

Introduction

POSTWAR PLEASURES

The change of atmosphere that greets anyone turning from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey*—which surely may be thought to reflect a parallel transformation in both the poet's own world and the world, however remote, that he or she was striving to recapture—is total and immediate, like the sudden emergence of sunlight after a long grey winter. A decade of grinding, relentless, destructive, and seemingly unending formulaic warfare is at last over, and the social code that enforced it shows unmistakable signs of breaking up. The surviving victorious Achaian veterans may face unforeseen hazards on their way home, and, like returning warriors of any age, may find worse personal problems facing them at home than any they left behind on the battlefield; but nevertheless wider horizons now confront them, there is scope for individualism and adventure. The unknown beckons enticingly for exploration, old myths and exciting new discoveries coalesce, there is a sense, however evanescent, of freedom in the air. The result is a heady mixture of Bronze Age memories and the opening up of the old world's unknown magical frontiers to intrepid voyagers. The Clashing Rocks may no longer be impassable; even Hadēs may be reached in a black ship (10.501–2); and old legends like those of the Sirens and the Lotus-Eaters may take on physical, if still elusive, reality somewhere out in the newly explored west.

All these features are present in the *Odyssey* as we have it and substantially contribute to making its narrative so vivid and compulsive throughout. The readability is also much enhanced by what can be seen as a striking modernity of vision, not least in comparison with the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey*, unlike its predecessor, has a strong sense of context. It is highly conscious of and very often interested in describing the scenery and background of whatever action may be going on. An early, memorable, and—as far as the story goes, quite unnecessary—instance of this is Kalypsō's remote island abode, duly scrutinized by Hermēs on arrival. He might have contented himself with noting, when he found the nymph at home, singing as she worked at the loom, that “a great fire / was ablaze on the hearth: the fragrance of split cedar / and citron wood burning spread far over the island” (5.58–60: smells, too, we note, are of interest). But he goes on to list the various birds of sea and land that nest around, as well as Kalypsō's garden vine, her four gushing

springs, “and beyond them soft meadows of blossoming violets and celery” (5.72–73), detail for detail’s sake.

Scene after scene gets similar observant treatment. Sometimes, indeed, this contributes to the action, as when Nausikaä carefully describes Odysseus’ route into the Scherian capital and her father’s house, and what he will see along the way (6.255–315): the harbor with its array of moored ships, the place of assembly, Poseidōn’s temple, the grove of Athēnē with its poplar trees—all interspersed with shrewd social advice on how to behave so as not to attract too much attention. Odysseus’ fearful struggle in the sea after shipwreck (5.291–457), during which

Both knees now lost their strength
and his strong hands too: the salt deep had crushed his spirit,
all his flesh was swollen, seawater oozed in streams
out through his mouth and nostrils. Breathless, speechless
he lay, barely stirring (453–57)

is described throughout with extraordinary power. The island of Ithákē, not surprisingly, gets careful scrutiny: its ruggedness and unsuitability for horses (4.601–8, 9.21–27), the harbor of Phorkys and the cave of the nymphs (13.95–112), the town spring with its encircling poplars (17.204–11). Scenes of country farming are described in detail: as M. L. West says (2014, 52), “this is a man who has lived on the land and knows it at first hand.” The account of the Kyklōps’ cave offers a highly knowledgeable picture of its owner’s dairy-farming practices (9.219–23).

An equally full picture is provided of the farmstead and piggery looked after by the loyal swineherd Eumaios. Its thorn-topped stone wall is described in detail. We learn the number of sows and hogs, and their disposition in a dozen large sties (14.5–20). As Odysseus approaches, Eumaios is sitting outside his house, cutting up oxhide for a new pair of sandals. Four fierce guard dogs run barking to attack the stranger: an experienced countryman himself, Odysseus drops his stick and sits down, while Eumaios calls the dogs off and showers them with stones (14.21–36). Like so much in the *Odyssey*, this could be a scene from a movie.

It is also a reminder of this composer’s interest in dogs. When Odysseus, after a twenty-year absence, comes home disguised as a ragged vagrant, his old hunting hound Argos, lying near death in the filth of the courtyard, is too weak to do more than feebly wag its tail and cock its ears in recognition of its master—and Odysseus, still very much incognito, cannot even acknowledge the gesture (17.291–327). Briefly and tellingly sketched, this is among the most moving moments of the entire poem.

We are not only told that the suitors invade and virtually take over Penelopē's domain in the absence of her husband: we both see and hear them at it, as Athēnē (disguised as Mentēs the Taphian) does when she arrives to give instructions to Tēlemachos:

There she found the bold suitors. They at the time
were amusing themselves with board games out of doors,
seated on hides of oxen they themselves had slaughtered,
while heralds and henchmen were busy on their behalf,
some mixing wine and water for them in bowls,
while others were swabbing the tables with porous sponges
and setting them out, or carving meat in lavish helpings. (1.104–12)

Again, as so often in the *Odyssey*, the impression given is much akin to that of an introductory or tracking shot in a film. This is the kind of world that we know, we feel, reinforced by “the naturalism and verisimilitude with which [the composer’s] characters tend to act and talk” (West 2014, 53). Think of Alkinoös (13.20–22) pacing to and fro aboard the Phaiakian ship that will ferry Odysseus home, making sure that the various gifts accompanying him are packed under the benches in such a way that they do not impede the oarsmen; or, during dinner (8.62–7, 105–8), the way the herald Pontonoös takes care that the blind minstrel Dēmodokos knows exactly where to find, not only his lyre, but also the food and drink awaiting him; or the sophisticated informality of Helen (4.120–82, 220–32), speculating to Menelaös on the identity of their guests and dosing the wine with a relaxing social drug when the conversation shows signs of becoming fraught; or the giggling, chattering realism of the maids (18.320–36, 20.6–8), whose vulgar pertness and lascivious habits so infuriate Odysseus (20.6–21). The insults of the maid Melanthō and his angry response are as near conversational realism as epic diction can allow, and show full awareness of the variability of individual emotions.

It is, perhaps, the dialogue of the *Odyssey* that establishes the clearest distinction between it and the formal, indeed formulaic, exchanges of the earlier *Iliad*. There is often a surprisingly lifelike resemblance to the confusion, broken sequences, and occasional illogicalities of a recorded discussion: that involving Tēlemachos, Peisistratos, Menelaös, and Helen (4.71–295), well analyzed by West (2014, 63), is typical. Questions, as in life, are not always answered directly or immediately. Two people will talk across, and about, a third (e.g., at 16.56–89 and 23.88–116). It is a truism of ancient portraiture that it aims to catch not physical actuality so much as an idea, a concept with which the artist associates his subject. With the *Odyssey* we come perceptibly closer to that actuality than does the *Iliad*.

THE INDIVIDUAL EMERGENT

There is an interesting, and significant, progression discernible in the opening lines of the surviving epics from antiquity. The composer of the *Iliad* takes a state of mind, wrath (*mēnis*), as his theme and appeals to the goddess (unnamed) to sing it, presumably using him as her instrument. The *Odyssey*, by contrast, picks on a particular man (*andra*) as subject and invites the Muse, rather than the goddess, not to sing, but to tell, his story. When we reach Apollonius of Rhodes, the sophisticated Hellenistic author of the *Argonautika*, he may be starting from Apollo (whatever exactly that means), but he is composing the work himself and goes back earlier than the Trojan War for his theme. By the time we reach the *Aeneid*, even the allusion to the god has been dropped: *Arma uirumque cano*, Vergil announces, *I do the singing: war and this man*—another survivor, Trojan this time, from that same remote war—form *my* subject. From millennia of oral anonymity as a *vox dei*, the poet has at last fully emerged as an individual in his own right, with all that this implies for the world as he portrays it.

STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

The *Odyssey* is constructed in three major interrelated sequences, which, again, may well remind a modern reader of the way a film is constructed, with parallel tracks, chronological manipulation, and occasional cross-cutting (e.g., from Sparta to the suitors [4.625] or from Tēlemachos' potentially dangerous voyage [15.300] to Odysseus and Eumaios at the farmstead. The first sequence, having opened with a meeting of the Olympian deities that discusses the dilemma of the poem's protagonist—isolated perforce, after shipwreck, chez Kalypsō, in what many might regard as a decidedly enviable exile—then proceeds to leave him until book 5, while his wife and son are shown coping as best they can with the unwanted presence of numerous young men eager to marry Odysseus' (presumed) widow and only too happy to freeload off her until she makes up her mind.

Penelopē, Tēlemachos, and the leading suitors are all presented with remarkable psychological insight. Penelopē is in an essentially weak position. She cannot just send her would-be suitors packing: she simply lacks the force to do so. Loyal to her absent husband she may be, but the strong likelihood of his death—of which she is unhappily conscious—both undermines her status as wife (rather than as highly eligible widow) and correspondingly encourages the lawless arrogance of her suitors. She is convincingly shown playing a desperate delaying game, in which her prime excuse of putting off

any final decision until she has completed weaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law Laërtēs is augmented with teasing messages and promises (2.87–92) designed to string her importunate suitors along. She knows only too well that if Odysseus *is* dead the only possible way she can save the family fortune (and possibly stop her son from being killed) is by remarriage. As a *pis aller*, this—contrary to what many scholars, West (2014, 68) included, surmise—is constantly at the back of her mind, and Penelopē’s ambivalence over it is conveyed with percipient subtlety.

Tēlemachos, too, gets insightful psychological treatment. As a fatherless boy just emerging from adolescence, his mood swings, from nervous uncertainty to brash overconfidence, are pinpointed with uncommon accuracy (1.114–36, 345–59, 365–80; 2.40–84, 129–45, 208–23, 309–20). His relationship with his mother is impatient and edgy: the effects of her prolonged mourning—unwashed person, dirty clothes—he finds distasteful. His formulaic epithet, *pepnumnos*, “sagacious,” ironic at first, becomes step by step more appropriate as he matures. His clashes with the suitors facilitate sharp sketches of their leaders as well: Antinoös, glibly plausible (2.85–128), and Eurymachos, imperious and openly aggressive (2.178–207). Tēlemachos’ travels to Pylos and Sparta in books 3 and 4 introduce first Nestōr, splendidly garrulous in his extreme old age (3.103–200), and then the even more long-winded Menelaös (4.333–592), living in luxurious retirement with his recovered wife, that sophisticated and blithely unabashed professional survivor Helen, an unforgettable cameo portrait done in a minimum of shrewd strokes (4.120–46, 220–89).

So we come, at last, in the second sequence, to the homonymous protagonist of the entire poem. For those who last met Odysseus in the *Iliad*—or even during Helen’s reminiscences—this encounter can be somewhat disconcerting. At Troy, he was among the military leaders and both shrewd and valiant. He had what veterans of World War II used to describe as a “good war,” distinguishing himself in a night raid against the enemy camp (*Il.* 10 *passim*), in the commando venture of the Wooden Horse (4.270–89; *Little Iliad*, arg. 4; West 2014, 122–23), and, with Aias, in the rescue of Achillēs’ corpse (*Aeth.*, arg. 3; West 2014, 112–13). But here he is (5.81–84), the solitary survivor of shipwreck on Kalypsō’s island, “sitting out on the seashore, weeping, / rending his heart with tears and groans and sadness, / gazing out through his tears at the unharvested sea.” For a marooned sailor, he has not done badly: seven years, no less, of luxurious cohabitation with a sexy nymph, who not only feeds and sleeps with him but has promised him immortality (5.135–36) if he stays. But now he wants to go home. Why? We

do not have to wait long to learn. Because (5.153) “the nymph no longer pleased him.” Our hero may long for wife and home, but chiefly because he has, very literally, a case of the seven-year itch.

Seldom in the history of literature can a hero have had a less promising introduction, and it is a mark of this composer’s narrative powers and ability to create a wholly convincing character, as it were on the wing, that after very little time our sympathies are completely with Odysseus in his struggle to return to his island home of Ithákē. His powerful, and praiseworthy, masculinity is constantly stressed, from the moment Hermēs delivers Zeus’ ultimatum to the protesting Kalypsō that her lover is to be sent on his way (5.112–47). He mightily fells the trees with which in four days he skillfully constructs a seaworthy raft (5.233–61). He stays awake, steering his homemade vessel effectively by the stars, until the land of the Phaiakians shows up on the horizon (5.270–81), and, at the last moment, a wrathful Poseidōn decides to intervene.

Odysseus can’t resist the storm that the sea god inflicts on him (5.280–332), but—strong male that he is—he attracts the sympathy of a marine nymph, Īnō, who gives him good advice and her magic veil to use as a life belt (5.333–53). He swims for it, and Athēnē—another feminine supporter—conveniently calms the storm (5.382–86). He gets safely ashore, and sleeps in a handy leaf-filled hollow under two bushes (5.445–93). Meanwhile, Athēnē ensures by means of an instructive dream that Nausikaä, the Phaiakian king’s daughter, will make a clothes-washing expedition to the same spot, meet Odysseus, and guide him to her father’s house (6.1–47). So it duly falls out; and once more Odysseus’ strength and masculinity are stressed, this time with a strong sexual component: the girls’ laughter wakes him, and he lurches out in front of them, naked except for a leafy branch held in front of his private parts (6.110–38). He has stripped off all his waterlogged clothes prior to swimming ashore, setting us up for what now follows. Nausikaä alone stands and faces him: he greets her, still standing carefully apart, with an elegantly flattering speech, culminating in one of the best definitions of a happy marriage ever made (6.148–85). By now his transformation for reader or listener is complete.

This preparatory treatment is essential, since during his time on Scheria Odysseus is the narrator of his own adventures, with the Phaiakians as an eager audience. We need to assume more than usual significance in such a decision on the composer’s part, since once Odysseus’ ship has been driven off course beyond Cape Malea (9.79–81) by far the greater part of his narrative is literally off the map. After nine days’ further sailing, he and his men encounter, in succession, the Lotus-Eaters, the Kyklōps, Aiolos the wind

master, the Laistrygonians (who destroy all but one of his ships, with their crews, 10.121–32), and Kirkē (who turns some of his own men into swine, 10.230–43, and keeps the rest of them there for over a year, 10.466–71). Despite their protests, before they can voyage home, they are required to make a journey to the Underworld so that Odysseus can consult the shade of the seer Teirēsias. He duly does so and reports seeing the ghosts of many famous old-time heroes and heroines (11, *passim*). After he and his men return from the Underworld, they resume their voyage. This takes them by way of the Sirens (12.36–54, 166–200) and Skyllē and Charybdis (12.73–110, 223–59) to the island of Thrinakiē (12.127–40, 260–398), where the famished crew kill and eat the sacred cattle of Hēlios, the sun god. For this offense, they perish in a divinely raised storm (12.397–419), with only Odysseus himself surviving to be washed up on Kalypsō's shore (12.447–53) and—seven years later—reach Scheria and tell his story.

That story is, in effect, the account of an improbable progress round the traditional mythic frontiers of the Greek world, culminating in a blatantly impossible venture beyond those frontiers to the dark, mysterious, and geographically vague realm of Hadēs and the Underworld. The relevance of either to the rest of the *Odyssey* is highly debatable: even Teirēsias' prophecy regarding Odysseus' future seems originally to have been given, not in the Underworld, but at the very real Thesprōtīan Oracle of the Dead in Dōdōnē (refs. in West 2014, 123–24). What did the composer have in mind in saddling Odysseus with such an experience, and, more important, its subsequent lengthy narration?

It should never be forgotten that our *Odyssey* was put together in a period that saw, not only the expansion of physical horizons through commerce and colonial exploration, but also the dawn of scientific rationalism, a radical questioning of old beliefs, and the new morality of thinkers like Xenophanēs of Kolophōn, who launched effective attacks on the all-too-human immorality, as they saw it, of the Olympian pantheon. The mythical frontiers of the Mediterranean were everywhere being challenged, and an entire fabric of belief with them.

At the same time there was a deep psychological resistance to the new discoveries, which seemed to undermine the entire system of traditional reality. Not only liminal myths, but the very existence of the Olympian universe, of encircling Ocean, of Hadēs and the Underworld, was at stake. As I note elsewhere, “The mythic past was rooted in historical time, its legends treated as fact, its heroic protagonists seen as links between the ‘age of origins’ and the mortal, everyday world that succeeded it” (Green 2007, 14–15). This remained true long after the seventh century. For the author of the

Marmor Parium, a Hellenistic epigraphic chronology, events that we would relegate to the world of fantasy are confidently dated: for example, Deukaliōn's Flood to 1528 B.C.E., the Amazons' alleged campaign against Athens to 1256, and (today perhaps more plausibly) the Trojan War to 1218. The fourth-century C.E. Christian historian Eusebius, with equal confidence, fixes the voyage of the Argonauts as having taken place in 1264. The postwar travels of Odysseus must have been similarly regarded. It is more than possible, when we consider the background of belief regarding them, that our composer cleverly hedged bets on their historicity by having their protagonist narrate them, leaving everyone, like Alkinoös and the Phaiakians, to make up their own minds as to whether he was telling the truth or, as so often, fabricating a tall story for the sheer pleasure of it.

The third and final sequence of the *Odyssey* occupies a good half of the whole, and is entirely taken up with the events following its hero's long-delayed return home, delivered to Ithákē, still sleeping, by his Phaiakian conveyers, together with a rich assortment of parting gifts from his hosts (13.70–125). It is characteristic of this composer that while we are eagerly awaiting Odysseus' reactions to his homecoming, the scene switches abruptly to Olympos, where Poseidōn, though conceding that Odysseus has been granted a safe return by Zeus, is shown complaining bitterly to his brother that he nevertheless shouldn't have been given so easy, comfortable, and profitable a passage. His, Poseidōn's, honor has been offended. No problem, Zeus responds: you can deal with those escorts of his how you like! You want to smash their ship—why not turn it to stone near the harbor where all can see it, as an object lesson? But that idea of yours of hiding their city with a mountain I wouldn't recommend. Wrathful Iliadic Poseidōn has been met with the new postwar Olympian reasonableness. He does what Zeus suggests, but no more (13.139–64). It is a reminder, to Athēnē and the returning Odysseus, that excessive vengeance, old style, should now be avoided: a reminder that, as we know, will be ignored until the very end, and then only enforced, upon goddess and humans alike, by a well-aimed thunderbolt (24.539–40).

Athēnē's cooperation with Odysseus in his restoration has its odd beginning now, and is marked later (18.346–48, 20.284–86) by a vengeful determination to have the suitors fully justify extreme measures against them. The mist she now sheds about him (13.189–93) not only makes him unrecognizable, even to his own wife, but also (by what seems a kind of careless excess) makes the features of his island home unrecognizable to *him*, so that he supposes the Phaiakians have misdelivered him, and perhaps robbed him of his presents (13.200–219). Materializing before him as a young shepherd, Athēnē

deplores his ignorance (which she herself has caused) and reassures him that this is, indeed, Ithákē (13.236–49). At which point Odysseus launches into yet another cover story, cut short by the goddess, who now takes on the appearance of a handsome woman (not, one would guess, unlike herself), reveals her true identity (13.287–310), strokes him, scatters the mist (13.352), and from then on converses with him in what can only be described as a flirtatious manner. Any other man, she says, would have made straight for home, but he has always been cautious. He must tell no one his identity. She will show him round, help him store away his treasure, and together they will plan the destruction of the suitors, something that will involve the spilling of blood and brains (13.394–96, 427–28) She then describes how she will alter his appearance to protect him. She also gives him immediate instructions: he is to go to the piggery of his faithful swineherd Eumaios, while she goes to Sparta to fetch back Tēlemachos, who's been seeking news of his father there. Brushing aside Odysseus' very reasonable query—why didn't she herself tell Tēlemachos his father was alive?—she touches him with her wand and effects his instant metamorphosis, described in detail (13.429–38), into an elderly, wrinkled, raggedly clad beggar.

All this sets the scene for what follows. We know, as did the original audience, what the climax will be, and, like them, grow impatient at the leisurely development of the narrative. The meeting with Eumaios takes up all of book 14, is full of vivid detail and conversation—including yet another fictitious, and lengthy (199–359), cover story—but advances the narrative little except to provide the piggery as a safe and hospitable base from which Odysseus can make forays into the noisy world of the feasting suitors, and where, heroic appearance restored in a flash by Athēnē (16.172–76), he is reunited with the awestruck Tēlemachos, back from Pylos, who at first takes him for a god. Back in his role as a dirty old beggar, Odysseus, in the intervals of planning the suitors' downfall, suffers humiliation at their hands (e.g., 17.217–35, 445–65). There are predictions of their doom, none more striking than a brief moment (20.345–58), quickly forgotten, when the suitors' laughter becomes hysterical, while their food and the walls seem spattered with blood.

Through all this moves the increasingly fraught figure of Penelopē, near despair, yet tempted by a dream (19.535–53) and repeated assertions by Tēlemachos' traveling companion Theoklymenos (17.152–61) and, above all, by the vagrant stranger who is in fact her husband (19.300–307, 546–58) that Odysseus is alive, nearby, and about to return. It is now (19.572–80) that she sets up the contest of the bow. “Why does the queen decide *at this point* to set the contest of the bow for the very next day and stake her entire future on its outcome?” Joseph Russo asks (*Comm.*, 3: 104), like many other commentators.

The answers that have been suggested achieve varying degrees of improbability. This I find puzzling, since the answer strikes me—in sharp contrast to any proposed solution regarding the bowshot—as both reasonable and obvious. Penelopē, after holding out for almost twenty years against all odds, is a woman in her middle or late thirties very near breaking point. Convinced that her husband must by now be dead, she is seriously contemplating remarriage, not least since her refusal to do so is threatening both the family fortune and her son's life. But at this critical juncture she receives strong hints—in particular, the assertions of the beggar, who is thought by Odysseus' old wet nurse Eurykleia to look remarkably like him (19.379–80), as well as her own dream (19.535–58)—that Odysseus just may, however improbably, still be alive. She could be further encouraged by an as yet unacknowledged sense that this beggar might indeed, even more improbably, be Odysseus himself.

What then to do? The contest of the bow (explained or not) is a brilliant solution. If Odysseus is, by some miraculous chance, the beggar, he will be certain to reveal himself by winning it, and thus will provide the best possible solution to her dilemma. If he is not, then Penelopē will do what she is already planning to do *faute de mieux*: marry the best of the suitors. The contest is the means by which she is giving her forlorn hope one last chance, something to make Odysseus, if it is indeed he, drop his maddening and inexplicable false role, and act. Which of course in the event it does.

INCIDENTAL PROBLEMS

There is a famous, and perennial, legal joke about a man facing prosecution, who, after discussion, accepts with enthusiasm the line of defense suggested by his counsel. He then goes home, thinks it over, sleeps on it, and begins to worry about certain details. It gets to the point where he calls up his attorney and tells him yes, on first hearing the proposed line of defense did strike him as perfect, but overnight he's been thinking things over, and certain possible flaws in it have occurred to him, and—

At this point the lawyer gently interrupts him to say: “But my dear fellow, the jury is only going to hear it *once*.” Throughout my work on translating Homer's *Odyssey*, this anecdote, for reasons that will become all too clear as we proceed, was never very far from my mind.

When I began the Introduction to my translation of the *Iliad*, it was in a mood of pessimism dictated by overwhelming ignorance. As I wrote then: “We do not know for certain who Homer was, or where he lived, or when he wrote. We cannot be absolutely certain that the same man (if it was a man)

wrote both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, or even that ‘wrote’ is a correct description of the method of composition involved. . . . Even the time at which the texts we know were actually written down, and what stage of composition they represent, are equally uncertain.” In brief, I said, “in the sense that we normally consider a written work, there is no anterior background; we are at the beginning.”

The situation facing us in the *Odyssey* is, in several crucial ways, different from that presented by the *Iliad*. First, and most important, we are no longer at the beginning. In the form in which we have it, the *Odyssey* describes a world that is historically recognizable and different in moral, social, and religious terms from the formulaic aristocratic society portrayed in the *Iliad*. With the notable exception of Poseidōn, the gods are no longer the spiteful and quarreling family whose vices incurred the harsh criticism of thinkers such as Xenophanes: like their human counterparts, they are acquiring middle-class ethical habits. Few now have speaking roles; for the most part, they give tacit agreement to the generally acceptable decisions of Zeus and Athēnē. The limits of their power remain uncertain: inexorable fate and destiny are still lurking in the background. Furthermore, though the *Odyssey* sets out to depict the end of the heroic age, it is made clear throughout that the postwar horizons of the Mediterranean world have definitely opened up. Peaceful sea travel has developed; destinations as far afield as Sicily, Sidon, Egypt, and the Black Sea are not uncommon. These are still remote areas, but measurably more is now known about them than can be deduced from the *Iliad*. In other words, we have now reached a period that not only marks a clear evolution from the world in which the *Iliad* was conceived, but is one that we can roughly date based on external historical evidence. It is the eastern Mediterranean world of the seventh century B.C.E.

Most of this I had, as a historian, deduced for myself while reading and rereading the text of the *Odyssey* over the years, and, at long last, translating it. The two obvious (I thought) conclusions that could be drawn from this were, first, that the *Odyssey* was a later work than the *Iliad*; and, second, that it was very probably put into the form in which it has reached us at some point in the seventh century. I was uncomfortably aware that such a view ran counter to the opinions of a large number of Homerists, some of whom were not slow to remind me that, as a historian, I had no understanding of the way in which literature, poetry in particular, and, a fortiori, its critical interpretation, worked. Quite apart from the fact that I had been studying, and writing, poetry for long before I decided to become a professional historian, I saw, and see, no reason why literary critics, whether ancient or modern, should be mysteriously exempt from the normal constraints of historical

evidence. No literary argument that I saw in any way shook my judgment on these two points.

When I was about two-thirds of the way through my translation, by the kind of happy coincidence that would raise eyebrows in fiction, but that keeps obstinately turning up in real life, I received just the kind of support that I most needed from an unexpected quarter. I had been sent for review Martin West's *The Making of the Odyssey*, in the event the last book he was to produce before his wholly unforeseen premature death. I had kept putting off reading it, because, knowing the quality of West's scholarship, I was afraid of what I might find there. I need not have worried. There was plenty in this text over which we differed, but nevertheless, on the likely date of the *Odyssey*, its chronological relation to the *Iliad*, and the reasons for both, we saw eye to eye. Moreover, West furnished me with detailed evidence that added some much-needed precision to my own opinions. As will become apparent below, this is by no means the only debt that I owe to a remarkable book, and I was glad of the chance, when I wrote my review, to pay tribute to one of the twentieth century's truly great classical scholars.¹

Another discovery, gradually forcing itself upon me as my translation progressed, came as an unexpected surprise. I had assumed, from years of previous reading, that the Greek of the *Odyssey* would be both easier to construe and more enjoyable to turn into English than that of the *Iliad*. In fact, neither assumption proved to be the case. I found the Greek of the *Odyssey* consistently harder, and very often far more ambiguous,² than that of the *Iliad*. Speeches (and a great deal of the *Odyssey* consists of dialogue) proved particularly difficult. Exchanges tended to be conversational and realistic, but lengthy monologues were another matter. I sometimes found sentence length and subordination of clauses looking forward to the sophisticated syntactical usages of fifth-century drama. Meaning tended to be more subtly nuanced. Formulaic phrases were far fewer, and—partly in consequence—the text was more tightly packed with particularist action and descriptions: as a result, finding room for line-by-line equivalency proved consistently harder than in the *Iliad*, and when I came to write the synopses of each book, these turned out, however hard I aimed for abbreviation, measurably longer than those of the earlier epic—despite the fact that the books of the *Odyssey* are, line for line, almost all a good deal shorter than those of the

1. The review appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5867 (September 11, 2015): 10.

2. On this, see now West 2014, 69–82.

Iliad, where repetitive battle action, with formulaic phrasing, takes up a remarkable amount of space. The *Odyssey* has sometimes been described, misleadingly, as the first modern novel—seldom, as we shall see, can a greater strain often have been placed on the reader’s suspension of disbelief—but the claim is at least true to the extent that in its narrative, whether direct or reported, the percentage of individual, original activity moving the story forward is unprecedentedly high.

The essential incompatibilities between *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in fact go a good way beyond what can be explained solely by differences of subject and genre, considerable though these are: the *Iliad* is in essence a heavily formalized tragedy, if at times unexpectedly realistic, whereas the *Odyssey* is rather a semi-heroic romantic adventure story, with a strong, and at times disconcerting, element of folktale and fantasy. The clear chronological gap between them indicated by the various social and linguistic differences outlined above suggests a genesis for our *Odyssey* perhaps fifty years later than that of the *Iliad*. We also need to take into consideration the *Odyssey*’s notably larger vocabulary than that of its predecessor. The formulaic phraseology is severely reduced, and sometimes, when used, seems awkward. Similes, so striking and brilliant a feature of the *Iliad*, are notably fewer in the *Odyssey*, and will on occasion strike the reader as strained or downright bizarre. When Odysseus reacts in anger at the lascivious maids (20.5–16), his heart within him growls like a bitch standing over her puppies and barking at strangers; Odysseus and Telemachos embracing in happy tears at their reunion (16.216–18) are likened to vultures mourning their stolen chicks.³ As I worked at the translation, I came to feel, more and more, that whoever was responsible for the *Odyssey* as we have it could not be the same creative mind that had produced our *Iliad*. And here, too (this time with prior knowledge of his position), I was in agreement with Martin West.

THE NARRATIVE EXAMINED

Exactly how the surviving text of the *Odyssey* was composed will never be agreed: there simply is not enough surviving evidence. The best we can do is to look closely at what’s there and see what it can tell us. Two basic assumptions seem reasonable: first, that the *Odyssey* drew generously upon the oral lays of the past; second, that it was compiled in roughly its final form by a poet who had learned what could be done with the written word from the *Iliad* and sought to produce a work that matched it in length and scope.

3. For other improbable similes, see, e.g., 6.232–35; 7.106; 20.25–27.

That goal was not achieved; the *Odyssey* is measurably shorter than the *Iliad*, notwithstanding the various lengthy digressions that occupy so much space: the reminiscences of Nestōr (3.103–200, 254–328), Menelaōs (4.333–592), and, later, Eumaios (15.390–484), the antecedents of Theoklymenos (15.222–82), the repetitive fictional cover stories of Odysseus, to Eumaios (14.199–359), Antinoös (17.415–44), and Penelopē (19.165–202), parts indeed even of the seemingly interminable off-the-map disquisition to the Phaiakians that takes up all of books 9–12.

The narrative of the *Odyssey* also differs fundamentally from that of the *Iliad*. Dramatically speaking, the world of the *Odyssey* is that of the Greek heroes' returns (*nostoi*) home after the Trojan War, but there is far less sense of historical reality than in the *Iliad*. No tantalizing hint of evidence that might authenticate the actuality of the events—or, better, the characters—lurks in the background. The Lotus-Eaters, the Laistrygonians, the Kyklōps, the Sirens, the Cattle of the Sun, the remote islands of Kalypsō and Kirkē, even the idealized—and equally remote—Scherian court of King Alkinoös: none of these belong to the harshly human world of Troy, Mykēnai, or even, indeed, to the corrupt postwar aristocratic society of the suitors' Ithākē. After Odysseus has been telling the Phaiakians the names of famous heroines of olden time whose ghosts he has observed in the Underworld, it is hard not to sense a tone of deadpan irony in Alkinoös' voice when he reassures his voluble guest (11.356–76) that his listeners do not suppose for one moment that he's one of those "itinerant men who fashion false tales from what no man could really see!" Few modern readers can have reached this point without entertaining a similar suspicion. By contrast, in the heady and expansive days of the seventh century that saw the birth of the *Odyssey*—when beyond-the-horizon myths like those of Skyllē and Charybdis, or the Sirens, or the Wandering Rocks, were being supplanted by less colorful geographical fact—there must have been many listeners who derived a certain quiet comfort from a narrative in which the reality of such myths was still vouched for, if only by a spellbinding teller of tales energetically singing for his supper.

Nor indeed, in this last context, does the narrative always maintain a plausible realism. We may, like the original audience, be able, at a pinch, to accommodate traditional monsters such as the Kyklōps or even the Sirens. But the *Odyssey* is also careless about practical details. As West stresses (2014, 66), "the whole narrative is pervaded by contradictions and inconsistencies," and its composer "is a chronically inconsistent narrator" who "cannot ever be relied upon to make the details of what happens in one passage match what an earlier passage portended, or a later report of events agree precisely with what we were told when they happened." A typical case is his confusion

over the removal of weapons from the hall.⁴ He has only the vaguest notion regarding the specific structure of Odysseus' house (see, e.g., 22.142–43 and n. 2 ad loc.). Several times we are confronted by physically improbable incidents or situations. The goatherd Melanthios is credited (22.142–46) with the ability to heft at one trip no fewer than twelve full sets of armor for the suitors. The hanging of the errant maidservants produces nooses from nowhere, and puts a minimum of 1,200 lbs. weight on a single rope that seems simply looped round a column (22.446–73, with n. 5 ad loc.).

Though originally, according to tradition, there seem to have been no more than a dozen suitors, all from Ithákē, a reasonable target for Odysseus' great bow (see West 2014, 104), nevertheless the composer of the *Odyssey*, who shows a liking for large numbers, at one point (16.245–53) has Tēlemachos list for his father over a hundred, from all around, islands and mainland, to emphasize the difficulty of dealing with them. Later, however, after a stretch of generalized slaughter, they have conveniently shrunk to a manageable number.

Most notable of all is the feat to be emulated in the contest of the bow (21.75–76 and elsewhere). How does Odysseus, from a sitting position (21.416–23), so shoot an arrow that it somehow passes through no fewer than twelve iron axe heads in a row (19.577–78, 21.419–23)? No remotely credible explanation of this feat has ever been advanced: for a recent account of some of these, with their difficulties, see *Comm.*, 3: 140–47. There are two main theories: that the arrow went through either (i) the empty sockets in the axe heads or (ii) the hanging rings, on double axes, at the base of the axe helves. In both cases, the holes would seem likely to have been far too narrow; indeed, it seems more than likely that the feat as described is a physical impossibility. Despite hopeful arguments and claims, no actual known hole in an ancient axe head or hanging ring is nearly large enough to sustain the trajectory of a fletched arrow, however accurately aimed, through twelve such spaced holes in a row, even granting the unlikely supposition that all twelve holes could be accurately aligned.⁵

MESSING WITH THE LEGEND: MORAL CENSORSHIP, CHRONOLOGICAL FIXES, AND OVERINTRUSIVE PRETERNATURALISM

There is one major event, referred to again and again in the *Odyssey*—first by Zeus during a conclave of the Olympians (1.29–43, 299–300), then by

4. See 16.281–98 and n. 2 ad loc.

5. The Greek, *prôtēs steileiēs*, is of uncertain meaning: it seems to refer to the end (*prôtēs*) of the axe's helve, haft, or handle, leaving the exact nature of the hole undescribed.

Nestōr (3.193–98, 253–75, 301–10), Athēnē disguised as Mentōr (3.234–35), and Tēlemachos (3.237–52) in discussion, then by Menelaōs, again to Tēlemachos (4.512–37), then by the shade of Agamemnōn to Odysseus (11.387–434) and Achillēs (24.20–22, 95–97) in the Underworld—that has an all-too-realistic supposed historical context. This is the seduction, during Agamemnōn’s absence at Troy, of his wife Klytaimnēstra by his cousin Aigisthos, the son of Thyestēs, followed by their joint rule over Mykēnai for seven years; their murder of Agamemnōn on his return from the wars; and the retributive murder, in the eighth year, of both Aigisthos and Klytaimnēstra by the latter’s son Orestēs.

The immediate object of the repeated reminders of this event—which might be seen, in historical terms, as a characteristic and predictable consequence of the prolonged absence from a major Greek citadel of its normal defenders—is clearly to contrast Klytaimnēstra with faithful Penelopē, who holds out for years, through thick and thin, the embodiment of an ideally loyal wife, against the temptations presented by a crowd of lawless and importunate suitors. In addition, there is the implied comparison of Tēlemachos with Orestēs. The motif of Agamemnōn’s betrayal and murder has rightly been interpreted thus by many scholars.

But the episode as presented has also been responsible for one of the most bizarre—and, on the face of it, entirely unnecessary—modifications of the postwar returns. From a very early date, tradition had it that Aigisthos and Klytaimnēstra jointly ruled Mykēnai for seven years. At some point, it was decided, improbably, that this reign *began* with the murder of Agamemnōn on the latter’s return from Troy. The reason for this may well have been the awkward fact that Aigisthos’ rule had been popular—his otherwise surprising formal epithet *amumōn*, “blameless” (*Il.* 1.29) may be suggestive here; and, since he was not only a grandson of Pelops, but the son of Atreus’ brother Thyestēs, who had himself succeeded Atreus as king of Mykēnai (*Il.* 1.102–8), he may well have been regarded as having as legitimate a claim to the throne (cf. 4.517–18) as his cousin Agamemnōn (to whom, rather than to his own son, Thyestēs had allegedly passed on the scepter of power).

There is also the tradition, never mentioned in Homeric epic, but a prominent feature of the Epic Cycle (see *Cypria*, arg. 8; West 2003, 74–75), that at the very beginning of the expedition to Troy, Iphigeneia, Klytaimnēstra’s daughter, was sent to the port of Aulis at the request of her father Agamemnōn on the pretext that she was to marry Achillēs, but in fact to be sacrificed to Artemis in order to placate the goddess’ wrath at Agamemnōn himself and obtain a following wind for the fleet to sail to Troy. The sacrifice took place, the fleet got its wind and sailed.

Klytaimnēstra may well have been thought by the rhapsodes who transmitted the oral legend to have had a very good reason to hate her husband—something that could indeed have influenced her when his cousin Aigisthos came calling. So when was that? Surely at a fairly early point during the Trojan War. Nestōr’s reminiscences (3.262–75) of how Aigisthos seduced Klytaimnēstra, as well as the version told to Menelaös by the Old Man of the Sea (4.517–37, esp. 524–29, with a watch set to provide advance warning of Agamemnōn’s return) are clearly based on just such a tradition. Klytaimnēstra’s initial reluctance, like the claim that a deer was substituted for the human victim, reveal a later determination to expunge the entire episode as morally repugnant, and to remove any hint of approval from the account of Aigisthos’ behavior throughout. For this, two changes were regarded as absolutely indispensable: the sacrifice of Iphigeneia was suppressed, while the commencement of Aigisthos’ seven years’ rule in Mykēnai was set at a point *after* the murder of Agamemnōn. Aigisthos was thus rendered wholly culpable, and Agamemnōn could be seen as the conventional cuckolded husband, whose murder directly facilitated both his murderer’s seven-year reign and the liaison with the (violently widowed) queen that went with it. Significantly, the reported degree of Klytaimnēstra’s own direct involvement in the actual murder remains variable (though Agamemnōn himself, as a shade, is angrily convinced of it, and loses no opportunity of comparing his own unhappy marital position with that of Odysseus: see 11.409–11, 421–30; 24.93–98, 192–202).

But the chronological displacement of Aigisthos’ rule over Mykēnai had an unlooked-for, and most unfortunate, narrative consequence. Nestōr takes it for granted (3.256–61) that, had Menelaös returned while Aigisthos was still alive, he would surely have avenged his brother’s murder. But—as everyone knew—it was Orestēs (who is thus, like Tēlemachos, given time to grow up) who, in the eighth year of Aigisthos’ rule, came back and did the deed, killing not only Aigisthos but also his own mother (3.302–10). Menelaös himself arrives, bringing much treasure, on the very day of the funeral feast (3.311–12), having spent eight years, after leaving Troy, trafficking round the Levant and Egypt with Helen (4.78–96, 227–32), and carefully emphasizes (4.90–92) that it was while he was thus occupied that his brother was killed. In fact, of course, the only reason for the existence of this unbelievably prolonged postwar business tour is to keep him out of the way until the murder has been avenged by Orestēs, since any earlier appearance would raise the question of why he had not then done the job himself.

The seven-year sojourn of Odysseus chez Kalypsō—during which, as West (2014, 127–28) remarks, nothing at all happens—is equally incredible.

Originally, Odysseus was thought to have taken no more than three years after the fall of Troy to get back home.⁶ Kalypsō has no real function other than to give Tēlemachos, like Orestēs, time to grow up—in his case with a view both to providing his mother with a compelling motive for remarriage, and to playing a creditable role himself in helping his father overcome the suitors. Poseidōn inflicts shipwreck on Odysseus in revenge for his having blinded the Kyklōps, Poseidōn's son (albeit in self-defense), but the resulting seven-year haven for Odysseus will not have formed part of his original three-year *nostos* (journey home). As a chronological device, these multi-year segregations are both obvious and singularly lacking in contextual plausibility.

In the first book of the *Iliad* (1.188–222), at a point when Achillēs, infuriated by Agamemnōn, is debating in his mind whether or not to draw his sword and kill him, the observant goddess Hērē notices and quickly dispatches Athēnē earthward to prevent such violence. Athēnē comes up quietly behind Achillēs, invisible to everyone except him, and grasps him by his long hair. Astonished, Achillēs swings round, instantly recognizes Athēnē, and enquires if she's come to witness Agamemnōn's "arrogant gall" (203), for which he's likely to lose his life. No, the goddess responds, she's been sent to curb Achillēs' own wrath, to stop his violence, make him restrict his fury to verbal abuse. Abashed, Achillēs exclaims: "Needs must, goddess, respect the words of you both, / however angry at heart one may be. It is better so— / and those who comply with the gods are listened to in return" (216–18). By the time he has resettled his sword in its scabbard, Athēnē, her task done, is already on her way back to Olympos.

It is a famous, unexpected, and immensely effective scene. Nothing quite like it ever happens again in the *Iliad*. Athēnē's divine intrusion is over almost before it has begun, but its impact on Achillēs is total and instantaneous: modern readers have been known to wonder whether the whole thing is a flash of imagination in Achillēs' mind. This sudden and daring injection into an all-too-human quarrel of an overriding preternatural ele-

6. As West (2014, 115) rightly says: "Neither the individual adventures nor the travelling from one to the next occupied long periods of time. It was hard to make them fill up ten years in aggregate, and Q [West's title for our *Odyssey's* composer] only makes it at all plausible by keeping his hero's progress stalled for a year with Circe and for seven years with Calypso. It has struck more than one scholar that without that stay with Calypso the ten years would be reduced to three: just the length of time suggested by the references to the suitors' three-year presence in the palace and Penelopē's three years of weaving." That of course, would leave Tēlemachos a mere thirteen-year-old. Not impossible: children grew up fast and early then.

ment—no sooner glimpsed than gone—depends for its effectiveness to a great extent on its rarity.

I have long nursed an uneasy suspicion that the composer of the *Odyssey* was not only impressed by the idea but also convinced that it could be repeated ad infinitum, with variations, without losing any of its real creative power. We first meet Athēnē (1.45–59) at a conclave of the Olympians, complaining that Zeus is not concerned with rescuing Odysseus from detention on Kalypsō's remote island. Zeus reminds her (1.63–79) that Poseidōn's claims must be considered. But he agrees, in a casual way, that Olympos should arrange for Odysseus' homecoming, and that it's mainly up to Athēnē to see to this. The result is a staggering sequence of (often preternatural) ad hoc micromanagement on Athēnē's part. She lectures Tēlemachos like a fussy schoolmistress on how to grow up (1.112–305), then flies off as a bird (1.320). At 2.224–41, the wise Ithakan Mentōr, whom Odysseus, Troy-bound, left in charge of his affairs, makes the first of his own rare appearances: advisedly so, since from soon after this (2.267–95) to the final emergency pact arranged with the dead suitors' surviving relatives (2.4545–48), when Mentōr seemingly appears, it is in fact, with one exception (17.67–71), Athēnē in his likeness, and one sometimes wonders (especially in that final case) where in fact the real Mentōr was at the time.

When busily arranging Tēlemachos' trip to Pylos (2.382–87), Athēnē actually takes on the likeness of Tēlemachos himself: luckily, this is a one-off, but the repeated alert that the goddess then “had another idea” can lead to endless improbabilities, such as Athēnē delivering the supposed Mentōr's prayer to Poseidōn (3.55–61), “while herself was bringing it all to pass.” Athēnē flies off like a sea eagle (3.371–72; Nestōr twigs that the bird is her); puts ideas into Odysseus' head from a distance (5.425–29); and visits Nausikaā in a dream in the form of a girlfriend (6.20–40), encouraging her to do the laundry by the seaside (6.112–15), in order to bring about her meeting Odysseus. In fact, she can at a moment's notice take on the likeness of anyone needed to pass on information or in any way advance the narrative, from a girl at the well (7.48–77) to a herald (8.7–15), a well-bred young shepherd (13.221–25), or a handsome woman invisible to Tēlemachos but seen by Odysseus and the dogs (16.155–77).

However, what must put the heaviest strain on the modern reader's willing suspension of disbelief is Athēnē's preternatural, instantaneous ability to transform Odysseus' physical appearance. She can spiff up the sleeping Penelopē's appearance to make her look sexually desirable to the suitors (18.187–96), and we can accept that; but her treatment of Odysseus defies credulity, and may have something to do with the inherent unlikelihood of no one, even his own wife, recognizing him when he is twenty years older—

though Eurykleia comes very close to doing so (19.379–81), before that telltale scar reveals the truth (19.467–75). Athēnē can, at need, and in a split second, magically transmogrify not only Odysseus' person but also his clothing: from a wrinkled old beggar in rags (13.397–403, 429–38) to a well-dressed, healthy, good-looking middle-aged man in his prime (8.16–23, 16.172–76), and back again (16.207–12, 452–59). In the one form (6.229–35), he not only charms the young Nausikaä but is told by her father (7.311–16) that he'd welcome him as a son-in-law. In the other, his persona as an aged beggar is so real that it seriously confuses his own wife (19.100–360). In the rejuvenation process preceding his final reunion with Penelopē, Athēnē restores his former heroic appearance, including a rich crop of "hyacinthine" hair (23.155–58). At a stroke these preternatural interferences with the naturally irreversible effects of twenty years' physical aging undercut the all-too-real and challenging emotions of husband and wife nervously rediscovering one another after their fraught and seemingly endless separation.

TRANSLATION AND THE HOMERIC HEXAMETER

It is over half a century now since Richmond Lattimore, following up (as I too have now done) on his *Iliad*, first published his deservedly famous, and ground-breaking, translation of the *Odyssey*.⁷ What made his version truly different from its innumerable predecessors was his determination to get as close as possible, in every respect—metre, rhythm, formulaic phrases, style, vocabulary, as well as the rapidity, plainness of thought, directness of expression, and nobility of concept emphasized by Matthew Arnold in his lectures *On Translating Homer*—to the original Homeric Greek. The stimulus for such an English *Odyssey* was, of course, the vast expansion of American university education in the humanities, largely fostered by the GI Bill in the years immediately following World War II; and what it sought to do was to give a totally Greekless readership the closest possible idea of what Homer had been about, metrically, linguistically, and in literary terms. My own version, a generation later, has the same objectives in view, with another added: the determination, in dealing with a poem so oral in its essence, that what I have written should be naturally declaimable.

At first sight what Lattimore was attempting did not seem innovative: ever since the Renaissance there had been an ongoing battle between modernist and Hellenizing translators, with the modernists generally winning.

7. Some of what follows here has been adapted from my review-article "Homer Now," published in *The New Republic* 243, no. 10 (June 28, 2012): 36–41, and is used by kind permission.

The essential modernist principle was famously expressed by Dryden, who declared of his version of Horace (but the same principle applies here), in relation to the original author's work, that "my own is of a piece with his, and that *if he were living, and an Englishman*, they are such as he would probably have written" (emphasis, except for *Englishman*, mine).⁸ This formula at once licensed any Anglicization, however inappropriate. It might have been thought that the Hellenizers, whose aim was the preservation of the original characteristics of the Greek, would suit a Greekless audience better; the trouble was that they, like the modernists, assumed, sometimes unconsciously, *an audience that could still read the original Greek*, and thus would be capable of making informed comparisons between text and translation. What Lattimore saw, very clearly, was that communicating the ultra-foreign essence, at every level, of Homer to minds that were virtually *tabula rasa* where any but English poetry was concerned called for a quite new fidelity—rhythmical and rhetorical no less than idiomatic—to the alien original, together with a comparable avoidance of all those comfortingly familiar, yet wildly misleading, fallbacks (blank verse being the most obvious, and the most misleading) that had served translators so well in the past.

Of all the essential features in this new type of translation—retention of formulaic phrases, syntactical empathy, avoidance of factitious pseudo-similarity to familiar English landmarks—the most difficult by far to achieve has always been an acceptable equivalent to Homer's metrical line, the epic hexameter. At the heart of the matter lies a fundamental difference between Greek and English poetics. In Greek (and Latin) verse, all vowels have a fixed quantity, either long or short. Short quantities can be lengthened by position, that is, before two or more consonants, which gives a poet more scope; but every metre is determined by an arrangement of vowel quantities. The power of a line is determined by the contrapuntal play of natural stress (ictus) against this rigid metrical pattern. In English, on the contrary, vowels have no fixed given length (though diphthongs and naturally long or duplicated vowels—think "chain," "groin," "fame," "teeth," "dice," "home," "dune"—to some extent can be made to follow the classical rule), and in the last resort are stressed solely by the natural syllabic emphases given to any sentence. In the strict sense, English doesn't have metres at all.

In Homer's case the situation is made still more difficult by the fact that the prevalent unit of emphasis ("foot") in the epic hexameter is the dactyl (—U U), one long syllable followed by two shorts, dah-didi. This six-foot

8. Preface on translation prefixed to the *Second Miscellany* (1685), reprinted in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. G. Saintsbury (Edinburgh, 1885), 12: 281–82.

line can be set out as follows: —U U |—UU |—|| U U | — || UU |—U U |—U. Any dactyl (i.e., any of the first five feet, though a resolved fifth foot is rare) is resolvable into one long, dah-dah, forming a spondee (—). The sixth foot is an abbreviated (catalectic) dactyl, shorn of its last syllable (— U). It too can be a spondee (—). The hexameter has a natural mid-break, against the metre most commonly in the third or fourth foot, as marked (||). To illustrate this line in English, here is a Victorian rendering of *Iliad* 1.44, by C. S. Calverley: “Dark was the | soul of the | god || as he | moved from the | heights of O | lympos.” Calverley, a good classicist, knew very well that dactylo-spondaic rhythm runs flat contrary to natural English rhythm, which is essentially iambic (U—) or, in lighter moods, anapestic (UU—), and forms the building blocks of the blank verse line, employed by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, and by the vast majority of would-be translators of Homer, even though that seriously reduces the speed of the hexameter, and has totally alien associations to it (translators like Pope compounded this error by choosing the tightly rhymed heroic couplet, since rhyming was unknown to Homer). Iambs naturally climb uphill, while dactyls are on the gallop: listen to the onomatopoeia Homer works into a line (*Od.* 11.598) describing the rock of Sisyphos obstinately rolling and bouncing down to the plain again: *Autis epeita pedonde kulindeto lāas anaidēs*.

The combination of alien rhythm and absence of stress/metre counterpoint has always made any sustained attempt at an English stress hexameter a lost cause, not least because the English stress pattern tends both to avoid spondaic resolved feet and to coincide exactly with the metrical schema. H. B. Cotterill’s *Odyssey* is typical, its flat dactylic rhythms boringly soporific:

Now when at last they arrived at the beautiful stream of the river
 Here the perennial basins they found where water abundant
 Welled up brightly enough for the cleansing of dirtiest raiment
 So their mules they unloosened from under the yoke of the wagon,
 Letting them wander at will on the bank of the eddying river. (6.85–89)

The problem was a daunting one, but most translators, who couldn’t have cared less about the needs of a Greekless general audience, never saw it as one at all.

What is still by far the best solution, though by no means a perfect one, was hit on by C. Day Lewis in 1940, when translating Vergil’s *Georgics*, and later developed in his version (1952) of the *Aeneid*. By a real stroke of luck, this translation was commissioned for broadcasting by the BBC, which meant that it was, precisely, aimed at a nonclassical general public that

would, in the first instance, hear rather than read it. It therefore had to perform to be, like its original, *declaimable*, a quality sadly to seek in most previous versions, but fundamental to all ancient epic. This meant, among other things, capturing something of Vergil's verbal structures and linear rhetoric, which, in turn, demanded a line-by-line adherence to the original text. Thus two crucial necessities were imposed on Day Lewis from the start, and they in turn made him face the dilemma of the English hexameter, one problem with which had always allegedly been that it was unmanageably long.⁹ What Day Lewis evolved was a variable 6/5 stress line, ranging from 12 to 17 syllables, and (though he did not claim this) largely dactylo-spondaic in its emphases.

The result made for far less boring rhythms, and even for a certain verbal springiness. Amusingly, Day Lewis' declared intention in varying the line's length had been to remove the need in translation to either pad or omit as occasion required.¹⁰ What he created was in fact the nearest thing to a truly contrapuntal stress hexameter we're ever likely to achieve. Lattimore, who had clearly seen the potential of such a line in Day Lewis' *Georgics*, used it for his *Iliad* (1951) and *Odyssey* (1965), and I explored its potential further in my version of Apollonius Rhodius (1997). While taking advantage of its variable length while translating the *Iliad* (2015)—as indeed of English natural rhythms, which allowed, very often, for a short syllable before an initial dactyl (which a strict hexameter wouldn't), quietly converting it to UU—that is, an anapest—I was surprised by how often, in fact, the line wrote itself either as a true hexameter, or with one syllable short (catalectic) in the final foot:

The assembly then broke up. The troops now scattered, each man
off to his own swift ship, their minds on the evening meal
and the joy of a full night's sleep. But Achilles wept and wept,
thinking of his dear comrade, so that sleep the all-subduing
got no hold on him: he kept tossing this way and that,
missing Patroklos—his manhood, his splendid strength,
all he'd been through with him, the hardships he'd suffered,
facing men in battle and the waves of the cruel sea. (*Il.* 2.4.1–8)

Controlling the hexameter is, in fact, the key to producing a version of Homer that gives one's nonclassical audience some sense of the *Iliad* or the

9. In fact, it was not as long as the clumsy (and rhymed) "fourteener" employed to translate Homer (1598–1616) by the Elizabethan scholar George Chapman, who has always had a good press from literary critics.

10. See his remarks in *The Aeneid of Virgil* (Garden City, NY, 1953), 8–9.

Odyssey as a whole poem, and I'm lucky in having had a lifetime of preliminary practice before I finally tackled it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This translation, then, aims to introduce Homer's *Odyssey*, as far as possible without familiar distracting comparisons or personal additions, to an audience that in essence knows nothing about the poem, its antecedents, or the circumstances of its creation. As far as possible I have done nothing to remove those features—not so many as might be supposed, and fewer in the *Odyssey* than the *Iliad*—that are often alleged to militate against modern acceptance. The leading characters, and other entities, all retain their repetitive personal epithets. A reader or listener very soon acclimatizes to these and comes to appreciate the subtly ironic way in which they are often employed. The formulaic oral phraseology governing familiar activities like eating and drinking is no odder than the da capo repetition of a dominant theme in, say, a string quartet.¹¹ Homer's own subtle sentence structure and linear rhetoric are at least as effective as the way translators have chopped and changed his language to make it sound more comfortably like words written by an English poet.

It is true that sometimes—very seldom, in fact, and again less often in the *Odyssey*—a point can be reached where close adherence to an idiomatic preference risks, through false associations, sounding ridiculous rather than simply strange or alien.¹² In such cases I have modified the original, generally with an explanatory note. But for the most part, these men and women created long millennia ago (not to mention their heavily anthropomorphized deities) combine a wholly alien background and ethos with all-too-familiar habits that are endearing or alarming according to circumstance: filial and marital devotion, status-conscious pride and arrogance, ancient long-windedness, obstinacy and recklessness, passion and despair. It is the universalism captured by this extraordinary epic poem, in a very different way from that achieved by the *Iliad*, that gives it its remarkable staying power; but the enjoyment it generates comes in great measure from the unexpectedly modern impression it so often achieves. At a distance of nearly three millennia, and

11. Indeed, a similar argument, and comparison, could be made in justification of yet another translation of the *Odyssey*: Would anyone ever raise serious objections to one more interpretation of J. S. Bach's six unaccompanied suites for cello?

12. A nice instance in the *Odyssey* is the Homeric use (paralleled in Latin) of the human head as a summation, personal no less than physical, of the individual: most famous from the Underworld (e.g., at 10.521) as the "weak heads of the dead."

despite its preternatural trimmings, this world, and its occupants, present, much of the time, what seems a recognizable familiarity. The problems, *mutatis mutandis*, are often ours. The reactions are recognizable. The unbridgeable otherness of the ancient world is somehow less of a stumbling-block here than in many later and more sophisticated works that should, on the face of it, be less alien and thus more easily appreciable. And in following the twists of the story, we skim blithely over most of those errors and inconsistencies—some of them described above—that so bedevil the translator and commentator. Any person in search of a compelling and enjoyable narrative is amply rewarded by the *Odyssey*: like Homer's ancient audience, and the jury of the legal joke, he or she will probably only hear or read it once; and those who return to it, often again and again, will have had their impression of it formed, indelibly, trust me—*experto credite*—by that first unforgettable exposure.

One last word. It will be noticed that I have made virtually no attempt to dictate the literary terms in which anyone new to the *Odyssey* should seek to appreciate it as a poem. This is partly because, just as no two historians can fully agree on the poem's genesis, so no two critics are in complete concordance when delineating its literary qualities. But first and foremost, it is because a lifetime devoted to teaching of one sort or another has shown me that initial impressions are crucial, and that if these are imposed externally, they can never be shaken off. First-time readers of the *Odyssey* should be allowed to establish their own personal impression of it before listening to the competing chorus of professionals, who are all too ready to shape their opinions for them. My bibliography offers a way into this noisy marketplace. Take my advice and don't consult it until you've familiarized yourself with the great poem itself, preferably on more than one reading, and have established your own personal attitude to it. Then Daniel Mendelsohn's *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic* (2017) might be a stimulating place to begin. If the experience leads you to learn Greek and tackle the original, so much the better. You won't regret it.

Book 1

The man, Muse—tell me about that resourceful man, who wandered
far and wide, when he'd sacked Troy's sacred citadel:
many men's townships he saw, and learned their ways of thinking,
many the griefs he suffered at heart on the open sea,
battling for his own life and his comrades' homecoming. Yet 5
no way could he save his comrades, much though he longed to—
it was through their own blind recklessness that they perished,
the fools, for they slaughtered the cattle of Hēlios the sun god
and ate them: for that he took from them their day of returning.
Tell us this tale, goddess, child of Zeus; start anywhere in it! 10

Now the rest, all those who'd escaped from sheer destruction,
were home by now, survivors of both warfare and the sea;
Him alone, though longing for his homecoming and his wife,
the queenly nymph Kalypsō, bright among goddesses,
held back in her hollow cavern, desiring him for her husband. 15
But when the year arrived, with its circling seasons, in which
the gods had ordained he should make his homeward journey
to Ithákē, not even then would he be free of trials,
even among his own people. All the gods felt pity for him
except for Poseidōn, who still nursed unabated wrath 20
against godlike Odysseus until he reached his native land.

But now Poseidōn was visiting the remote Aithiopians—
who live in two sundered groups, both at mankind's frontiers,
the one at Hyperion's setting, the other where he rises—
to receive from them a full sacrifice of bulls and rams, 25
and was sitting there at the feast, enjoying himself: the other
gods were all assembled in the halls of Olympian Zeus.
Discussion was started among them by the Father of men and gods,
who'd been brooding in his heart over handsome¹ Aigisthos,

1. The epithet applied to Aigisthos is *amumōn*, which usually carries the formulaic meaning “blameless” or “peerless.” This seems inappropriate here, since Aigisthos murdered his cousin Agamemnon. A. A. Parry 1973, 123–24 argues on etymological grounds that *amumōn* could also mean “handsome” or “stately.” I accept this explanation *faute de mieux*, but suspect (see pp. 15–17 above) there may be some other reason for the presence of the surprising formulaic title.

slain by far-famed Orestēs, the son of Agamemnōn: 30
 with him in mind he now spoke among the immortals, saying:
 “My oh my, the way mortals will fasten blame on the gods!
 From us, they say, evils come, yet they themselves
 through their own blind recklessness have ills beyond
 their fated lot, as lately Aigisthos—beyond *his* fated lot— 35
 killed Atreus’ son at his homecoming, married his wife,
 though he knew this meant sheer destruction, since we’d told him
 before the event, sending Hermēs, the sharp-eyed Argos-slayer,
 he should neither slay the man nor marry his bedfellow,
 since vengeance for Atreus’ son would come from Orestēs 40
 once he’d reached manhood, and longed for his own country.
 So Hermēs said; but he failed, for all his good intentions,
 to dissuade Aigisthos, who now has paid the full penalty.”

Then the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
 “Our father, son of Kronos, highest above all rulers, 45
 that man indeed was destroyed by well-merited disaster—
 so may all others perish who commit such crimes!—
 but my heart is distressed on account of clever Odysseus,
 that ill-fated man, who, far from his dear ones, has long
 suffered griefs on a sea-ringed island, where the sea’s navel is: 50
 a tree-rich island, and a goddess has her home there,
 the daughter of crafty-minded Atlas, who knows the depths
 of every sea, who in person shoulders those lofty
 pillars that keep earth and firmament apart from each other.
 His daughter it is who detains that luckless, sorrowful man, 55
 forever beguiling him with soft and wheedling words
 to forget his island, Ithákē. Yet Odysseus, in his yearning
 to perceive were it only the smoke rising up into the sky
 from his homeland, longs now for death. But your own heart
 cares nothing for him, Olympian! Did not Odysseus 60
 by the Argives’ ships honor you with the sacrifices he made
 in the broad land of Troy? Why, Zeus, do you hate² him so?”

Cloud-gatherer Zeus responded to her, saying: “My child,
 what’s this word that’s escaped the barrier of your teeth?
 Now how could I ever forget the godlike Odysseus, 65

2. There is an untranslatable pun here (and elsewhere) involving the name Odysseus and the verb *odussomai*, meaning to hate, or be wrathful. Cf. 19.409 and note ad loc.

who for mind surpasses all mortals, who's sacrificed most
to the deathless gods who possess the wide firmament? No,
it's Poseidōn, the Earth-Shaker, whose fury with him is relentless,
unceasing, because of the Kyklōps, whose eye he blinded—
the godlike Polyphēmos, whose strength is the mightiest 70
among all the Kyklōpes: the nymph Thoōsa bore him,
daughter of Phorkys who rules the unharvested sea,
for there in the hollow sea caves she lay with Poseidōn.
That's why Earth-Shaker Poseidōn is wroth with Odysseus:
not killing him, but forever frustrating his homeward journey. 75
So come, let all of us here give some thought to his return,
how to get him home safely: Poseidōn will have to abandon
his rage, he won't be able, with all the immortals united
against him, to strive alone, lacking the gods' goodwill."

The goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying: 80
"Our father, son of Kronos, highest above all rulers,
if indeed it is now agreeable to the blessed gods
that quick-witted Odysseus should return to his own home,
let us then dispatch Hermēs, the guide, the slayer of Argos,
to the isle of Ōgygia, so that as soon as may be 85
he can inform the fair-tressed nymph of our firm decision
on steadfast-minded Odysseus: that he's to return home.
I meanwhile will go to Ithákē, approach his son,
put more strength in his heart, give him the courage
to summon the long-haired Achaians to assembly, and make 90
a strong case to the suitors, who without cease slaughter
his flocks of sheep and his shambling, crumple-horned cattle;
and then I'll send him to Sparta and sandy Pylos, to seek
news of his father's homecoming—he may learn something—
and win a good reputation among men at large." 95

So she spoke,
and bound on her elegant sandals under her feet,
immortal, golden, that bore her both over the sea
and across the boundless earth, as swift as the wind's blast;
and she took her brave spear, so massive, thick and strong,
its tip of sharp bronze, with which she routs the ranks of men, 100
heroes against whom she, a strong sire's daughter, is wroth,
and took off, down from the heights of Olympos, landing
on Ithákē, right before Odysseus' outer entrance,

his courtyard's threshold, still grasping the bronze spear,
in the guise of a stranger, the Taphian leader Mentēs. 105

There she found the bold suitors. They at the time
were amusing themselves with board games out of doors,
seated on hides of oxen they themselves had slaughtered,
while heralds and henchmen were busy on their behalf,
some mixing wine and water for them in bowls, 110
while others were swabbing the tables with porous sponges
and setting them out, or carving meat in lavish helpings.

By far the first to see her was godlike Tēlemachos,
who was sitting among the suitors, sorely vexed at heart,
in his mind's eye seeing his noble father, how he might 115
return, make a scattering of the suitors through his domain,
and himself gain honor, be king of his own possessions.
Thinking thus, there among the suitors, he noticed Athēnē,
and went at once to the forecourt, embarrassed at heart
that a guest had to wait outside. He stood beside her, 120
clasped her right hand, took charge of the bronze spear,
and addressed her with winged words, saying: "Greetings, stranger!
As a guest you're welcome among us, and afterwards, when
you've shared our meal, then explain to us what it is you need."

That said, he led the way, and Pallas Athēnē followed. 125
When they entered the lofty house, Tēlemachos carried
her spear across and stood it beside a tall pillar, in
a polished spear rack, where many more spears were standing,
that belonged to steadfast Odysseus. Athēnē herself
he led and had sit down in a backed chair, spreading 130
a cloth on it first: a finely wrought chair, with footstool,
and beside it an inlaid seat for himself, away from the others,
the suitors, lest his guest, irritated by their uproar,
should be put off his food, among such arrogant men—
and besides, he wanted to ask him about his absent father. 135

Then a handmaid brought water for them in an exquisite
golden pitcher, poured it into a silver basin, so they
could rinse their hands, then set a polished table beside them,
and a grave housekeeper brought them bread, and with it
appetizers galore, giving freely of what was to hand, 140
while a carver made up and sent them platefuls of meat

of every kind, and set by them golden goblets, while
a herald went to and fro to furnish them with wine.

Then in came the arrogant suitors, and all immediately
settled themselves in rows on the seats and benches, 145
and heralds now poured water over their hands, while maids
brought them bread by the basketful, and youths
filled the bowls to the brim with drink for them, and they
reached out their hands to the good things ready for them.
But when they had satisfied their desire for food and drink, 150
the suitors' minds now turned to other pleasures,
to singing and dancing, a feast's proper complement,
and a herald brought out for Phēmios his well-tuned lyre—
he sang for the suitors only because he was forced to—
and he struck a chord, introducing his own fine song. 155

But Tēlemachos now spoke to grey-eyed Athēnē, leaning
his head close to hers, so that no one else could hear him:
“Dear stranger, would you be shocked by what I tell you?
All these men care about is music and singing, easy enough
for them—they're freeloading off another man's livelihood, 160
a man whose white bones may be rotting in the rain
away on the mainland, or rolled by the sea's breakers.
If they were to see him, if he ever returned to Ithákē,
they'd all be praying that they could run away faster, not
as now, that they were richer in gold and expensive clothes! 165
But no, he must have suffered a wretched fate, nor is there
any comfort for us, not even should someone, somewhere,
claim he'll come back: his day of returning's perished.
But now tell me this, and give me a truthful answer:
Who are you? From where? What city? Who are your parents? 170
On what kind of ship did you come here? How did sailors
bring you to Ithákē? What place do they say they're from?
For I don't imagine you made your way here on foot!
And tell me this truly too, that I may be certain of it:
Is this your first visit here, or are you one of my father's 175
guest-friends? Many the men who used to visit our home,
just as he too traveled widely among mankind.”

Then the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
“So, I'll answer the questions you asked me fully and truthfully.

I declare I am Mentēs, wise Anchialos' son, 180
 and that I rule the Taphians, master rowers; and now,
 as you see, I've put in here by ship, with my companions,
 sailing the wine-dark deep to meet men of foreign speech,
 on my way to Temésē for copper, with a cargo of gleaming iron.
 My ship's out there, by the countryside, far from the city, 185
 in the harbor of Rheithron, down below wooded Nēion.
 Guest-friends of each other Odysseus and I claim we are
 from way back—you can go ask that elderly hero
 Laërtēs, who, they say, no longer comes to the city,
 but far away in the backwoods has a hard existence 190
 with one old woman servant, who sees to his victuals and drink
 when exhaustion steals over and weakens his limbs as he
 shuffles along the high slope of his patch of vineyard.
 So now I've come, for indeed word had it that your father
 was back home; but the gods must be thwarting his return, 195
 since not yet has he died in this world, the noble Odysseus,
 but still lives, perhaps held prisoner, out on the vast deep
 in some sea-girt island, kept there by violent men,
 wild savages, who, most likely, are holding him under duress.
 But I shall now make a prediction for you, just as the immortals 200
 put it into my mind—and I think it will come to pass,
 though I am no seer, have no clear knowledge of bird-signs!
 Not much longer will he be away from his own beloved
 country, no, not even if iron bonds restrain him—he'll
 find a way to return, this man of many resources! 205
 But now tell me this, and declare it to me truly,
 if indeed, big as you are, you're Odysseus' own son—because
 your head and fine eyes bear an amazing resemblance
 to his: many the hours we spent with one another
 before he embarked for Troy, like so many others, 210
 the finest of the Achaians, in the hollow ships, and set forth.
 But since then I've not seen Odysseus, nor he me."

Sagacious Tēlemachos responded to her, saying:
 "So, stranger, I'll give you a full and truthful answer.
 My mother says I'm his child, but for my own part 215
 I cannot tell: never yet did any man know his begetting!
 Indeed, I could wish I'd been the son of some fortunate
 gentleman, taken by age while among his own possessions!

But truth is, it was the most ill-fated of mortals who,
 so they say, begot me—since you're asking about this matter." 220
 Then the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
 "No nameless lineage, surely, did the gods decree for you
 hereafter, since such as you are you were born to Penelopē!
 But now tell me this, and declare it to me truly:
 What party, what gathering's this? What's your concern with it? 225
 A feast, is it? Or a wedding? No communal dinner, surely?
 The riotous, arrogant manner in which, as it seems to me,
 they are carrying on in your house! A man might well take offense,
 walking in on this shameful behavior—any decent man, that is."

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to her, saying: 230
 "Since, stranger, you ask this, and question me on these matters,
 our household once looked to be rich and respectable,
 so long as that certain man was here among his people;
 but now the gods have willed otherwise, have planned misfortune,
 have vanished him utterly, as they've done to no other man 235
 ever—I wouldn't be grieving so over his death
 had he fallen alongside his comrades upon Trojan soil
 or expired in his friends' arms after winding up the war!
 Then all the Achaians would have made him a burial mound,
 and great glory would have been his, and his son's, hereafter. 240
 But now, ingloriously, the storm winds have swept him away.
 He's gone, out of sight, out of knowledge, leaving me pain and sorrow
 —and it's not on his sole account that I'm lamenting now,
 since the gods have inflicted other harsh troubles on me.
 All those highborn leaders who lord it over the islands— 245
 Doulichion and Samē and forested Zákynthos,
 besides those who rule as princes over rocky Ithákē—
 are all paying court to my mother, and devouring our property.
 Yet she neither refuses this hateful marriage, nor can she make
 an end of the business, while they with feasting keep on 250
 eating away our substance: very soon they'll destroy me too."

Outraged by his statement, Athēnē responded, saying:
 "It's true, you're in urgent need of the vanished Odysseus,
 to come and lay hands on these shameless suitors!
 How I wish he'd appear now, here at your outer gate, 255
 armed with helmet and shield and a brace of spears,

the way he was the first time I set eyes upon him,
 in our house, drinking wine and enjoying himself, on his way
 back from Ephyrē, where he'd gone to see Ilos, Mermeros' son.
 Odysseus had voyaged there aboard his speedy vessel 260
 in search of a lethal poison that he wanted to get
 to smear the bronze tips of his arrows. But Ilos refused
 to give it him, fearing the wrath of the gods that are forever;
 yet my father did, for he loved the man most dearly.
 If only Odysseus might come, thus arrayed, among the suitors! 265
 They'd all find a quick death then, and a bitter marriage.
 But of course all this rests on the knees of the gods—
 whether or not he'll return and exact full retribution
 in his own halls. But I urge you yourself to consider
 how you might drive out these suitors from your household, 270
 so pay attention now, mark carefully what I tell you.
 Tomorrow call an assembly of the Achaian heroes:
 Speak your mind to them all, let the gods be your witnesses!
 Tell the suitors all to disperse, to go back home;
 And if your mother's heart is urging her toward marriage, 275
 she should return to her powerful father's domain,
 where they'll set up the wedding and arrange the bride-gifts,
 lots of them, all that's fitting to go with a much-loved daughter.
 And for you yourself wise advice, if you'll take it: man a ship,
 the best you have, with twenty rowers, and go 280
 to seek news of your father, who's been so long absent,
 just in case some person can tell you, or you pick up a rumor
 from Zeus, the most common way that mortals gather tidings.
 Go first to Pylos, interrogate noble Nestōr,
 and from there to Sparta, to fair-haired Menelaös, 285
 for he was the last of all the bronze-corseleted Achaians
 to get home. If you hear that your father's alive, and on his
 way back, then, though beleaguered, hold on for another year;
 but if you get word that he's dead, no longer living,
 then make your way back to your own dear country, 290
 raise him a burial mound, perform funeral rites at it—
 lavish ones, as is fitting—and find your mother a husband.
 Then, when all this business is over and done with,
 is the time to consider, in your mind and spirit,
 how you might slaughter these suitors in your halls, 295
 whether by guile or openly. It does not become you

to persist in childish ways: you're no longer a child.
Or have you not heard what glory noble Orestēs won
among all mankind when he slew his father's murderer,
crafty Aigisthos, for killing his famous father? 300
You too, my friend—for I see how handsome and tall you are—
be valiant, that men yet unborn may speak well of you!
But now I shall go back down to my swift ship,
where my comrades must be waiting impatiently for me.
So think on these things, and pay heed to what I've told you." 305

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to her, saying:
"Stranger, the words that you said were spoken considerately,
as a father would speak to his son: I will never forget them.
But please do stay longer, though eager to be on your way,
so that when you've had a bath and refreshed your spirit 310
you can go to your ship with a present, happy at heart—
an expensive and beautiful gift, to be an heirloom for you
from me, such as guest-friends exchange with one another."

The goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, responded to him, saying:
"Delay me no longer—I need to resume my journey: 315
and whatever gift your heart incites you to give me,
give it me when I return here, to take back home. And choose
something really precious: it'll bring you its worth in exchange."

That said, the goddess, grey-eyed Athēnē, departed,
flying up through the skylight. Into his heart she set
courage and strength, and put him in mind of his father 320
even more than before. Reflecting on what had happened
his mind was in awe: this must be a god, he thought.

At once he approached the suitors, a godlike mortal.
For them the far-famed minstrel was singing, and they 325
sat listening in silence. His song recounted the Achaians'
wretched homecoming from Troy, laid on them by Athēnē.
From upstairs the marvelous tale was heard and pondered
by Ikarios' daughter, the prudent Penelopē, who now
went down from her high bright upper chamber: not 330
alone, for two of her handmaids followed in attendance.
When she, bright among women, came where the suitors were,
she stood by the central post of the snugly timbered roof,
holding up her shining veil in front of her face,

and flanked on either side by a devoted handmaid, 335
and then, in tears, addressed the godlike minstrel:
“Phēmios, much else you know to keep mortals spellbound—
deeds of men and of gods, made famous by minstrels:
give them one such song as you sit here, let them in silence
still drink their wine, but quit this lay you’re singing, 340
so unhappy, it always agonizes the heart in my breast,
since on me beyond all others has come unforgettable
grief, for that much-loved being I picture with such longing—
my husband, of wide renown through Hellas and mid-Argos.”

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to her, saying: 345
“Mother, why do you begrudge so excellent a minstrel
the right to please in whatever way he chooses?
It’s not minstrels who are at fault, but Zeus, who deals out
to bread-eating mortals whatever he likes for each.
Don’t blame this bard for singing the Danaäns’ grim fate: 350
men always show most enthusiasm for the newest lay
that’s performed with a view to enchant their listening ears!
So harden your mind and heart, be resigned to listen:
It was not Odysseus alone who lost his day of returning
from Troy—many others perished, just as he did. 355
So go back to your room, get down to your regular tasks,
at the loom, with the distaff; see to it that your handmaids
do their proper work too! But speechmaking is men’s business,
and mine above all, since mine is the power in this household.”

Taken aback, Penelopē now withdrew to her chamber, 360
and stored in her heart her son’s smart observations.
Upstairs she went, her handmaids with her, and then
wept for Odysseus, her own dear husband, until
grey-eyed Athēnē spread sweet sleep over her eyelids.

But the suitors created an uproar throughout the shadowy hall, 365
each praying that he might be the one to bed and lie with her,
and among them sagacious Tēlemachos was the first to speak:
“You, my mother’s suitors, domineering and arrogant,
for now let us feast and enjoy ourselves, but please,
no shouting! It’s a rare pleasure to be able to hear 370
a minstrel like this one, with a voice like that of the gods!

But tomorrow at dawn let's go and be seated in assembly,
all of us, where I'll make you a forthright public request:
Get out of my home! Go find other feasts for yourselves,
consume your own goods, move around from house to house! 375
But if this is what you regard as better, more profitable,
to devour one man's livelihood without offering compensation,
then gobble on! I'll petition the gods who are forever,
and maybe Zeus will grant me an occasion of reprisal,
so that you, while still feasting for free in my halls, all perish!" 380

So he spoke; and all of them bit their lips hard, astonished
at the way Tēlemachos had spoken out so boldly.

Antinoös, son of Eupeithēs, now addressed him, saying:
"Tēlemachos, it must be the gods themselves who've taught you
this high-flown delivery, this audacious way of speaking! 385
You, king of sea-girt Ithákē? May the son of Kronos never
grant you the throne, though it's yours by ancestral right!"

Sagacious Tēlemachos responded to him, saying:
"Antinoös, what I now say may perhaps offend you.
This too I'd be glad to accept, were Zeus the giver: 390
do you think it the worst fate that could befall a man?
To be king's no disaster: right from the start your domain
Is enriched, and you yourself are held in greater honor.
Still, there are many other princes of the Achaians,
both young and old, who dwell here in sea-girt Ithákē: 395
any one of them might get this, since noble Odysseus
is dead. But I shall be lord over our own household,
and the servants that noble Odysseus got as booty for me."

Then Eurymachos, son of Polybos, responded to him, saying:
"Tēlemachos, all these matters rest on the knees of the gods— 400
like, which of the Achaians will be king in sea-girt Ithákē!
So keep your possessions, lord it over your own household,
and may the man never come here who'd deprive you by force
of your possessions, as long as Ithákē's inhabited! Yet
I'd like, my good friend, to ask you about that stranger— 405
Where did he come from? What country does he claim as his?
Where are his relatives, his family acres, to be found?
Did he come here with news about your father's return,

or was it just to take care of some business of his own?
The way he took off and vanished, not even waiting 410
to meet us—he didn't look, though, like some common fellow.”

Sagacious Tēlemachos then responded to him, saying:
“Eurymachos, by now all hope for my father's return
has perished. No longer do I trust rumors from any source,
or give any heed to prophecies, such as my mother 415
might pick up from a seer that she'd invited home.
As for this stranger, he's from Taphos, a friend
of my father, he says, named Mentēs, wise Anchialos' son,
and is lord of the Taphians, those master rowers.”

So spoke
Tēlemachos; but in his heart he knew the immortal goddess. 420

The suitors now turned to dancing and the pleasures of song,
pursuing their revels until it was evening: only darkness
interrupted their merrymaking, only then
did each of them slope off homeward to take his rest.

But Tēlemachos made his way to the handsome courtyard, 425
in a sheltering corner of which his chamber had been built,
and sought his bed there, pondering much in his mind,
escorted by his old nurse, who bore the lighted torches—
faithful Eurykleia, daughter of Ōps, Peisēnōr's son.

Long ago she'd been bought by Laërtēs, at a good price, 430
when she was still a young girl: twenty oxen, no less.

He respected her in his home no less than his loyal wife,
but never made love to her, for fear of his wife's anger.
So now it was she who carried the lighted torches: of all
the servants she loved him most, had nursed him as a child. 435

He opened the door of his well-carpentered chamber,
sat down on the bed and took off his soft tunic,
then placed it in the hands of this wise old woman, who
now folded and smoothed the tunic, hung it up
on a peg at the side of the corded bedstead, and went 440
out of the chamber, pulled the door shut behind her
with its silver hook, and drew the bolt home by its thong.
So the whole night through, wrapped in a woolen blanket,
he brooded over the journey Athēnē had planned for him.