thus the poet describes Odysseus and Telemachus moving swiftly into action to remove the weapons from the walls of the hall: 'They then darted forward, Odysseus and his brilliant son' (19.21). It comes as a surprise, though, when in the middle of the fight for their lives the disloyal servant Melanthius, offering to go and fetch weapons for the Suitors, says 'That is where they put them, Odysseus and his brilliant son' (22.141). That is not the way people talk about their enemies. Nor is it life-like when Odysseus tells his supporters, after the slaughter of the Suitors, 'Then clean the splendid chairs and the tables with water and with sponges with many holes' (22.438–9). That evidently comes from the narrative use, a few lines later: 'Then they cleaned the splendid chairs and the tables with water and with sponges with many holes' (22.452–3). The

epithets, stately and only a little quaint in narrative, become bizarre in the giving of an order. As with Odysseus' brilliant son, and with the swift ship, the adjectives are not meant to be pressed.

Something similar must be said of Penelope taking a cupboard key 'in her sturdy hand' (21.6), an epithet evidently meant less for ladies than for heroes taking up spears in battle; we should not invent subtle justifications for such passages, as people still do. The 'shining clothes' which Nausicaa takes to wash (6.74) are no different: clothes normally are clean and shining in the heroic world, and the fact that these are dirty is not fully felt. When the swineherd Eumaeus says that if Odysseus had only come home he would have given to his loyal retainer 'a house and a plot of land and a much courted wife' (14.64), the epithet 'much courted' suggests a daughter of a noble house, not at all the sort of girl for a swineherd, however trusty; and in fact it is elsewhere used only of Penelope, beset by her hundred suitors (4.770, 23.249). Again, it would doubtless be inept to build on this epithet a psychological account of Eumaeus' pathetic hopes for social climbing. Sometimes epithets are used rather loosely, but in general they are appropriate and exact – the swift black ships, the tall trees, the clattering horses – and their constant recurrence, keeping all things before our mind's eye in their sharply seen essence, contributes a great deal to the style, clear yet noble, of Homeric verse.

The oral poet faces particular problems. He must keep his song going, and that involves fitting the constantly unfolding pattern of events to an elaborate and exacting metre. The Homeric hexameter is a long line consisting of patterns of 'long' and 'short' syllables (there is no stress accent in early Greek). The basic unit of the line is the dactyl, – ∪∪ (– = long syllable, ∪ = short syllable: in English, e.g. 'armoury' or 'sensible'). The two short (or 'light') syllables might be replaced by one long (or 'heavy') syllable. The line, as its name 'hexameter' suggests, consists of six of these dactyls, except that the last in the line marks the end of a rhythmical unit by a slight variation: not –∪∪ but –∪. The line thus consisted of a minimum number of twelve syllables, which is very rare, in fact: for instance

> tō d' en Messēnēi xumblētēn allēloiin. (21.157)
> (the pair met in Messene).

The maximum is seventeen, which is common: for instance

> ton d' apameibomenos prosephē polymētis Odysseus. (7.207 and repeatedly)
> (to him in answer spoke Odysseus of many plans).

The singer accompanied himself on the *phorminx*, or lyre: probably more to support the rhythm than to produce startling musical effects. The Homeric line is quite unusually long, complex, and exacting for oral epic, especially as there are other conventions governing such things as the points in the line where word division takes place. Some points are avoided for this, others cultivated; and there is a strong tendency for the line to divide into two slightly uneven halves, the second half being a little longer than the first, and also into four quarters, not equal in length. Some typical lines:

> andra moi / ennepe, Mousa, // polutropon, / hos mala polla (1.1)
> (Sing me, Muse, the man of many travels)
>
> pollōn d' / anthrōpōn // iden astea / kai noon egnō (1.3)
> (He saw the cities of many peoples and knew their minds)
>
> autōn gar / spheterēsin // atasthaliēsin / olonto (1.7)
> (For they perished through their own sin)
>
> kourē / Īkarioio, // periphrōn / Pēnelopeia (1.329)
> (The daughter of Icarius, the prudent Penelope).

The singer must fit his material to this elaborate frame, in addition to remaining within the artificial dialect and the elevated style and special vocabulary associated with epic song. Not only this: he must be prepared for interventions and pressures from his audience. The ideal he aims at, indeed, is to have them under his spell. That is the effect which Odysseus himself produces on the Phaeacians, when he tells them his tales: King Alcinous says to him 'We do not take you for a deceiver and a cheat, one of the many liars whom the black earth supports; your utterance is shapely, and your mind discreet. You have told your tale like a singer . . .' (11.363ff): like Homer himself, in fact. The result on the Phaeacian audience was, as the poet twice tells us, that 'He finished speaking, and they were all profoundly silent, held by enchantment in the shadowy hall' (11.33–4; 13.1–2). That 'enchantment', by the way, is to be

understood in something like a literal sense. We are to imagine an audience of strong and unselfconscious reactions, not jaded by constant watching of television; and the power of the word over them was great. In countries like Greece and Italy it is still stronger today than in northern Europe. Several centuries after Homer's time the philosopher Plato objected to the watching of tragedy, because it had too engrossing an emotional impact on the audience, and makes a professional Homeric performer describe how he dominates his audience with his performance, making them weep, and stare, and be lost in amazement (Plato, *Ion* 535e).

That was the aim of the singer, but it is clear from the *Odyssey* that the enchantment was not always achieved. Phemius, singing to the Suitors of the return of the Achaeans from Troy, is dominating his audience – 'The famous bard was singing to them, and they were sitting and listening in silence' (1.325) – when Penelope suddenly appears and interrupts, asking for a different theme instead of this harrowing one, the tale of events which have robbed her of her husband (1.337ff). Demodocus, too, the singer of Phaeacia, is repeatedly interrupted when his songs of the Trojan War make Odysseus weep.

> Alcinous, who sat next to Odysseus, heard his heavy sobs, and at once he spoke out among the Phaeacian lords of the oar: 'Listen, you leaders and rulers of the Phaeacians: now we have had our fill both of dinner and of the lyre which is the partner of the feast . . . ' (8.95–9)

Again later Alcinous stops Demodocus:

> Listen, you leaders and rulers of the Phaeacians: let Demodocus now check his tuneful lyre, for what he is singing is not to the liking of everyone . . . (8.537–8)

The singer must be aware of the response of his audience, and there can be no doubt that on different occasions he would sing different versions of any song – longer or shorter, more or less decorated, emphasising one feature or another, even taking different versions of the same story. We shall return to this important question in sections 6 and 10.

The consequence of all this was that the singer did not simply repeat his songs by rote. On the other hand, he also did not improvise

them on the spot out of wholly unpremeditated material. He had in his mind a range of recurrent and typical scenes: the launching of a ship, the preparing and consuming of a feast, the arrival of an unexpected person, a duel between heroes, the despatch and mission of a messenger, and so on. These scenes could be extended or compressed, combined or varied. He also had at his disposal an extensive and supple range of formulaic phrases and expressions, ways of referring to individual heroes and gods, phrases for simple acts such as 'drew his sword' or 'smote the water with their oars' or 'dawn broke'. It is the existence and the range of these systems which explains much which can seem unfamiliar about the poetry of Homer; and they derive their function from the oral nature of the Greek epic tradition. It is impossible to know how conscious and explicit such 'systems' were to the singer's own mind: he speaks in very different terms, of the Muse, goddess of song, inspiring him as he goes along (1.1–10; 8.480–1, 487–91. Cf. *Iliad* 1.1–8; 2.484–92).

## 4 The language of the *Odyssey* and the 'formulaic system'

It is easy to give examples of formulae which form a regular system. The hero Odysseus is of course mentioned many times in the *Odyssey*, and it was an obvious convenience to have ready-made ways of referring to him which fitted the hexameter line and complied with the stylistic level of the epic. The metrical form of his name, ⏑ – –, fits well into the final position in the line, and we find the poet constantly putting it there. He extends it to the convenient length – ⏑⏑ – – by putting before it the elevated but colourless epithet *dīos*, 'noble': *dīos Odusseus* comes at the end of more than seventy lines of the *Odyssey*, often preceded by a verb (*hupoleípeto*, 'was left behind', for instance, or *enērato*, 'slew'). That enables the poet to produce an elegant half line. But he may want to extend the name of his hero a little further: ⏑⏑ – ⏑⏑ – –. In that case he becomes *polymētis Odusseus*, 'Odysseus of many plans'. That makes it possible to put a rather shorter verb, for instance, before the name of the hero, especially a verb for 'spoke', *prosephē*: more than seventy lines have as their second half *prosephē polumētis Odusseus*, 'spoke

Odysseus of many plans'. But in the rarer case (three instances) where a naturally short vowel stood at the end of the word which was to precede ∪∪ – ∪ *Odusseus*, the rules of Homeric metre required a more massive group of consonants than the *p* of *polymétis*, in order to produce the effect of 'lengthening' the awkward short vowel. In that case Odysseus ceased to be 'of many plans' and became 'city-sacker', *ptoliporthos Odusseus*: so, for instance, at 8.3 *ōrto ptoliporthos Odusseus*, 'Odysseus city-sacker arose'. It was also often convenient to take up the whole of the second half of the verse with the hero's name, not just the last quarter: in that case he becomes – thirty-two times – *polutlās dīos Odusseus*, 'much-enduring noble Odysseus', ∪ – – – ∪∪ – –.

Now, Odysseus was, of course, noble, and a planner, and long suffering, and a city-sacker (the title no doubt relates to his devising of the wooden horse which led to the capture of Troy); the system is concerned to be appropriate, and it never (for instance) gives wily Odysseus the regular epithet of the dashing Achilles, *podas ōkus*, 'swift of foot', although *podas ōkus Odusseus* would scan just as well as *polumētis Odusseus*. But clearly it would be inappropriate to find reasons other than metrical convenience for the choice of one of these qualities of Odysseus rather than another, in a particular passage of the poem. Similar patterns can be found for other prominent persons, such as Penelope and Telemachus. This point is an important one, but it is also important not to exaggerate it.

First, despite the formal elegance and wide extension of such systems of formulae involving proper names, it remains true that the name of Odysseus occurs more often in the *Odyssey* with no epithet at all than with one. Similarly, while there are recurrent phrases with epithets for the sea, they are used only in one in three of the allusions to the sea in the poem. Second, it must be remembered that ancient Greek is a highly inflected language, like Latin: modern German gives some idea of grammatical inflection, but has only a remnant by the standards of the ancient languages. That means that the name of Odysseus, like any other noun, will appear in different forms in accordance with its grammatical function in the sentence. *Odusseus* is the form of his name only if he is the subject of the verb; if he is the object, if someone or something looks at him or insults him or misses him, then his name has the

form *Odussēă*, and all the subject formulae are unusable. If he is the possessor of something, or has something given to him, then two more forms (*Odussēŏs, Odussēĭ*) must be accommodated in the verse. For these cases there are no systems comparable, in elegance and economy, with that for Odysseus as subject, and a much wider range of solutions is found. We are not to suppose that there existed sets of formulae which would generate poems more or less automatically.

It will be helpful to give an example on a more extended scale of the way in which the poet can use his stock of lines and motifs. What follows is a fairly unstressed passage, the summoning by Telemachus of a public meeting (*agorē*) of the people of Ithaca, the first for twenty years, in his attempt to mobilise public opinion against the Suitors. The meeting itself will be very lively, with a full range of contrasting speeches and Telemachus reduced to bursting into tears, but the introduction is dispassionate:

ēmos d' ērigeneia phanē rhododaktulos ēōs,
ornut' ar' ex eunēphin Odussēos philos hūios,
heimata hessamenos, peri de xiphos oxu thet' ōmōi,
possi d' hupo liparoisin edēsato kāla pedīla,
bē d' imen ek thalamoio theōi enalinkios antēn.
aipsa de kērūkessi liguphthongoisi keleuse
kērussein agorēnde karē komoōntas Achaious.
hoi men ekērusson, toi d' ēgeironto mal' ōka.
autar epei r' ēgerthen homēgerees t' egenonto,
bē r' imen eis agorēn, palamēi d' eche chalkeon enchos
ouk oios, hama tōi ge duō kunes argoi heponto. (*Odyssey* 2.1–11)

(When early-rising rose-fingered Dawn appeared, / then the dear son of Odysseus rose from his bed, / putting on his clothes, and about his shoulder he slung his sword, / and under his smooth feet he fastened his fine sandals, / and he left his bedroom like a god to meet. / At once he instructed the clear-voiced summoners / to summon the long-haired Achaeans to a meeting. / They cried their summons, and the people were soon assembled. / Then when they had assembled and come together, / he made his entrance into the meeting-place, and in his hand he held a bronze spear. / He was not unaccompanied: two nimble dogs followed him.) [In the translation I have indicated with an oblique line the end of each verse of the Greek.]

That is a representative example of a routine piece of Homeric narration. It opens with a beautiful and memorable line comparing the rays of dawn to the extended fingers of a hand, the colour of a rose; it goes on to a competent account of Telemachus' preparations, and it then presents him making his first public appearance. Athena, the poet goes on to say, shed grace on him, and the people gazed in admiration as he took his father's seat (a moment pregnant with symbolism: the young prince starts to assert himself as king – but without success). We see him, an outdoor young man, with his dogs at his heels. In the passage there is not a single phrase which does not occur elsewhere in identical form, and whole groups of lines also are found elsewhere. The first line appears altogether twenty times in the *Odyssey* and twice in the *Iliad*. It is a perfect line, and the singer felt no need to try to improve on it. Of the second line, the first half is used twice elsewhere in the *Odyssey* (of Nestor getting out of bed, 3.405; of Menelaus, 4.307), and the second half, a periphrasis for Telemachus, recurs four times. The next three lines occur unchanged at 4.308–10, the rising of Menelaus; only the first two (lines 3 and 4 here) at 20.125–6, again of Telemachus; while line 4 also appears four times in the *Iliad*. Line 5, as we have seen, appears in the same context in the fourth book of the *Odyssey*; it is also notable that the first half appears again in the *Iliad*, where it is used of the goddess Hera leaving her toilette to seduce her husband Zeus, *Iliad* 14.188 ('he' and 'she' are not expressed in the Greek), while the second half closely resembles the phrase used in the *Iliad* of the summoner Talthybius, *theōi enalinkios audēn*, 'like a god in voice'.

The next lines, which describe the summoning of an assembly, recur in the *Iliad*, which contains more assemblies, but not in the *Odyssey*: with a variant for the first three words of line 6, lines 6–8 recur identically at *Iliad* 2.50–2; later in the same book of the *Iliad*, when the assembly is over and the men move off to fight, they recur again (*Iliad* 2.442–4), but this time with the substitution for *agorēnde* ('to a meeting') of the word *polemonde* ('to war'). This illustrates the suppleness of these formulae: as with the possibility of completing 'like a god . . .' in two different ways which both fit perfectly, so the change of one word for another which is metrically equivalent enables the singer to use a group of three lines in two different contexts. The tenth line is a little less straightforward, as the poems

are not usually concerned to represent the *first* appearance of a hero at an assembly: such gatherings were a routine part of the hero's life, his ambition to be 'a speaker of words and a doer of deeds' (*Iliad* 9.443). Line 10 is composed of elements which all do recur. 'He made his entrance into the meeting-place' comes at *Odyssey* 20.146 (a weak passage, where Telemachus is simply got out of the house for a little for the poet's own purposes and there is no meeting); 'and in his hand he held a bronze spear' is used of Athena when she arrives at Odysseus' house in disguise, 1.104, while the phrase 'a bronze spear' at the end of the line is a very common one, appearing seventeen times in the *Iliad* and five times in the *Odyssey*. Thus we see that the common 'a bronze spear', useful primarily for descriptions of fighting, is extended, in the rarer peacetime context, with 'and in his hand he held'; that produces half a line which fits smoothly with another half line.

Finally, line 11, the two dogs. 'Two nimble dogs followed him' is a phrase which occurs three times in the *Odyssey*, but the line as a whole is more interesting than that simple fact. It is a regular feature of the Homeric world that a lady does not appear alone in company, especially the company of men. When Penelope comes among the Suitors, she comes

> ouk oiē, hama tēi ge kai amphipoloi du' heponto
> (*Odyssey* 1.331, etc.)
> (Not unaccompanied, with her followed two maids)

Three times that line is used of Penelope in the *Odyssey*, and once of a very different lady, the guilty and remorseful Helen of the *Iliad* (*Iliad* 3.143). There is a family resemblance between that line and the one which describes Telemachus accompanied by two dogs, as we see when we add some other members of the family:

> Not unaccompanied, with him two menservants followed
> (*Iliad* 24.573)
> Not unaccompanied, with him went Helen and Megapenthes
> (*Odyssey* 15.100)

(of Menelaus with his wife and his son).

> Not unaccompanied, with him went the two sons of Antenor
> (*Iliad* 2.822)

It is not only that 'not unaccompanied, with him/her . . .' provides a convenient half line, which can be completed with maids or manservants or dogs or other heroes; the number two seems to come naturally in such lines. We may even find a hint of it in a verse like *Odyssey* 10.208, when Eurylochus reluctantly leads his scouting party on Circe's island:

> Off he went, with him two and twenty companions . . .

Why that number? Because the shape of the verse suggested the number two. Some of the older commentators enmeshed themselves in problems on the question how many men Odysseus had at this time and how he reached that number: we can see that such questions are not the point.

The point is that the exigencies of performing in the epic tradition led to a kind of poetry in which the unit of composition tended not to be the word, as it is in most of the verse familiar to us, but the phrase: sometimes a substantial sentence or more, occupying several lines of the poem. Everywhere in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the attachment of nouns and epithets tends to grow fixed and regular; a particular verb tends to occur regularly at the same point of the line; phrases are repeated, or others are modelled on the sound of them. In the case of *theōi enalinkios antēn* and *theōi enalinkios audēn*, 'like a god to meet' and 'like a god in voice', the close resemblance of sound has clearly played the decisive part.

At another level, we see in the *Odyssey* the importance of the typical scene. The poet has in his repertoire a large number of patterns for scenes, which it is a great part of his skill to vary and arrange. In the *Odyssey* there are, for instance, a great many scenes concerning the arrival of a stranger and the offer to him of hospitality. There is a definite series of events which should follow. The stranger should be greeted, welcomed, invited in, and offered a meal. After he has eaten, he can with good manners be asked who he is and where he comes from (that is made explicit at *Odyssey* 3.69–70 and 4.60–1). The guest may be given a bath and bedded down for the night; at parting the host should give him a present (*xeinion*). This outline can be filled in with details. The question of the identity of the guest, for instance, can be made into a little drama. Helen, who shows herself cleverer than her husband at every turn, is quick to guess the identity

of Telemachus (4.137ff). With Odysseus among the Phaeacians the moment of self-revelation is delayed enormously: he is asked after his first meal 'Who are you?' (7.238), but he contrives to conceal his identity for another seven hundred lines, giving hints by his behaviour at dinner the next evening (8.83, 522) but finally answering only at 9.19 – 'I am Odysseus son of Laertes, famous among all men for my cunning, and my reputation has reached to the sky . . .'

The meal can be a sacrificial feast to a god, as with the people of Pylos in Book Three, or a wedding, as with Menelaus in Book Four, and that allows for developments and variations. At dinner the company may tell of their experiences (Nestor, 3.103ff; Menelaus, 4.351ff; enormously expanded, Odysseus, 9.19–12.453), or a singer may tell a story (8.266ff). The motif of presents also lends itself to various developments. Villains, as we shall see, offer monstrous parodies of the gifts which are the due of a guest. The moment of presentation can be disposed of in half a line ('There they spent the night, and he gave them presents': 15.187), or it can be developed into one or more separate scenes, as when Odysseus is given not only presents by his host, King Alcinous, but also a special gift by a tactless Phaeacian who has insulted him, and in addition gifts by Queen Arete which he packs in a box and fastens with a special knot which Circe taught him (8.401–48). From the Phaeacians Odysseus receives fabulously lavish gifts, 'bronze and gold in plenty and garments, so rich that Odysseus would not have brought so much from Troy if he had come unscathed, bringing his share of the booty' (5.39–41; 13.135–7). That enables the poet to remedy his hero's losses, a point to which he, like Odysseus, attaches great importance (see section 19). Again, the motif can be made into a little comedy of manners. Menelaus, well meaning but obtuse, offers Telemachus a gift of horses and chariot: Telemachus must tactfully decline, explaining that Ithaca is too rocky for horses (4.589–619). Good-natured Menelaus offers a silver gilt bowl instead; but as he makes the gift he is upstaged – as usual – by his wife Helen, who appears with a gift of her own, a dress for Telemachus' bride when he gets married, 'a keepsake of the hands of Helen' (15.112–30). She knows the extra value which that provenance will give it.

Conversely, there may be breaches of hospitality. When the disguised Athena arrives in Ithaca to speak to Telemachus, the Suitors

take no notice of her coming (1.103–22); they go on with their games and their noise, and Telemachus and his guest are forced to whisper (1.156–7). No wonder Athena comments unfavourably on their manners:

> Tell me the truth now: what is this feasting, what is this throng? What is its function? Is it a celebration or a wedding? Evidently it is not a dinner by subscription. They looked to me like violent and arrogant men dining in this house. Any decent newcomer would be shocked by the sight of all their outrages. (1.224–9)

This establishes the theme for the terrible wrongness of Odysseus' eventual arrival home. He is insulted by the servants (17.215ff, 18.321ff, 19.6ff) and mocked and abused by the Suitors, who throw things at him in his own house; Ctesippus, one of the Suitors, actually says 'I will give this man a present (*xeinion*)' – and throws a cow's hoof at him (20.296). That recalls the monstrous behaviour of the Cyclops, who promises a present to Odysseus in return for his good wine and then says 'I will devour you last, after your companions, the others first: that shall be your present' (9.369–70). The Cyclops is duly punished for this grisly offence against hospitality, and when Ctesippus is slain the virtuous oxherd exults over his corpse: 'That is a present for you in return for the hoof you bestowed on the god-like Odysseus' (22.290). These scenes of the perversion of hospitality are to be appreciated in the light of the repeated examples of true hospitality, and collectively they all contribute a central strand to the moral pattern of the poem: both Odysseus and Penelope say of the slaughter of the Suitors, using identical words, 'It is the gods who have killed them, for they respected nobody in the world, high or low, who came among them' (22.413–16, 23.63–6). At the opposite extreme of insignificance we can see how the poet can reduce the theme to a minimum – he does not like to omit it:

> The sun went down and all ways were darkened, and they arrived at Pherae, at the house of Diocles, the son of Ortilochus son of Alpheius. There they spent the night, and he gave them presents. And when early rising rose-fingered dawn appeared, they yoked their horses and mounted the bright chariot and drove away. (15.185–91)