THE MEANING OF MEAT AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE *ODYSSEY*

This comprehensive study of the *Odyssey* sees in meat and meat consumption a central theme of the poem that is essential for its interpretation. It aims to place the cultural practices represented in the poem against the background of the (agricultural) lived reality of the poem's audiences in the archaic age, and to align the themes of the adventures in Odysseus' wanderings with the events that transpire at Ithaca in the hero's absence. The criminal meat consumption of the Suitors of Penelope in the civilized space of Ithaca is shown to resonate with the adventures of Odysseus and his Companions in the pre-cultural worlds they are forced to visit. The book draws on folklore studies, the anthropology of hunting cultures, the comparative study of oral traditions, and the agricultural history of archaic and classical Greece. It will also be of interest to narratologists and students of folklore and Homeric poetics.

EGBERT J. BAKKER is Professor of Classics at Yale University. Within the wider area of the interaction between linguistic analysis and literary interpretation he works mainly on the language, poetics, and interpretation of the Homeric poems. He has lectured and published widely on both linguistic and literary subjects. Among his publications are *Linguistics and Formulas in Homer* (1988); *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse* (1997); and *Pointing at the Past: From Formula to Performance in Homeric Poetics* (2005). He has co-edited *Brill's Companion to Herodotus* (2002) and is the editor of *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language* (2010).

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EGBERT J. BAKKER

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Preface

The seed for this book was planted when I browsed through the reader for a graduate seminar on "Environmental Anthropology" at McGill University, Montreal in the Summer of 2000. The emphasis on the symbolic value and religious importance of meat for traditional hunting cultures seemed immediately relevant to the *Odyssey*, the Circe episode in particular. When starting to work on this project, first in the form of preparation for lectures and seminars, it began to occur to me that the theme of meat eating could grow into something more than an "interesting insight from anthropology," that it could be formulated as one of the unifying forces in the poem, providing thematic coherence between the hero's tale of his Wanderings and the poet's tale of the hero's Homecoming.

The resulting argument was shaped in an extended process of lecturer–audience interaction. A long series of conferences and departmental gatherings in various countries and continents, beginning with the University of Georgia at Athens in September 2000 and ending with Boston University and the University of Konstanz, Germany in November 2011, witnessed points in an ongoing gestation process. Each new presentation yielded some progress, whether through a provocative question or the need to rephrase an argument in light of audience reaction. This very fruitful process includes students at various levels in various universities. I am thinking in particular of the participants of a graduate seminar on the *Odyssey* at Yale University in the Fall of 2005. I hope that all those who attended the earlier discussions and presentations, to the extent that they remember them at all, will agree upon reading the following pages that some progress has been made.

Prologue: food for song

Song and food, or more precisely, meat, are intimately connected in the Homeric world. Aristocratic banquets are the prime occasion for the performance of heroic song, as exemplified in the *Odyssey* by Demodokos' songs at the feast in the hall of Alkinoos, king of the Phaeacians (*Od.* 8.62–82, 471–520), the songs of the anonymous "divinely inspired singer" (*theîos aoidós*) in Menelaos' hall (*Od.* 4.17–19), or the compulsory performance of Phemios before the Suitors in Odysseus' *megaron* (*Od.* 1.150–5, 325–7; 17.261–3). But the connection holds for different, less illustrious settings as well. The humble meal in the hut of Eumaios, Odysseus' faithful swineherd, provides a natural setting for storytelling (15.398–402), and even though the tale of the traveler, whether mendacious or true, is in itself not song, the *Odyssey*, as we shall see, has many ways to act as if it is.

The unbreakable bond between song and its setting is the backdrop for the typically Odyssean interconnection between singer and hero. Demodokos is called "hero" (ἥρῳ Δημοδόκῳ, *Od.* 8.483), after Odysseus offers him a choice piece of meat: the singer becomes part of the aristocratic feasting group by being allowed to participate in the meat distribution that takes place among the members of his audience. Singing the songs of heroes well, as Demodokos does, is to become subsumed in the world of heroes. Conversely, Odysseus the hero comes to be cast in terms appropriate to singers throughout the poem, from his performance in Alkinoos' hall to the stringing of the bow in his own *megaron*. The bow will become the "accompaniment of the banquet" (ἀναθήματα δαιτός, *Od.* 21.430; cf. 1.152), the singer's habitual lyre turning into a lethal and destructive weapon in the hero's hands.

The Suitors' final banquet is the occasion at which the singing of the song breaks through its confines as self-contained art and becomes epic action in and of itself. The massacre of the Suitors, notionally carried out by the singer who performs at their feast, forms in this way (and in others

as well) the climax of the *Odyssey*'s self-conscious and metapoetic tendencies. We can also say, and this is the subject of this book, that the poem comes to encompass its own setting, making the banquet itself one of its important themes.

The killing of the Suitors is the end of a banquet that started, strictly speaking, not on the day of the mass killing itself, the day of the festival of Apollo of the New Moon, but three years earlier, as a deliberate and concerted effort literally to eat Odysseus' house to ruin. The absent king's herds and flocks are systematically plundered with the intention of wiping them out completely, and thereby destroying the king's son's inheritance. The poem's central act is an extended feast, criminally perverted and magnified. The nature of this feast is highlighted in the contrast with good banquets in the poem, such as Nestor's sacrificial feasts at Pylos, the Phaeacians' banquet in honor of their mysterious guest, or the humble meal in Eumaios' hut.

Even more central to the poem's thematics and narrative structure is the relation between the Suitors' extended feast and other examples of problematic feasting carried out, far outside the confines of civilization, by another group of Ithacans. During their involuntary extended voyage, which takes them to the ends of the world and back in time from their own Bronze Age to both the barbaric and the paradisiacal realities of the Golden Age, Odysseus and his Companions encounter a variety of situations that resonate with the situation back home in Ithaca. The description of these situations, when aligned with the narrative of the events at Ithaca, lends a depth and intensity to the Suitors' depredations that a narrative using simple Bronze (or Iron) Age terms could not have achieved.

The book's three central chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) explore the extensive paradigmatic relationships between the adventures in the Otherworld and the situation at Ithaca. The chapters focus, respectively, on the Cyclops episode, the Circe episode, and the episode of the Cattle of the Sun. Each of these three adventures confronts Odysseus with a different type of Master of Animals and revolves around meat eating and its many modalities. The Companions eat the meat of hunted animals and farmed animals; they enjoy extreme hospitality and serve as meal to their host themselves; they enjoy effortless and limitless plenty, and are faced with absolute taboo. The situations they encounter present meat and its consumption as the essential prerequisite of civilization, even humanity itself; yet, at the same time, these situations have the potential to bring down the human eater to the level of the beast he consumes. If eating meat is what ultimately constitutes civilized man and his relation to the divine, it also

represents a danger zone in which transgression is a real and constant possibility. Ultimately, *nostos* – in the sense not only of return, but also of survival, of the individual and his community – is a matter of restraint and moderation, the ability to resist the temptation that meat presents.

Structural parallels with the Wanderings turn the killing of the Suitors into a many-layered event, providing Odysseus with roles in addition to that of the deadly singer. In particular, Polyphemos the Cyclops and Helios the Sun gain significance beyond the confines of their respective episodes, as Odysseus takes on features of both when he goes about his gruesome work of effecting the kind of mass killing of which he himself was once the sole survivor. The food perspective reveals that the Suitors and the Companions are, as unrestrained consumers of meat, paradigmatically linked to each other, whereas Odysseus himself provides the link to the previous episodes in taking on the role of returning and revenging Master of Animals.

The three first chapters provide in various ways the background for this reading of the Wanderings in light of the wider themes of the poem. Chapter 3 offers an account of meat consumption and its symbolic value in the *Iliad* as backdrop for a characterization of the Suitors' meat consumption as a systematic perversion of the heroic feast. The outrage of their actions acquires economic color and shape when set against the background of the realities of animal husbandry in the Iron Age, the time frame of the *Odyssey*'s historical audiences. The *Odyssey* in this way comes to be seen as a tale of the transgression of limits and of the depletion of finite resources.

The first two chapters provide the basis for a reading of the poem in which the Wanderings and the main story, the hero's tale and the poet's, are strongly and systematically interconnected. Chapter 1 makes a case for eliminating the narratological hierarchy inherent in making Odysseus an "embedded" narrator, arguing that the hero and the poet are on the same footing in the presentation of the tale. Chapter 2 detects a basic narrative pattern running through the *Odyssey* with numerous variations and transpositions, and linking the hero's tales of adventures in exotic lands with the poet's story of a social conflict in a remote corner of rural Greece.

The two final chapters take up problems and questions raised by the earlier parts of the book. Chapter 7 revisits some of the old theological problems in the interpretation of the *Odyssey*, questions revolving around theodicy and human responsibility. Of particular importance here is the question of the guilt of the Companions in eating the Cattle of the Sun. My conclusions focus on a conflict on the divine plane (Poseidon versus Zeus) that is deeper than sometimes supposed, reflecting tensions in the

poem regarding the ambiguous poetic traditions of its central hero. Chapter 8 takes up the metapoetic aspects of Odysseus' disguise as wanderer and teller of liar tales, a disguise that crucially involves that part of the human anatomy that is most physically involved in the consumption of food: the belly. The shedding of the beggar's disguise will not only reveal the hero who was hiding behind it, but will also seal his successful return by aligning him with the ultimate epic hero, the Iliadic Achilles.

The argument of the book frequently relies on the interpretation of formulaic repetition as the means by which paradigmatic linkage between episodes is articulated. An Epilogue will address the poetic and semantic problems raised by this method. The central question to be addressed is whether the deliberate "quotation" of a formula can be reconciled with a conception of the *Odyssey* as oral poetry, as proposed in the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Readers who are used to approaching Homeric problems from the oral-formulaic side may want to start with the Epilogue, although full appreciation of the case studies presented may require the detail provided in the preceding chapters.