INTRODUCTION

*Odyssey Books 13–20*

After ten years fighting at Troy, three years on the high seas and seven years held by the demi-goddess Kalypso in the cave on her island, Odysseus has finally returned to his homeland, the island of Ithaka. He is met by his patron goddess Athene, who disguises him as a bleary old beggar, and sends him first to the hut of his faithful swineherd Eumaios, in the countryside, well away from his palace (Book 13).

Eumaios, though poor, welcomes the beggar warmly and shows him generous hospitality. In the course of his stay there Odysseus slowly draws out of him the situation in the palace – how his wife Penelope is beset by suitors, aristocratic young thugs from Ithaka and surrounding territory who are intent on forcing marriage upon her, and are ruthlessly eating her out of house and home while they wait; how Penelope has withdrawn into a protective shell as her only defence against them, though she still clutches at every straw of hope brought by even the most disreputable traveller who claims to have news of her husband; and how her son Telemakhos (newly born when Odysseus left for Troy twenty years earlier) has gone abroad to seek news of his father (Book 14).

With the beggar Odysseus now safely lodged in Eumaios’ hut, the goddess Athene goes to Sparta, where Telemakhos has been enquiring after his father from Menelaos, husband of Helen (whose seduction by the Trojan Paris had started the Trojan War twenty years earlier). Athene instructs Telemakhos to return to Ithaka at once,
taking care to avoid the ambush which the suitors have laid for him, and to go to Eumaios’ hut (Book 15). This he does, and there Athene (unbeknown to Eumaios) engineers an emotional recognition between Telemakhos and the father he has heard so much about but never seen. Odysseus and Telemakhos now plan their next move – Odysseus’ entrance, still in disguise, into the palace – and Odysseus instructs his son to put up with any assaults the suitors may make on him (though he may attempt gently to persuade them otherwise); not to give him away; and to remove the weapons from the hall (Book 16).

Next day Telemakhos sets out for the palace, with instructions to Eumaios and the beggar Odysseus to follow. He is rapturously greeted by his mother Penelope, who was convinced he would never return. When Eumaios and Odysseus set out, Odysseus is attacked by Melanthios, a disloyal goatherd who has sided with the suitors – the first of many assaults on Odysseus in his own land. At the entrance to the palace, Odysseus is recognised by his old hunting dog Argos, once a fine animal but now shamefully neglected in Odysseus’ absence. The dog dies at the sight of his master, returned after twenty years (Book 17).

In the palace, Odysseus is able to witness for himself the shameless behaviour of the suitors, who inhabit it as if they owned it, ignore the most elementary laws of hospitality to strangers, and pay scant regard to the gods. Odysseus himself is subjected to a number of attacks from them, including the ring-leaders Antinoos and Eurymakhos and even a serving-girl, Melantho, sister of the goatherd Melanthios. Meanwhile, Penelope makes a rare appearance among the suitors to announce that it will soon be time for her to marry again. When Odysseus had left for Troy, she tells them, he gave her instructions that, if he did not return, she should remarry when her son ‘was grown up and bearded’ – and that time was fast approaching (Book 18).

Penelope now welcomes the beggar to a private night interview to see if he has any news of Odysseus. Odysseus, without giving himself away, tactfully lays before her unambiguous evidence that ‘Odysseus’ is alive and well, and Penelope rewards him by calling the faithful old family retainer Eurykleia (who had nursed Odysseus as a baby) to
bathe his feet. Eurykleia recognises the scar on Odysseus’ thigh, the result of being gored in a boar-hunt on Mount Parnassos when he was a young man. Odysseus swears the old woman to silence. Penelope now reveals that she intends to set up a competition to decide whom she will marry. Whoever can string Odysseus’ great bow and shoot an arrow through all twelve axes will be her new husband. Odysseus encourages her to do this (Book 19).

In the hall next day, which is a feast-day for Apollo, the assaults and insults on Odysseus continue, but a herdsman Philoitios, bringing in animals for the feast, turns out to be sympathetic to the beggar and expresses a wish that Odysseus would return. Meanwhile various omens and signs indicate that matters are heading towards a climax. The lines that close Book 20, immediately prior to the start of our text, read: ‘The suitors laughed as they prepared themselves a good, hearty meal from the large number of beasts they had slaughtered. But no meal could possibly be less delightful than the one that the goddess [Athena] and the mighty man [Odysseus] were preparing to set before them, the men who had been first to do the deeds of shame.’

**The art of Homer**

(1) Whether Homer used writing or not, the *Odyssey* bears all the hallmarks of oral poetry, i.e. poetry composed for live, apparently extempore recitation, without a text. The simplest and most common indication of poetry of this type is repetition, at the level of phrase, clause, sentence and scene. Odysseus, for example, is typically πολύμηττας, Telemachos πεπνυμένος, Penelope περίφρων; the *Running Vocabulary* points out repeated whole-line sentences; and at the level of scene, compare the two spear-throwing incidents at 22.255–9 and 22.272–6 and the two recognition scenes at 21.222–5 and 22.498–500. The repetitions are necessary for the oral poet. To put it extremely crudely, he needs ‘ready-made’ language which can be manipulated to fit the complex metre in which he composes (hexameters). But the repetitions should be enjoyed, not merely as examples of the enormous technical skill with which Homer constructs his story but because they constantly present us with a sense of the unchanging quality and value of the world they describe.
4 Introduction

This makes Homer’s deviations from expected norms all the more striking.

(2) Poetry which is heard rather than read must be easily assimilable by a listener. Consequently, sentence structure is very rarely complex; and indeed, in most cases meaning is usually graspable in no more than line-length ‘bites’. The story-line too is clear and strongly marked, though the modern reader may find Homer’s love of expansion unfamilial. For example, Odysseus’ bow is given a long introduction at 21.13–41; Antinoos likens Odysseus’ behaviour to that of a drunken centaur at 21.295–303; Odysseus’ stringing of the bow is accompanied by his testing it for worms, a simile and a sign from Zeus (21.393–415); and the battle in the hall receives extremely varied treatment through individual deaths, mass attacks, diversions for arming, divine interventions, appeals for mercy, and so on.

These, again, are to be enjoyed. Homer’s inventiveness and visual imagination are part of his brilliance as a story-teller, and his expansions are never irrelevant. In particular, they often highlight key objects (e.g. the bow) or important moments in the narrative (e.g. Odysseus’ stringing of the bow). The variations in the battle narrative of Book 22 pick up on what has gone before (e.g. Ktesippos’ death at 22.285–91), emphasise the hypocrisy of the suitors (e.g. 22.310–29), contrast the mercy shown to the loyal (22.330–80) with the pitiless treatment of the unfaithful (22.465–77) and generally throw light on relationships (e.g. Odysseus and Telemakhos (22.146–59), Odysseus and Athene (22.205–40), etc.).

(3) Homer’s handling of the plot sequence too is masterful. Typically, he proceeds by sequences of contrasting viewpoints, which enable us to see the narrative through many different eyes – Penelope’s, Eumaios’, the suitors’, etc. To take the first half of Book 21:

1–62: Penelope in the privacy of the storeroom.
63–79: Penelope announces the contest of the bow in public.
80–3: Eumaios and Philoitios react with tears.
84–95: Antinoos reacts with abuse and expresses hopes of stringing the bow.
Introduction

96–100: Homer foreshadows Antinoos’ failure and death.
101–35: Telemakhos happily sets up the axes and would have strung the bow.
136–66: Leodes a suitor tries and fails.
175–87: Melanthios is summoned to soften up the bow.
188–244: Odysseus reveals himself to Eumaios and Philoitos and issues instructions (a) to Eumaios to give him the bow and (b) to Philoitos to lock the hall.
245–55: Eurymakhos fails to string the bow.
256–73: Antinoos calls a halt and suggests waiting till next day, when they can sacrifice to Apollo for help with the task.
274: Odysseus makes his move to get his hands on the bow now . . .

Observe too how cleverly Homer prepares the logical links that move the narrative smoothly on from one reaction to the next. For example, Penelope weeps as she takes up the bow at 21.55–6; the loyal Eumaios and Philoitos weep at the sight of it too (80–3); this rouses Antinoos to abuse (84–8), and a statement about the difficulty the contest poses (89–95), which is immediately followed by Homer’s remark that (a) Antinoos hoped to complete the contest himself (96–7) but (b) in fact it would mean his death. Telemakhos now intervenes and, instead of weeping, laughs at the prospect in front of him (105) – a clear contrast to Eumaios, Philoitos and Penelope; and when he has set up the contest and nearly strung the bow himself (125–9, compare Antinoos), he summons the others to string the bow.

Note too the silence: the silence of Odysseus, who just observes proceedings, watching his bow move from his storeroom, out of Penelope’s hands into Telemakhos’ (he shows himself fully capable of stringing it – true son of his father), and out of Telemakhos’ into various suitors’. He bides his time and makes his preparations before his decisive intervention, when the bow will finally come to rest in its rightful owner’s hands.

(4) One technical device which Homer constantly employs to help him keep a grip on his narrative is known as ‘ring-composition’. At its simplest, he uses it, especially after digressions, to bring the narrative
6 Introduction

back to the point at which the digression began, often with a quite intricate ‘reversed’ structure. Thus, for example, at 21.185–90:

(A) we leave Antinoos and Eurymakhos wrestling with the bow (185–7),
(B) we move outside the house with Eumaios and Philoitios (188–9),
(C) Odysseus too moves outside (190) to reveal himself to them.

The recognition-scene takes place and at 21.242–5 we move back into the palace:

(C') Odysseus moves back inside the house (242),
(B') the two others do (244),
(A') Eurymakhos is wrestling with the bow (245).

Observe how the digression begins with elements ABC and ends with the elements repeated in reverse order C'B'A'.

Ring-composition also structures and organises the narrative itself. For example, the story of Iphitos’ bow at 21.13–41 is a massive example of ring-composition:

(A) 8 Penelope went to her chamber,
(B) 9 where her treasure was stored away.
(C) 13–14 Iphitos gave the bow as a gift.
(D) 15–16 Odysseus and Iphitos met in Messene.
   (a) 16–17 Odysseus was going on an errand;
   (a') 20 it was on this errand Odysseus was going.
   (b) 22 Iphitos was seeking mares.
   (b') 31 Seeking these mares, Iphitos . . .
(D') 31 Iphitos met Odysseus,
(C') 38 and gave him the bow.
(B') 41 It was stored up in the palace.
(A') 42 Penelope went to her chamber.

Also typical of Homer’s narrative strategy is his liking for pairs of characters. Thus Eumaios the swineherd is given a partner, the herdsman Philoitios; Antinoos has a counterpart in Eurymakhos; the evil goatherd Melanthios has an equally nasty sister Melantho; the loyal servant Eurykleia is matched by Penelope’s handmaiden Eur-
ynome; and so on. The narrative advantage of pairs is that they can be played off against each other, for purposes of comparison and contrast.

(6) One striking feature of the Odyssey is the role given to the humble and lowly, like Eumaios, Philoitos and Eurykleia. Beside them the thuggish, aristocratic suitors come out very badly indeed; and the respect and trust which Odysseus and Telemakhos (for example) put in them are amply repaid by their loyalty and (in the case of the males) martial valour. Odysseus is a great hero, but he now moves in a world of palaces and families. It is a mark of Homer’s genius that he does not seem out of place, and this is partly due to the warm relationship Homer develops between Odysseus and those who have been faithfully guarding his property while he has been away.

This consideration raises the question of character portrayal in Homer, and how he makes them live so vividly. The art of Homer here is (on the whole) to stand back from them – to interpose no comment of his own, but to let them speak, and act, and react. They are what they say and what they do (observe how much dialogue there is in Homer), and what we can tell from the way others react to them. In other words, we make of them what we can: Homer offers limited comment himself (contrast, strongly, Virgil or the novel, where the author’s comments on the characters bulk very large). This can present severe problems of interpretation.

(7) Finally, it is worth noting the strong moral message with which the story is imbued: this surfaces especially in the final battle in Book 22. The death of the suitors is seen as the triumph of good over evil (22.374, cf. 35–41, 63–4, 287–9, 317): note especially the mercy shown to Phemios and Medon (22.330–80) and the hideous deaths of the disloyal maidservants (465–72) and Melanthios (473–6). The outcome is firmly ascribed to the gods (413–17). This is a very different world from that of the Iliad, where ‘good’ and ‘evil’ do not come into play so starkly and the gods seem interested in only limited aspects of human behaviour (e.g. treatment of the dead).

It is also thematically coherent with the rest of the Odyssey, especially its grand opening (1.1–43). Here Homer begins the story with special emphasis on people who knew that what they were doing was
8  Introduction

forbidden and insisted on doing it all the same, e.g. Odysseus’ men who ate the cattle of the Sun God (1.7–9, cf. 12.260–446) and Aigisthos, lover of Klytaimestra, who refused to listen to Hermes’ warning not to have anything to do with her, on pain of death (1.32–43). Both Odysseus’ men and Aigisthos act as the suitors do—bringing divine destruction on themselves.

Homer’s metre

The Homeric hexameter has six feet, and scans in a combination of dactylics (– – –) and spondees (– –) as follows:

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<th>First foot</th>
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E.g.:

Τῇ δ’ ἀρ’ ἐπὶ φρεσὶ θήκε θεὰ γλαυκώπις Ἀθήνη
doχύρῃ Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφροιν Πηνελόπείη,
τόξον μυστήρεσαι θέμεν πολιών τε σίδηρον
ἐν μεγάροις Ὀδυσσός, ἀέθλια καὶ φόνον ἀρχήν.

21.1–4

Rules for determining whether a syllable is long (–) or short (–) can be briefly summarised as follows.

(1) A long vowel, i.e. η, ω, α, ι, υ, diphthong (αι, ει, etc.) = a long syllable.

(2) A short vowel, i.e. ο, ε, α, ι, υ = a short syllable.

(3) A short syllable followed by two consonants becomes long for scansion purposes, e.g. μυστήρεσαι, θέμεν πολιών. Note that ζ, ξ, ψ count as two consonants (σδ, κς, ρσ). This rule applies in Homer even where a ‘mute’ (π τ θ χ β δ γ) is followed by a ‘liquid’ (λ μ ν ρ). In Greek tragedy, for example, πατρός could scan πατρός or πατρός. In Homer, it always scans πατρός.
Introduction

4) ‘Correption’ occurs when a long vowel or a diphthong at the end of a word becomes short because the next word begins with a vowel, e.g. ἀφνὸς ἄρχην.

5) ‘Synizesis’ occurs when two vowels which do not normally count as a diphthong, or a vowel and a diphthong, are run together to make one, e.g. θεοί, usually scanning ὧν ὧν, scans ὧν.

6) Finally, note that some Homeric words which start with a vowel act as if they started with a consonant. This is because the Greek letter Φ (digamma, ‘w’), which has dropped out of our Greek alphabet, was still felt in Homeric times. Thus, for example, ὀἶνος was originally Φοῖνος (cf. English wine), οἶ (‘to him’, ‘to her’) was Φοί, οἶκος (‘household’) was Φοίκος. Thus: ἔμθα δέ οἶ, not ἔμθα δ’ οἶ, because οἶ is really Φοί. In ὅς οἶ the first word scans ὅς, because it is really ὅς Φοί (two consonants).

Further reading

1) Commentaries

J. Russo, M. Fernández-Galiano and A. Heubeck, A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey, Volume III: Books xvii—xxiv, Oxford, 1992. [Unfortunately, the commentary on Books 21 and 22 in this otherwise superb new series is to be used with caution. Fernández-Galiano’s views about an A and B poet are controversial, and his discussion of the problem of the bow and the axes and of the layout of Odysseus’ palace, while extremely detailed, assumes that Homer himself had a clear, consistent and historically accurate picture of Mycenaean bows, axes and palaces.]

Peter Jones, Homer’s Odyssey, Bristol Classical Press/Duckworth, Bristol, 1988 (a commentary not on the Greek but on Richmond Lattimore’s translation).

2) General books about the Odyssey

N. Austin, Archery at the Dark of the Moon, California, 1975.
10 Introduction


(3) Translations


(4) Audiobook

*The Odyssey* (Penguin Audiobooks, 1995), read by Alex Jennings and Barbara Jefford, from the translation by E. V. Rieu, revised by D. C. H. Rieu. Accompanying handbook by P. V. Jones.