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Author(s): M. J. Alden

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THE ROLE OF TELEMACHUS IN THE 'ODYSSEY'

The 'Odyssey' is, among other things, the story of a hero who, after long absence abroad, returns in the nick of time to prevent the remarriage of his wife. There are many examples of this theme in traditional literature: clearly the story catches popular imagination. Variants occur within modern Greek literature¹ and the returning husband may test his wife's fidelity² as Odysseus tests that of Penelope by his observation of her behaviour. The wife may, in her turn, require that her husband prove his identity to her³. The return of the husband to claim his own may be thwarted: Alcmene was deceived by Zeus in the form of her husband, Amphitryon. Agamemnon does not arrive in time to prevent his wife's remarriage, but there are hints which suggest that the feast at which Agamemnon perishes may have something to do with a wedding: he and his companions are cut down as pigs are slaughtered

ἢ γάμῳ ἢ ἐράνῳ ἢ εἰλαπίνῃ τεθαλυίῃ⁴.

Usually a departing husband makes a bargain with his wife, that she is not to give him up for lost nor take another husband until a certain time: Penelope says that their time limit was when she saw their son growing a beard⁵. When the time has elapsed, she is not eager to remarry. The wife of Dobryna Nikitich, a Russian hero, waits twice the six years agreed with her departing husband: at the end of that time, she is forced by the Tsar to marry the only man her husband forbade her to consider⁶. Every heroine eventually comes under pressure to abandon what appears to be an untenable position, and the contest for the hand of the bride and/or the wedding feast is set up.

¹ R. BEATON. *The Folk Poetry of Modern Greece*, Cambridge 1980, pp. 13–18, 27–34, discusses variants of 'Mikrokonstantinos' a latter-day Odysseus-figure, who in some versions leaves his wife in the care of his mother. The wife's virtue works miracles during his absence, despite the machinations of her mother-in-law, who is punished on the hero's return.

² For example, by demanding that she return a kiss which he gave to her dying husband (J. Th. KAKRIDES, *Homer Revisited*, Lund 1971, p. 153), or by saying that she is now required to marry him, whom she has not recognised as her husband because of their long separation (R. BEATON, *loc. cit.*, p. 28).

³ By knowledge which only a husband would have, of marks on her body (J. Th. KAKRIDES, *loc. cit.*, p. 153) or by revealing a scar or birth-mark (a recognition token) on his body (R. BEATON, *loc. cit.*, p. 24).

⁴ *Od.* λ, 415.

⁵ *Od.* σ, 269–270.

⁶ N. K. CHADWICK, *Russian Heroic Poetry*, Cambridge 1932, pp. 80–90.

At a time when it is reasonable to assume that Odysseus must be dead, and all the conditions for Penelope's remarriage have been fulfilled, the suitors have, on one level, been enjoying the legitimate traditional entertainment of contenders for the hand of a noble bride which we see also in the context of Hippocleides' famous remark »οὐ φροντίζετο Ἴπποκλείδης«. Their action is wicked only when it becomes clear that they are paying court to the wife of a living man. We are not told specifically that a wedding-feast is to take place in the 'Odyssey', only that Penelope will marry the suitor who succeeds in the contest of the axes and the bow⁸. It seems as if the people of Ithaca might not approve Penelope's remarriage, however unavoidable:

ἢ μάλα δὴ τις ἔγημε πολυμνήστην βασιλείαν·
 σχετλίη, οὐδ' ἔτλη πόσιος οὐ κουριδίοιο
 εἶρυσθαι μέγα δῶμα διαμπερές, ἦος ἔκοιτο⁹.

Local opinion in these lines appears to think it proper for a wife to wait however long it may take for her husband to return.

When the marriage seems inevitable the hero, who has been detained by imprisonment or by unwanted hospitality, comes home quickly, often with supernatural aid. Dobryna Nikitich's horse tells him of the imminent wedding feast and carries him there: disguised as a minstrel he sends a ring to his wife in a goblet of wine: she acknowledges him, and the new suitor is flogged for having given false news of the hero's death. At the behest of the Sultan, who has been entertaining him, Messer Torello in the 'Decamerone', is transported in a single night, the night before his wife's remarriage, and left in the church near his house. His means of transport is a magic bed, laden with treasures which he conceals in the church¹⁰. Odysseus is transported by the Phaeacians on a magic ship in a single night, to arrive in time for the contest for the hand of his wife.

Sometimes, as in the case of Messer Torello, all parties have acted with good intentions, and the suitor is not punished, but only disappointed. However, unsuccessful suitors may be killed, as Hippodameia's were, though hers perished serially, and not all at once. After the slaughter of the suitors in the 'Odyssey', Telemachus and the swineherd are told by the victorious suitor/true husband to dance in the hall so that people will think Penelope has remarried:

ὣς κέν τις φαίη γάμον ἔμμεναι ἐκτὸς ἀκούων¹¹.

⁷ Hdt. 6, 129.

⁸ Od. τ, 572-580.

⁹ Od. ψ, 149-151.

¹⁰ GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO, *The Decameron*, Navarre Society 1921, Novel IX, pp. 370-386.

¹¹ Od. ψ, 135.

The Saxon king, Horn, arrives from Ireland to find the feast at which the marriage is to be announced of his sweetheart to Modi of Reynis: he makes himself known to his mistress and slaughters Modi and his followers¹². Occasionally, as with Agamemnon, the husband does not arrive in time to prevent his wife's remarriage, and is killed like an unsuccessful suitor. The guilt of the wife in Klytaimnestra's position, and of her new husband is well illustrated in the story of Martin Guerre, in which the unfortunate interloper is executed¹³.

Horn was not married, but only betrothed to the sweetheart whom he rescued at the last moment from her unwanted suitors. The fisherman's son in Grimm's story of the King of the Golden Mountain was similarly betrothed to his faithless princess: when he interrupts the marriage feast he tells her: »Wenn man den alten Schlüssel gefunden hat, bedürfe man des neuen nicht¹⁴.«

Sitt al-Husn and her cousin Hasan Badr al-Din were betrothed before birth by their two fathers who were brothers. Hasan is brought by a Jinni to the harîm just as Sitt al-Husn is being robed for her enforced marriage to a hunchback. The hunchback too is under compulsion, and his only crime is his ugliness, but the Jinni enables Hasan to take the place of the bridegroom: the unfortunate hunchback is punished by the Jinni, who does not kill him, but forces him to spend what ought to be his wedding night upside-down in a privy¹⁵.

An Irish folktale tells of Eleanor Kavanagh, betrothed to Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh: when she is on the verge of marrying another, Cearbhall comes to the wedding feast disguised as a beggar, and behaves as a fool. In his disguise he relates a long story, Seachrán Chearbhaill (Cearbhall's Wandering) by which Eleanor recognises him¹⁶: when the other guests are asleep, Cearbhall and Eleanor elope¹⁷.

The tale of the absent hero and the lady who waits for him has two versions: the couple may be either married or betrothed.

¹² M. DEUTSCHBEIN, *Studien zur Sagengeschichte Englands*, pt. I. »Die Wilkersagen«, Cöthen 1906, p. 187.

¹³ NATALIE ZEMON DAVIES, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, Cambridge Mass. 1983.

¹⁴ J. BOLTE & G. POLIVKA (eds.), *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, Leipzig 1915, vol. II, pp. 318-335.

¹⁵ J. C. MADRUS, trans. POWYS MATHERS, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, London 1947, vol. I, pp. 172-235.

¹⁶ The tale which the disguised Odysseus tells to Penelope (Od. τ, 165-202) is a false one, and there is no recognition at this point.

¹⁷ J. E. DOAN, *Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh as Craftsman and Trickster*, *Bealoideas* 50 (1982), pp. 54-89. I owe this and several other references to Irish material to Mrs. LINDA BALLARD of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

In cases of betrothal there are no children. Where the couple are married, in stories like that of Messer Torello, in which everyone has acted honourably, no harm is done or intended towards the two little boys of the first marriage. However, in cases where the suitors merit punishment, they have very often further demonstrated their wickedness in their attempts to do away with the children of the first marriage¹⁸.

The wickedness of step-parents is illustrated in the Asiatic Kirghiz epic, 'Joloi', which tells the story of the marriage of Joloi's sister, Kardygash, to the Kalmuck prince, Karacha, and their usurpation of Joloi's principality. The dethroned hero is imprisoned by the Kalmuck prince, Urum Khan. Joloi's son, Bolot, is born in his absence, and Kardygash and Karacha try to slay the child, who is rescued and brought up in a nomadic settlement. But Bolot later returns and rescues his father¹⁹.

The parallels with the 'Odyssey' are very clear: the hero Joloi is detained by imprisonment, as Odysseus is detained by Calypso. The usurpers want to do away with the infant heir: the suitors in the 'Odyssey' want to do away with Telemachus. A point not necessary to my argument, but which I include to show how close a parallel may be, is the fact that Joloi even goes to the Underworld with a black shamanka²⁰: a Circe-figure?

The story of Alpamysh is another parallel to the 'Odyssey', and is found in many versions in different parts of Asia²¹. Alpamysh and Barchin are cousins and are betrothed in the cradle. When Barchin grows up very beautiful, the giant champions of the Kalmuck Shah fall in love with her: she decrees a contest in a horse-race, in archery, and a wrestling-match, and secretly sends messages to Alpamysh, who comes to win her with the aid of his magical winged war horse. Alpamysh later returns with forty warriors, to avenge the cruelties which are being done to his father-in-law in the land of the Kalmucks. He is met by an old witch, Surkhail (Circe?) at the head of forty beautiful maidens. After a feast, all the forty warriors are slain except Alpamysh, who is imprisoned in an underground dungeon for seven years, as Odysseus was held for seven years on the island of Calypso. Eventually the daughter of the Kalmuck Shah falls in love with Alpamysh and helps him to escape. Alpamysh returns home in disguise, dressed as his father's herdsman. He finds his mother

¹⁸ It seems that step-parents very often hate intensely the children of the first marriage (Guardian, 8th July 1985, p.12). These stories may be a kind of wish-fulfilment fantasy, where the wish is that the original parent will return and »punish« the step-parent, whom the child views as its oppressor.

¹⁹ N. K. CHADWICK & V. ZHIRMUNSKY, *Oral Epics of Central Asia*, Cambridge 1969, pp. 38-39.

²⁰ A shamanka is a female shaman.

²¹ V. ZHIRMUNSKY, *The Epic of Alpamysh and The Return of Odysseus*, P.B.A. 52 (1966), pp. 267-285.

lamenting his death, his father and his son, Yadgar, being humiliated, and he notes which of his servants have remained faithful to him. Odysseus too is interested in the fidelity of his servants, especially the maids. Alpamysh also finds the marriage-feast which his step-brother, Ultan-taz, has set up, to marry Barchin against her will. Ultan-taz, has already plotted to murder her young son. At the marriage-feast, Alpamysh discovers by singing alternate verses with Barchin that she is still true to him. There is an archery contest at the feast: his son brings the disguised hero the bow of Alpamysh, and no-one else can string it, as no-one else can string the bow of Odysseus. Needless to say, there is a terrible vengeance, and the survivors live happily ever after.

I tell these stories at such length to make the point that comparative material may provide many instances where the suitor(s) plot(s) to kill the hero's infant son, if the hero was married before he went away. But Telemachus is not an infant son: he is a young man growing a beard, even if his age is as indeterminate as the time-scale of the 'Odyssey'. I have not been able to discover any parallel story in which the hero's son, the intended victim of the suitor(s), is as old as Telemachus, or one in which the hero's son assists his father in taking his vengeance. To some extent, Telemachus can be seen as an embarrassment in the story: the suitors ought to be trying to kill an infant son, and this may be why their ambush to kill Telemachus on his way back from Pylos is so half-hearted: it is difficult to imagine how it might have worked. Telemachus, with the advice of Athene²² avoids the suitors with ease. Telemachus' age may derive from another folk motif which appears to be employed in the 'Odyssey'.

The 'Odyssey' appears to be set in motion by Zeus' consideration of the revenge of Orestes on Aigisthus²³. The thought prompts Zeus to call the assemblies in books I and V which result in Hermes being sent to the island of Ogygia to tell Calypso to let Odysseus go. Athene, when she appears in the form of Mentès telling Telemachus to go to Pylos to look for news of his father, holds up to the young man the example of Orestes, who has just taken vengeance on his father's murderers²⁴.

Orestes at the time of his revenge was not a child: he was at least seventeen, and probably more. Agamemnon had been absent at Troy for the length of the siege, which took more than nine years. Aigisthus ruled in Mycenae for seven years after killing Agamemnon²⁵. The age of Telemachus when the immediate action of the 'Odyssey' is taking place is a moot point: the prophecy

²² Od. ο, 27-30.

²³ Od. α, 29-31.

²⁴ Od. α, 298-305.

²⁵ Od. γ, 304-310.

of Halitherses²⁶ that Odysseus is returning late and alone in the twentieth year would imply that Telemachus must be nineteen or twenty, but if Zeus has been thinking his thoughts immediately after the vengeance of Orestes, then Telemachus ought to be more like seventeen. It does not matter that the chronology of the 'Odyssey' is inconsistent: it would be impossible to try to reconcile all the chronological systems operating within it, and philistine, in my view, to make the attempt. But the time-scales and their inconsistencies may occasionally be a help to us in understanding the material and devices used by the poet in his composition.

DELEBECQUE thought the voyage of Telemachus had been implanted in the 'Odyssey', and that we should better understand it if we examined the threads by which it was attached²⁷. Others²⁸ have seen the »Telemachy« as the education of Telemachus: he begins as a timid and indecisive boy, goes off on travels which broaden his mind, is treated with a respect which he has not encountered in Ithaca, and returns to play a full part in the slaughter of the suitors. By the time of his return to Ithaca, he has become 'Telemachos Polymechanos', displaying the same wiliness as Odysseus and Penelope. The adventures of Telemachus have been seen by APHORP²⁹ as a reflection of those of his father, to the point where Telemachus is enchanted by Helen, just as Odysseus is enchanted by Circe. The difference, which APHORP does not point out, is that in the case of Telemachus, the Irish dictum »the first tale from the host, tales from the guest until morning«³⁰ which Odysseus is so well able to follow among the Phaeacians, does not work, although Menelaus, who tells the stories in place of Telemachus, relates his own visit, not to consult Tiresias in the Underworld, but to consult Proteus³¹, who tells him not merely his return to Sparta (where was Helen during all this?) but also his own death and his translation to the Isles of the Blessed: the same story-shape as Odysseus heard from Tiresias: his return and the manner of his death³², even though he did not ask it.

The reflection of the father's adventures in those of the son is not necessarily a spontaneous invention of the poet's, although it is an essential element of the 'Odyssey' as we have it. It may well have an honourable place

²⁶ Od. β, 174–176.

²⁷ E. DELEBECQUE, *Télémaque et la Structure de l'Odysée*, Aix-en-Provence 1958, p. 71.

²⁸ Listed by NORMAN AUSTIN, *Telemachos Polymechanos*, *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 2, 1969, 45 n. 1.

²⁹ M. J. APHORP, *The Obstacles to Telemachus' Return*, *Cl. Qu.* 30, 1980, pp. 1–22.

³⁰ GILLIAN BENNETT, *Rocky the Police Dog and Other Tales: Traditional Narrative in an Occupational Corpus, Lore and Language III*, pt. 8, pp. 1–19.

³¹ Od. δ, 363–572.

³² Od. λ, 100–137.

in an oral poet's repertoire of themes: on the lines of the traditional Kirghiz pattern of Alpamysh, a new poem, 'Yadgar', was composed, in which the deeds of the legendary hero's son are variations on the themes of his father's adventures³³.

The 'Odyssey' refers repeatedly to the vengeance of Orestes on Aigisthus: as well as Athene's reference to it in book α, Proteus tells it to Menelaus: it is mentioned at several points³⁴. D'ARMS and HULLEY think the poet is trying to link the tradition of the return of Odysseus with that of the noblest house in the epic tradition, the house of Atreus³⁵. This may indeed be the case, but there is another possibility, which will now be explored.

When Athene comes to see Telemachus at the beginning of the 'Odyssey' she says

ἀλλ' ἄγε μοι τόδε εἰπὲ καὶ ἀτρεκέως κατάλεξον
εἰ δὴ ἐξ αὐτοῦ τόσος πάϊς εἰς Ὀδυσῆος.
αἰνῶς μὲν κεφαλὴν τε καὶ ὄμματα καλὰ ἔοικα
κείνω³⁶.

Telemachus in his reply seems less than quite certain:

μήτηρ μὲν τ' ἐμέ φησι τοῦ ἔμμεναι, αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γε
οὐκ οἶδ'· οὐ γάρ πώ τις ἐδὸν γόνον αὐτὸς ἀνέγνω³⁷.

Odysseus departed before Telemachus was of an age to remember his father. Everyone except Telemachus uses recognition tokens to satisfy himself that Odysseus is who he says he is. Eurycleia sees the scar³⁸, Eumaeus and the cowherd see it later³⁹. Penelope asks many questions and sets many trials, culminating in the proof of the bed⁴⁰. Laertes is shown the scar and told the trees which he had given to Odysseus when he was a child⁴¹. KAKRIDIS has an attractive treatment of these recognitions and how they have been taken and modified from folk tradition⁴². However, there can be no such tokens between Odysseus and Telemachus, because Telemachus knows nothing of his father except what he has been told. That is why, after initial disbelief, he ac-

³³ N. K. CHADWICK & V. ZHIRMUNSKY, *Oral Epics of Central Asia*, Cambridge 1961, p. 327.

³⁴ *Od.* α, 29-43, 298-300; *Od.* γ, 193-198, 302-310; *Od.* δ, 512-547.

³⁵ E. F. D'ARMS & K. K. HULLEY, *The Oresteia-Story in the 'Odyssey'*, *T.A.Ph.A.* 77, 1946, 207-213.

³⁶ *Od.* α, 206-209.

³⁷ *Od.* α, 215-216.

³⁸ *Od.* τ, 392-393.

³⁹ *Od.* φ, 221.

⁴⁰ *Od.* ψ, 183-204.

⁴¹ *Od.* ω, 331-344.

⁴² J. TH. KAKRIDIS, *Homer Revisited*, Lund 1971, pp. 151-163.

cepts it when he is told by the stranger in the swineherd's hut that he, the »outsider« who changes like a chameleon at the whim of Athene, is his father.

It may be that Odysseus needs Telemachus for his son quite as much as Telemachus needs Odysseus for his father. This may be the significance of Odysseus' imprecation when he is upbraiding Thersites:

μηδ' ἔτι Τηλεμάχοιο πατὴρ κεκλημένος εἶην⁴³.

The confirmation of the father-son relationship may signify the restoration of order on Ithaca. If that is so, there may be an element of sternness in Odysseus' words to Telemachus:

οὐ σε ἔοικε φίλον πατέρ' ἔνδον ἔοντα
οὔτε τι θαυμάζειν περιώσιον οὔτ' ἀγάσθαι·
οὐ μὲν γάρ τοι ἔτ' ἄλλος ἐλεύσεται ἐνθάδ' Ὀδυσσεύς⁴⁴.

Odysseus cannot allow Telemachus to reject him and prevent him from claiming his wife and his kingdom.

It is Telemachus' ignorance of his father, coupled with the frequent references to the vengeance of Orestes on Aigisthus which leads me to suppose that the 'Odyssey' combines a number of themes in story-telling, each of which makes its requirements felt. WILAMOWITZ distinguished »der Held von Irrfahrten«, who is the subject of fairy-tale from the »verschollene Gatte«, the subject of *Novelle*⁴⁵. The theme of the king who returns in the nick of time to prevent the remarriage of his wife appears in the 'Odyssey' in the version where the new suitor(s) is/are wicked, and there has been plotting against the son of the first marriage. However, the theme of the blood-feud appears also in Kirghiz and Kazakh folk-lore⁴⁶: the hero's father is killed or taken prisoner, his family or tribe are abducted by the conqueror, the hero grows up without knowing his parentage. On learning of it, he sets off to take vengeance, kills his father's murderers, and returns home. There are elements of this plot in both, the 'Odyssey' and the story of Orestes. Orestes was a baby when rescued and sent to Phocis: he returns from exile to kill his father's murderers. Telemachus, who has grown up not knowing his father, goes abroad, ostensibly to look for news, but perhaps, since his stated quest achieves very little, so that he can return »from exile«, to assist his father in slaying the suitors.

Many of the parallels to the 'Odyssey' feature an infant son whom the wicked suitor(s) plot(s) to kill. Telemachus is hardly, at seventeen to twenty, an infant son, and so the motif of the plot against the hero's baby son is com-

⁴³ Il. B, 260.

⁴⁴ Od. π, 202–204.

⁴⁵ U. VON WILAMOWITZ-MOELLENDORFF, *Die Heimkehr des Odysseus*, Berlin 1927, p. 186.

⁴⁶ See CHADWICK & ZHIRMUNSKY (above, n. 33), p. 313.

bined with the motif of the blood feud. Because the blood feud requires the son to return from exile to avenge his father's murderers, Telemachus goes on a quest which does not reveal his father's whereabouts. The avenging son then wreaks vengeance, not on his father's murderers, but *with* his father, on the unsuccessful (or wicked) suitors of his mother. The combination of themes of story-telling which we find in the 'Odyssey' has resulted in a work of art which goes beyond the folk-tradition from which its material is derived.

Belfast, Northern Ireland

M. J. ALDEN

CESURA MEDIANA E TRIMETRO EURIPIDEO

Com'è noto, le cesure del trimetro giambico tragico sono la *penthemimeres* e la *hephthemimeres*¹. Non mancano tuttavia versi tragici privi delle due cesure fondamentali, i quali cioè esibiscono fine di parola in posizione diversa dal secondo *anceps* o dal secondo *breve*, come la cosiddetta cesura mediana o fine di parola dopo il terzo *longum*². Si è spesso affermato che la cesura mediana si presenta raramente in Eschilo e in Sofocle (se ne registrerebbero in tutto 25 casi), mentre Euripide ne userebbe più spesso (ca. 100 casi), ma in coincidenza con sillaba elisa e cioè solo in forma «attenuata»³.

Quanto ai versi con cesura mediana senza elisione, si tratta naturalmente di casi eccezionali⁴; ben nota è infatti la tendenza dei poeti greci a non «spezzare» a metà versi come il trimetro giambico o l'esametro dattilico. Che però un trimetro con cesura mediana fosse sbagliato o insopportabile per un orec-

¹ La frequenza della *penthemimeres* nei tre tragici oscilla tra il 70% e l'80%, con valori mediamente più alti in Euripide; vd. J. DESCROIX, *Le trimètre iambique*, Mâcon 1931, 261-68.

² Per es. Aesch. Pers. 251 ὡς ἐν μιᾷ πληγῇ κατέφθαρται πολὺς, Soph. Ai. 855 καίτοι σὲ μὲν χάκει προσαυδήσω ξυνών.

³ P. MAAS, *Greek Metre* (tr. H. Lloyd-Jones), Oxford 1962, § 103; K. RUPPRECHT, *Einführung in die griechische Metrik*, München 1950³, 33; B. SNELL, *Griechische Metrik*, Göttingen 1962³, 13; W. J. W. KOSTER, *Traité de métrique grecque*, Leiden 1966⁴, V 15,6; D. KORZENIEWSKI, *Griechische Metrik*, Darmstadt 1968, 48. Ma per un resoconto più puntuale dei fatti vd. ora M. L. WEST, *Greek Metre*, Oxford 1982, 82s.

⁴ Già R. PORSON, nella prefazione all'ediz. di 'Hecuba' del 1802, p. XXVs., aveva notato: «Longe rarior est ea licentia, qua integri pedes, tertius et quartus, vel integras voces vel vocum partes faciunt» (cita come esempi Soph. Ai. 1091, Aesch. Pers. 509). Successivamente P. ELMSLEY, in *Classical Journal* VIII, 16, 1813, 428-32, sottopose ad esame la tradizione euripidea e ridusse al minimo i casi di cesura mediana. L'esiguo numero fu ulteriormente ridotto da A. SCHMIDT, *De caesura media in Graecorum trimetro iambico*, Diss. Bonn 1865, 24-30, che, ravvisando nella cesura mediana una grave *offensio*, corresse o espunse i versi euripidei che la esibissero. ELMSLEY e SCHMIDT sottolinearono come l'elisione rendesse più sopportabile l'anomala cesura.