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HOMER
ODYSSEY

BOOKS XVII–XVIII

EDITED BY
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For my father

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PREFACE

Homer's *Odyssey* tells a familiar story: a hero, a veteran of the Trojan War, returns home after ten trial-filled years of wandering in exotic lands only to find his halls occupied by 108 carousing youths who court his wife in the hope that the lawful husband and master has perished abroad. And yet for all the simplicity of its tale, the poet's technique is brilliantly intricate; from the notorious tease of the opening line which hides the epic hero's name, to the sudden threat of retaliation from the dead suitors' kin in the closing episode, the composition uses flashbacks and internal narratives, dramatic irony, doubling, and retardation devices to keep us wondering how exactly affairs in Ithaca will be resolved. It is a work that, not surprisingly, has exercised a lasting fascination from archaic through to contemporary times, and that has been re-imagined in countless forms, visual, verbal and musical among them.

If another study of the *Odyssey* needs no justification, then the choice to focus on books 17 and 18 may prompt the question 'why these?' One reason is the sheer diversity and tonal range of the two books' contents, which run from the burlesque comedy of the boxing match between the disguised Odysseus and the parasite Irus to the charged moment when the hero re-enters his home after his twenty years' absence and first sets eyes on his wife. The pathos of the death of the tick-infested Argus, who has kept vigil for his master ever since his departure, is unmistakable, its poignancy sharpened by the entirely different episode preceding it, where Odysseus meets the churlish cowherd Melanthius and is treated to language and threats normally excluded from the epic register. Books 17 and 18 also offer the first full exploration of the contrary impulses and motives that will inform Penelope's future conduct, articulate the theodicy that in part shapes the hero's revenge, and offer virtuosic displays of Odysseus' capacity for role-playing, mendacity and verbal irony at the expense of his interlocutors.

Previous work on the *Odyssey*, particularly in this series, also helped determine my selection of these two books. A previous edition by R. B. Rutherford treats books 19 and 20, while A. F. Garvie's edition covers books 6–8. As will be clear, I owe many debts, frequently unacknowledged for the sake of economy, to the work of my predecessors. Following the lead of Rutherford, Garvie and C. W. Macleod in his edition of *Iliad* 24, also in this series, I emphasize the 'literary' or stylistic and structural over the more strictly technical aspects of the poem, aiming to illuminate Homer's compositional procedures and to show how artfully the poet constructs individual phrases, lines, and passages through the purposeful deployment of formulas, similes, modes of address, apostrophe and other rhetorical devices. Assuming that Homer has in mind a unified and overarching poetic design, I draw attention to how one scene echoes or anticipates another and how the poet develops themes and motifs sounded at other points in the tale. The commentary also incorporates some of the chief critical approaches developed over the last two decades: it signals the variety of narratological devices that shape the action, the poet's use of narrative indeterminacy, and his glances to other competing versions of his hero's adventures so as to enrich and promote his

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novel account of events; the notes also explore the poem's ideological orientation and the social, political and religious context that it assumes, observe ways in which the *Odyssey* revisits and even revises Iliadic material, and suggest that at various points the poet foregrounds and comments on his own art and modes of composition. As a way of indicating the degree to which the poem has influenced subsequent texts, I have also included some of what I see as among the most significant echoes in later Greek and Roman authors. In keeping with previous editors, I have reserved for the Introduction discussion of more general issues of oral composition and poetics, and the still outstanding questions concerning the nature of the occasion and the makeup of the audience before whom the poem would have been performed. Here too I place books 17 and 18 within the context of the larger *Odyssey*, also signalling their major themes and particular contribution to the poem as a whole, and briefly discuss Homeric metre and the transmission of the text. The Introduction does not include an overview of Homeric grammar (the editions of both Rutherford and W. B. Stanford offer helpful sections on that), but the body of the commentary should supply the necessary help. Throughout I have tried to keep in mind the double aim of providing the lexical, grammatical and syntactical assistance that students may require and of trying to show the richness and complexity of the poet's compositional techniques.

I am happy to acknowledge my many debts to other previous commentaries on the poem. I have drawn repeatedly on the discussion of books 17 and 18 by J. Russo in vol. III of the three-volume Oxford Commentary, a work which covers the entire *Odyssey* (first published in a six-volume format in Italian), as well as on the contributions by other scholars in that edition. These frequently go more deeply into the textual, lexical and archaeological questions treated briefly here, and offer much information of a more technical kind. Also indispensable is the older but still very valuable two-volume edition of the poem by W. B. Stanford. Again, to save space, I have often incorporated material from these works without acknowledgment.

It is a pleasure, finally, to thank my many teachers, colleagues, students and friends who have guided this project to completion. This commentary simply could not have come about without the patient and painstaking assistance of the two editors of the series, Richard Hunter and Pat Easterling. Not only did they read far too many versions, correct countless mistakes, alert me to repetitions and superfluities, but they tactfully but firmly kept reminding me of the larger purposes of a commentary in this series, that it should, in concise fashion, both help and engage its readers. Mark Griffith kindly read a very early draft, showing me just how to go about the project, and Marco Fantuzzi heroically commented on a completed version of the whole, catching numerous errors along the way. Helene Foley continued in her long-standing role as guide by giving help on the Introduction, Suzanne Saïd was a touchstone for all matters bibliographic, and Tobias Meyer acted as 'guinea pig' for one of the introductory sections. Other colleagues at Columbia have provided assistance and encouragement of many different kinds, and I am also grateful to the many students there who have read the poem with me over the years. Thanks too to Eleanor Dickey

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and Joshua Katz on whose linguistic expertise I have drawn. Other debts are of a more personal kind: to my husband, Andrew Feldherr, thanks for everything over these years and more, and not least for revising the adage ‘get a life’ when I was at a moment of scholarly *aporia*, and suggesting that I ‘get a commentary’, which I did. To my two children, Rebecca and Miriam, the first of whom loves hearing stories from the poem, the second of whom understands why the Argus scene would first have turned me into a juvenile Hellenist. And to my father, to whom this commentary is dedicated, who treated me to his own version of the *Odyssey* when I was a child, and whose bookshelves are filled with multiple translations and re-tellings of this endlessly fascinating tale.