CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

Part One (Books 1–4): The 'Telemachy'

Book 1

1.1–10 **Tell me, Muse**, of the **ingenious and much-travelled man** who wandered
so far off course after he sacked the sacred citadel of **Troy**!
He saw the cities of many men and he understood their minds;
while attempting to stay alive and see his men home safely
he suffered great pain on the sea – and in his heart – 1.5
but despite this effort he did not save them.
No, they perished as the result of their own recklessness: they consumed
the cows of Hyperion the Sun God, **the fools**! –

Tell me, Muse taken literally these words form a prayer or invocation to a divinity: in keeping with the representation of divine knowledge elsewhere in the poem, Homer as narrator here admits his dependence on a superior power for things no mortal can possibly know in full. This admission may also be taken more suggestively to highlight the quality of the poem – songs and poets are regularly 'divine' in Homer. The traditional number of nine Muses appears in Book 24 (lines 60–2), at Achilles' funeral; otherwise the unspecified 'Muse' appears elsewhere only in Book 8: she 'loves' and 'has instructed' the court poet Demodocus. The mythological traditions about the Muses vary widely; Homer has left his treatment of them much vaguer than his contemporary Hesiod in his *Theogony*, where they are the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosune (Memory).

ingenious and much-travelled the Greek word here (*polutropos*) is used only once again of Odysseus at **10.330** (see question 2 on p. 96); Greeks themselves in antiquity debated as to its interpretation and it is translated twice here to capture its ambiguity. It must mean something like 'much-turned' but the meaning of 'turned' here is open to interpretation. (See Peradotto 1990 for an intriguing exploration of some of the possibilities.) Odysseus' most common epithets are 'long-suffering' (*polutlas*) and 'crafty' (*polumetis*); both are used frequently of him in the *Iliad*.

man in Greek, it is *andra* (man) that is famously and most emphatically the first word of the poem (we may compare 'anger', the first word of the *Iliad*), yet we do not learn the name of this man until line 21. Virgil acknowledged Homer's influence by following this pattern in the first three words of the *Aeneid*: *arma uirumque cano*, 'arms and the man I sing': his poem will contain both the martial element of the *Iliad* and the story of a hero's voyage from the *Odyssey*.

Troy Odysseus can be credited with the sacking of the city (traditionally dated to 1184 BC) because he devised the plan of the Trojan Horse (see note on **4.272**).

the fools Homer seems to be disclosing his opinion to his audience, not a common phenomenon. Odysseus' men will consume the cows in Book 12.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

A Muse plays the cithara (from which we get our word 'guitar') on Mount Helicon, one of the traditional homes of the Muses (vase-painting, fifth century BC).

and in return that god took from them the day of their homecoming.
Start your story **somewhere here**, goddess – you are the daughter of Zeus!
Do for my audience and me **as you have done for others**. 1.10

For most readers these first ten lines form a prologue or preface to the *Odyssey*, much in the same way that the *Iliad* starts. Some readers have taken the preface to extend to line 21.

somewhere here a unique word in all of Homer (such words are referred to as *hapax legomena*), it draws attention to Homer's dependence on his Muse – the poet has no idea where to begin – and it ironically gives an almost casual quality to what is a very carefully planned unfolding of narrative complexity. Homer closes this section as he began it, with direct address to the Muse, a device typical of oral poetry known as 'ring composition', which helps articulate the divisions of the narrative for the listener.

as you have done for others the Greek here seems to suggest that Homer is again coming across as a self-deprecating human narrator in need of divine help; he also hints at the fact that other poets have treated similar material.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

1 The focus of lines 4–9 is on Odysseus' relations with his companions. While this is a significant theme it can hardly be said to be the major theme of the poem. For some scholars these lines jar so much that they must have belonged to a different poem originally. Do you think these lines make sense as an introduction to the poem?

2 Why might Homer wish to excuse Odysseus from blame in the deaths of his men?

3 What do we learn about Odysseus in these opening lines?

4 Traditionally these lines have been felt to be symptomatic of Homer's narrative bias in favour of his protagonist. Can you make a case for a more subtle or even ironic authorial attitude towards Odysseus?

1.11–95

Though all the others who had escaped utter destruction at Troy
were home after surviving the war and the sea,
the nymph, Lady **Calypso**, resplendent goddess, kept him back
in hollow caves, isolated. He longed
to come home and return to his wife, but Calypso wanted him to
be her husband.
Yet just when in the roll of time a year had come and gone,
the gods spun fate for him and ordained a **homecoming**
to Ithaca (yet not even then had he and those dear to him
escaped conflict): all the gods pitied him
except for Poseidon. This god was constantly enraged with
godlike **Odysseus** as he made his journey home.
But now **Poseidon** had gone to visit the distant

Calypso we won't meet Calypso (whose name resembles the Greek for 'I will conceal') and Odysseus until Book 5: Homer tantalizes us here but makes us wait while he builds up narrative tension over the next four books.

homecoming the Greek word is *nostos*; it gives us our word 'nostalgia', literally 'pain for a return home'. Much of the Greek epic cycle (see p. 3), now largely lost, concerned the homecomings (*nostoi*) of other Greek heroes as they returned from Troy (mentioned in lines 11–12). Menelaus narrates his own *nostos* to Telemachus in Book 4. Note that the gods 'spin' a homecoming for Odysseus: on the spinning and weaving motif see note on line **1.238**. The rapid scene-change to a divine decision-making council at line 26 will be familiar to audiences and readers of the *Iliad*; here, as there, the gods look down on human action.

Odysseus the 'man' of line 1 is finally named here for the first time: the delay is typical of the Homeric style and appropriate in a text so concerned with the themes of concealment and identity. The Latin name for Odysseus, *Vlixes* (hence our Ulysses today), probably comes via the Etruscan language.

Poseidon his anger will be explained at line 68. As the god of the sea he can obstruct Odysseus' *nostos* (Poseidon's brother Zeus is god of the sky and their brother Hades is god of the Underworld). Homer's gods are fond of the pious and far-flung Ethiopians: in the first book of the *Iliad* they all go to visit them. Note how Homer typically digresses here.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

Ethiopians (who live at the far edge of humanity and fall into two groups:
those who live at the setting of the sun and those at its rising)
to accept a sacrifice of bulls and rams,
and there he took his seat as guest and delighted himself with the feast.
Now the other gods
assembled together in the palace of Olympian Zeus.
The father of men and gods began to speak to them;
he remembered in his heart the handsome Aegisthus,
whom **Orestes**, son of far-famed Agamemnon, had put to death.
With him in mind he addressed the immortals:
'The *outrage*! Mortals are now beginning to blame us gods
and say that misfortune comes from us! And yet it's they themselves,
as a result of their own **recklessness**, who create such unnecessary suffering!
Case in point: just now Aegisthus married Agamemnon's wedded wife
– an act of excess! – and he killed him when he arrived home from Troy.
He planned his utter destruction even after we had told him in advance
not to kill him nor to court his wife
by sending Hermes, Watchful **Slayer of Argus**:
"Revenge is bound to come from Orestes, grandson of Atreus,
the moment he reaches manhood and begins to miss his homeland."
That's what Hermes told him and yet despite this advice
he failed to persuade Aegisthus and now the man has paid for it in full.'
Then Bright-eyed goddess Athena replied:
'Son of Cronus, father, supreme among the gods,
surely that man lies dead in a death he deserved –
and anyone else who acts like that should die like that.
But as for warlike Odysseus, my heart burns with anguish
for this unlucky creature, who has been suffering for such a long time
apart from those he loves
on a sea-girt island in the centre of the ocean.
A goddess has her palace there, on this wooded isle,

Orestes made famous in Greek literature by Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, he and his family story are held up here (and see line 298) as a paradigm, or parallel for Telemachus; what went wrong with his family constantly looms ominously in the background: Aegisthus kills Agamemnon on his homecoming: what will happen to Odysseus on his *nostos*? Note that in Homer's version of the story Aegisthus, and not Clytemnestra, is the murderer; he forms a better parallel with the suitors – he is Agamemnon's cousin – than she, as his wife, would.

recklessness the Greek is *atasthalia*, an important concept for the *Odyssey* since this is what the suitors are guilty of, as well as Odysseus' men (see line 7). The central idea is failure to pay heed to a warning, as here with Aegisthus.

Slayer of Argus for details of Hermes' defeat of this many-eyed monster see note on **5.43**. Hermes serves as the messenger of the gods in the *Odyssey*, as Iris does in the *Iliad*.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

the daughter of baleful **Atlas**, the god who knows
the depths of the entire sea, and who supports the massive
pillars that encompass earth and sky.
It's his daughter who's detaining my weeping, wretched man;
with her soft and seductive words she constantly
charms him so that he won't remember Ithaca. And meanwhile Odysseus,
who yearns to see even just a puff of smoke rise
from his fatherland, wants to die! Are you still not moved
in your heart for him, Olympian? Didn't Odysseus
bring you some pleasure in the sacrifices he made by the Argive ships
at wide Troy? Why in fact have you **become so angry** with him, Zeus?'
In reply Cloud-gatherer addressed her:
'My child, what's this that you've let slip from your mouth?
How could I have overlooked godlike Odysseus?
He's abundantly clever among mortals and he has given abundantly in sacrifices
to us immortal gods who hold wide heaven.
It's Poseidon, Stayer of Earth, who has become so resolutely
angry with him over the Cyclops whom Odysseus deprived of sight,
godlike **Polyphemus**, whose might is greatest
among all the Cyclopes. Now it was the nymph Thoosa who give birth to him,
daughter of Phorcys, master of the barren sea,
after making love to Poseidon in hollow caves.
This is why Earth-shaker Poseidon is driving him back from his ancestral
land though he has not, of course, managed to put Odysseus to death.
Come on, then, let's all of us discuss here and now
how Odysseus is to achieve his homecoming. Poseidon will let go of
his anger: he certainly won't be able to maintain this quarrel
all on his own, contrary to the wishes of all the immortals!'
Then Bright-eyed goddess Athena replied:
'Son of Cronus, father, supreme among the gods,

Atlas one of the Titans and brother of Prometheus, he fought against Zeus and was made to hold up the world as his punishment; his daughter is Calypso. His connection with the sea here is curious: S. West 1988 explains this by reference to the Hittite mythological monster Upelluri, who lives in the sea and upon whom the world is built. For further connections between Greek myth and the Near East, see M. L. West 1997 and 2007.

become so angry the Greek word here is *ōdusao*, highly reminiscent of Odysseus' name; in Book 19 (**19.407–9**) Odysseus' grandfather Autolycus explicitly connects the concept of anger to our hero (see also **5.340**). The actual origin of Odysseus' name is unclear, yet Homer is fond of such puns (see Silk 2004), and particularly of suggestive names.

Polyphemus we will meet the Cyclops Polyphemus fully in Book 9; with the mention of the obscure Thoosa we find Homer (and Zeus!) typically digressing and displaying his erudition in conventional epic style.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

if in fact the blessed gods now want this,
my shrewd Odysseus' homecoming,
then let's urge Conductor Hermes, Slayer of Argus,
to go to the island of Ogygia and speedily tell
the fair-haired nymph our sure decree:
great-hearted Odysseus is coming home.
Meanwhile I'll make for Ithaca so that I can
encourage **his son** and put some strength in his heart:
he'll assemble the long-haired **Achaeans**
and give full notice to all these suitors who are constantly
slaughtering his thronging sheep and fine horned oxen.
I will send him to Sparta and sandy Pylos
so that he can make enquiries about his father's homecoming –
if anyone will talk to him –
and thereby acquire a good **reputation** among mortals.'

1 What is achieved by starting the poem with the Olympian gods?
2 What are your first impressions of the gods and their interactions as they are presented in the poem?
3 Can you think of other myths – even modern ones – in which the son of a hero is sent on a mission to find his father?

1.96–143

With these words Athena tied her fine sandals beneath her feet;
immortal and golden, they carried her over sea
and endless land with the breath of the wind.
She took with her a stout spear with a sharp bronze edge,
heavy, long and sturdy – the one she uses to subdue the ranks of fighting
men whenever in all her might as Zeus' daughter her anger is roused –
Athena sped down from the heights of Mount Olympus
and came to stand at the front door of Odysseus' house in Ithaca,

his son Athena's words now open and at the same time summarize the 'Telemachy', or 'story of Telemachus', as the first four books of the epic are frequently called. By calling his fellow Greeks to a formal assembly (*agorē*), Telemachus can highlight for the reader as well as his countrymen just how difficult the situation with the suitors has become – and arguably Odysseus' revenge is thereby more justified. In Sparta Telemachus will meet Menelaus (Book 4) and in Pylos he will meet Nestor (Book 3).

Achaeans the Greeks who go to fight at Troy are variously named in Homer as 'Achaeans', 'Argives', 'Danaans' and 'sons of Danaus': all these terms will be confusing to a first-time reader but they are largely synonymous.

reputation a good reputation, or 'fame' (*kleos*) is what the typical epic hero craves and it is what motivates Odysseus in our tale. According to Athena, Telemachus needs to be educated in the concept.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

right on the threshold of the courtyard. Bronze spear in hand
she made herself resemble Odysseus' Ithacan ally **Mentes**, leader
of the Taphians.
And there she found the **mighty** suitors. They
sat before the doorway, happily rolling their dice and
sitting on the hides of the cows they had slaughtered.
Their messengers and nimble attendants were on hand:
some were mixing wine and water in the large bowls,
others were cleaning the tables carefully with sponges
and setting them up, while others set about divvying up the abundant meat.
Godlike Telemachus was the very first to spot Athena;
he sat among the suitors grieving in his heart,
looking in hope for his noble father, that he might come
and rout the suitors there in the palace,
regain his honour and rule as king over what was his.
Sitting with these thoughts in mind Telemachus saw Athena
and made straight for the courtyard, angered in his heart that
a **stranger** had stood outside for so long. He stood close to her,
grasped her right hand, and took the bronze spear.
As he addressed her the words flew from his mouth:
'Greetings, stranger and guest, you will find hospitality here: then after
dining you can tell me what you've come to say.'
With these words he led her in and Pallas Athena followed.
Once they were within the lofty hall

Mentes Athena makes her first appearance on earth disguised as Mentes. As Odysseus' patron goddess it is no surprise to find her concealing herself and, in effect, lying. Mentes is an outsider, not a native Ithacan, and as S. West 1988 notes, 'the shocked reaction of a stranger is more effective than any words which could be put in the mouth of Mentor' (Telemachus' next major adviser, whom we meet in Book 2, and from whose name we get our word 'mentor'). Note the subtlety of the intervention: just as earlier she appealed to Zeus' sense of justice, here Athena merely appeals to Telemachus' desire for fame and a good reputation to get him moving.

mighty the suitors are routinely given positive epithets like 'mighty', even in the mouths of their enemies. The reader is cautioned not to read too much into the significance of these epithets, which belong to the fixed repertoire of epic language (see p. 7). They do not necessarily represent an endorsement of the suitors, but simply characterize them as powerful and the leading men of the region.

Their messengers and nimble attendants these are freeborn men, not slaves, who perform a variety of tasks for their lords, just as they do for the heroes of the *Iliad*.

stranger *xeinos* can also be translated 'guest' or 'host'; hospitality (*xeinia*) is based on the same word; it is a key concept in Odysseus' world and will feature prominently in the poem (e.g. in Book 9). Telemachus' concern for his guest here contrasts strongly with the suitors, whose extended stay and bad behaviour have violated the norms of hospitality.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

he took her spear and stood it next to a large column
within a polished spear-case, where in fact many
other spears stood that belonged to great-hearted Odysseus.
He led her to a chair and seated her, spreading fine cloth in the seat;
the chair was beautifully made and underneath was a stool for her feet.
Next to her he drew up a fine couch. They sat apart
from the suitors so that Telemachus' guest would not be annoyed at their noise
and lose interest in the meal; she had come to the company of arrogant men
and she was there to ask Telemachus about his absent father.
A slave-girl brought a water jug made out of beautiful gold
and poured water over their hands, holding a silver basin below
so that they could rinse them clean. Nearby them she laid out a table
of carved wood.
A dutiful steward then brought the food and put it before them;
there was a good deal of it and she gave generously of what she had.
A carver brought platters of all kinds of meat and put it
before them; he also brought golden goblets,
while one of the messengers immediately approached them to pour some wine.

1 Why does Homer have Athena appear in disguise? Wouldn't a direct divine appearance (i.e. an epiphany) be more effective?
2 Why does Homer mention that Telemachus was the first to notice Athena / Mentes?
3 Why does Homer mention Odysseus' spears in line 129?

1.144–77 Then the proud suitors all entered the hall. As they
took their seats, rank and file, among the couches and chairs,
the messengers poured water over their hands,
slave-girls heaped up the food in baskets,
and boys filled their bowls to the brim with drink.
The suitors then started on the food that had been placed before them,
and once they had had enough food
and drink, other concerns occupied their minds:
song and dance – the crowning glories of a meal.
One of the messengers put a fine lyre into the hands
of **Phemius**, whom the suitors forced to sing.

Phemius with the introduction of Phemius we find Homer's playful self-consciousness at work; we are inevitably invited to compare the singers of the *Odyssey* with Homer himself, and indeed, these audiences with ourselves (see Segal 1994, chapters 6–8); note that Phemius is spared when Odysseus kills the suitors in Book 22. His name is based on the word 'report', or 'talk', even 'rumour' (*phēmē*): his job is to spread the fame of gods and men.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

Just as he put his hands to the instrument and began his fine song, 1.155
Telemachus addressed Bright-eyed Athena,
leaning in close to her head so that the others couldn't hear him:
'Friend and guest, if I were to say something would it anger you?
Music and poetry: that's all these men care
about – and it's easy enough for them – they are consuming the livelihood
of another 1.160
without fear of reprisal! Meanwhile his white bones lie rotting in the rain
somewhere on land – or ocean waves wash over them in the sea!
If these men were to see him return to Ithaca
they would all pray for more speed to make a getaway
than for more money to spend on fancy clothes. 1.165
But as it is, this man has died horribly, and even if some mortal were to tell us
that he's on his way back, it will hardly bring
us any comfort: his day of return is gone.
But come now, tell me this and speak truly:
who are you and who is your father? Where is your city and what is
your family line? 1.170
What sort of ship did you come in? How did the sailors
bring you to Ithaca? Who in fact did they profess to be?
I suspect that you didn't get here on foot!
Answer me truly so that I can know
whether you are visiting us for the first time or are one of my father's 1.175
guest-friends. Many men have come to our
home and he was fond of visiting others.'

1. Why does Telemachus wait for Phemius to start singing before he speaks to Athena / Mentes?
2. What do you make of Telemachus' attitude in this conversation?
3. What do we learn about the suitors at their first appearance?

1.178–266 Bright-eyed goddess Athena replied to Telemachus:
'I will then speak truly about what you ask:
I contend that I am Mentes, son of wise 1.180
Anchialus, and I am king of the oar-loving Taphians.
That's how I got here: with my companions and our ship.
I was sailing over the wine-dark sea among foreigners
to Temesa, in search of bronze, and I'm shipping ruddy iron.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-13773-7 – Homer's Odyssey
Charles Weiss
Excerpt
More information

Homeric society and history

Athena's mention of bronze and iron neatly encapsulates the fictional world of the *Odyssey*. The poem portrays elements of life drawn from the Bronze Age (2000–1100 BC) as well as the Iron Age (1100–800 BC) of Greece. So, for example, the weapons are bronze but we also find the more recently developed and tougher iron in use (compare **9.393**). It is therefore over-simplifying matters to think of Homeric society as representing a particular time-period; some details may reflect realities of Homer's own day, while others hearken back to an earlier period – perhaps because they are deliberately and nostalgically setting the poem in an age of heroes or because the oral tradition stretches back to a time when weapons were still made out of bronze. Scholars differ widely on exactly how to relate a given element of Homeric society to the realities of Homer's own day or earlier periods (see Osborne 2004 and Morris 1997 for useful overviews), yet surely the mention of shipping here reflects the realities of expanding trade in early Greece, and it lends an element of realism to our epic. Temesa may refer to Tamassos on the island of Cyprus, a well-known source of copper, used in the production of bronze. Other people (Taphians) and places (Rheithrum, Neium) cannot be located geographically.

My ship stands out in the countryside, away from the city,
in the port of Rheithrum, just under the woods of Neium.
We contend that we have been guest-friends of your father, and he of us,
from the beginning: go and ask aged Lord
Laertes – I've heard that he no longer comes
into town but rather lives out in the countryside, suffering,
his only company being the old slave-woman who brings him his food
and drink when exhaustion lays hold of his limbs
as he shuffles along the hills of his fruitful vineyard.
So, here I am. People were telling me that he was here at home,
your father, but it seems the gods are keeping him from his journey.
But our splendid Odysseus has not died somewhere on land:
he is being detained somewhere out on the wide sea,
on some sea-girt island, where harsh men are holding him captive;
some savages are keeping him somewhere against his will.
But let me hazard a guess as to what the immortals
are aiming at and how I think this story will end,
though I am certainly no seer and have no knowledge of augury.
Odysseus will not, I am sure, be far away from his beloved
fatherland, not even if chains of iron hold him now.
He is resourceful: he will be contemplating how to make his return.
But come now, speak and tell me truthfully:
are you Odysseus' child? You are the right size,

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org