READING THE ODYSSEY

The city of Troy fell over three thousand years ago, at the end of the second millennium before our era. Yet the story of the Trojan War still holds us in its grip, as does the account of those who returned from the war and of those others who maintained their world during the twenty-year absence of fathers, husbands, and sons. That these narratives, in the forms of the Iliad and the Odyssey, endure across cultures and across times is a remarkable fact of literary and intellectual history that raises a fundamental question: what qualities of the Homeric poems keep alive a story that might otherwise have concerned merely handfuls of scholars instead of the crowds of readers who turn to the Homeric poems for pleasure, for understanding, and for the contemplative solace of high literature?

To answer this imposing question to any satisfaction is a life’s work; here, we can give only a brief sketch focusing on the Odyssey. The possible responses to the question vary with the perspective from which it is posed. Those looking for entertainment turn to the geographical sweep of Odysseus’ journey and see the poem as an adventure tale, related to the many others that fill our shelves, from the Greek legend of the Argonauts, to the tales of the explorers in the early modern period, to the stories of the space explorers, real and fictional, of contemporary life. Moralists from pagan and Christian antiquity to the present may see the voyage of Odysseus from Troy to his home on Ithaka as an allegory for life’s
“journey homeward,” through perils both out in the world and inside the soul, to peace, harmony, and self-reconciliation. The Western literary historian, in turn, draws a line from Homer to Virgil to Dante to Milton to Joyce to argue for the grandeur of the tradition of epic, the genre that attempts to convey an all-inclusive sense of the human predicament. Similarly, the scholar who compares outwardly diverse cultures will bring into consideration such epic works as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana from India, the Túin Bó Cuáilnge from Ireland, or the Sunjata from Africa, and numerous other non-Western narratives that strike similar chords in human experience.

Such comparative studies may bring even more attention to the myth, legend, and folklore at the heart of the poem, where the one-eyed giants and clashing rocks, the Sirens and cannibals, the sun god and the denizens of the underworld put on an exhibition of the fantastic and grotesque. Scholars delight in tracing versions of these tales in cultures from all over the world. For example, Circe, from book 10 of the Odyssey, resembles many other witches in the woods who transform men into birds or beasts; Denys Page (Folktales in Homer’s Odyssey 58) summarizes versions from Corsica, Germany, and India. The Sirens, past whose beguiling song Odysseus can sail only by stopping up his crewmen’s ears and having himself bound to the mast (Od. 12.154–200), are like the mermaids of northern Europe, who lure passing sailors to destruction; the bird-women of Java, who bewitch men; or the gorgons in the birth stories of the Buddha, who lure men to their death by their sweet singing (see Page, Folktales in Homer’s Odyssey 87–88). Such widespread currency of these stories testifies to their power in giving entertainment to ordinary readers looking for a sense of the marvelous or for an embodiment of fears or wishes otherwise left unexpressed.

Those readers for whom “literature” largely means the novel notice especially how the Odyssey brings together the demands of fantastic fiction and realistic narrative. Lovers of the novel of fantasy and romance find satisfaction in Odysseus’ liaisons with amorous females, in his visits to such ideal places as Scheria and to such nightmarish ones as the land of the Laistrygonians, and in the unremitting sense of dangers to be overcome through his cunning and his courage. The more “naturalistic” novel’s development and resolution are prefigured in the way that the stories of Telemachos’ maturation, of his reunion with his father, and of his mother’s stalwart defense of home and hearth lead to Odysseus’ carefully prepared return to his palace and build up to the final battle against the suitors. Furthermore, since the Odyssey often focuses on servants and common people (e.g., Eumaes the swineherd, Eurycleia the nurse, and Melanthios the goatherd and his sister, Melantho the housemaid), showing how they participate for good or evil in the outcome of events, it vigorously anticipates the novel’s portrayal of different classes and social types. These same elements bring to the text scholarly
readers bent on pursuing the historical crises of antiquity, the struggles between
genders, classes, and social groups.

For these scholars and other readers, the ethical issues raised by the drama
of a marriage threatened by a husband’s absence, heightened by the vulnerabil-
ity of Penelope as she fends off the suitors, may well hold center stage. Thus,
Odysseus’ vengeance reinforces the moral tale by violently reasserting the ba-
sic social bonds against the severest odds. Indeed, ethical dilemmas inform the
plot from Zeus’s opening speech at the beginning of the poem, in which he de-
precates mortals’ tendencies to evade their own responsibility by blaming the
gods for their misfortunes, to the conclusion’s truce between Odysseus and the
townspeople who had sought to avenge their slaughtered kinsmen. How should a
son act when he does not know what has happened to his father—should he just
wait for his father to return, or should he take over his position as master? To
whom do servants owe their loyalties, to a master absent for almost twenty years
or to the demanding habitués of the palace who are in a position to punish and
reward them?

Perhaps the most loyal readers of the _Odyssey_ see the poem’s central tensions
as crucial to any life: the relationship between Odysseus and Penelope stands for
the careful negotiation that attends all relations and especially those based on
erotic bonding. So too, the conflicts among the suitors, Penelope, Telémachos,
and the goddess Athena (in book 1, disguised as Menestheus, a male friend of
Odysseus, and sometimes thereafter as Mentor, an even closer comrade) are
fraught with a tension that seems an irreducible part of any relationship. Por-
trayals of the way individuals relate to their society come up over and over
again—in Telémachos’ speeches before the suitors, especially in books 1 and 2;
in Odysseus’ strained relations with his sometimes rebellious crew in books 9
through 12, as he strives to keep them from destroying their own chance to re-
turn home; in the behavior of the Phaiakian youths in book 8, for whom the au-
thority and age of their unknown visitor are a problem; and even, in one of the
most startling examples, in Odysseus’ dealing with a crowd of ghosts in Hades’
domain as a politician might deal with a dubious citizenry, careful to listen to one
at a time and eager to gratify them. In this light, Penelope’s management of her
importunate suitors is as much a political as a domestic conflict, because the well-
being of the community depends on her ability to make the right decision in de-
sperate circumstances. Even the appeal of the blinded Polyphemos to his fellow
Cyklópes toward the end of book 9 highlights the problem of how a person fits
or does not fit into society, a question that will come to inform Western thought,
whether in historical, philosophical, or literary terms. So the conflicts in the
_Odyssey_ present a vision of what it is like to live a life constrained by the political
terms inherent in being an individual within a group.
Each of these answers—focusing on the travel tales; constructing allegories or moral tracts; examining the psychological, social, and even political aspects of the work in almost novelistic terms—has its own truth, partial but contributing to a greater whole. Perhaps the answer to the question of why the Odyssey commands the attention of the ages lies in the very multiplicity of possible answers. The plot itself involves aspects of human experience that cross cultural boundaries, if not in their treatment, then certainly in their substance: all cultures modulate the relations among classes and genders, among the people and groups of people who share a community; every human community confronts the maturation of the young and the progress of age; all cultures confront deep conflicts of interest among social groups. No culture is without its elements of folklore and fantasy, as even our positivistic, technological age dwells on such fantasies as Star Wars and Star Trek and continues to be ever more fascinated by myths of the premodern cultures. In sum, Homer has been and continues to be many things to many people.

THE ODYSSEY AS CULTURAL ARTIFACT

Epic Scope

Whatever our main perspective on the Odyssey may be, the detailed episodes of the poem are what hold our imaginations through twenty-four books, from the first glimpse of Zeus and Athena on Mount Olympus to the final encounter between the house of Odysseus and the citizens of Ithaca—in such scenes as Odysseus escaping from the Cyclopes by clinging to the belly of a huge ram (9.424–72) or delivered from the temptation of the Sirens by being bound to the mast of his ship (12.154–200). We are moved by the death of a devoted dog when he sees his master return after an almost twenty-year absence (17.290–327), by a faithful nurse’s recognition of a scar on the thigh of the lord she nurtured as an infant (19.361–494), by Penelope’s dream of pet geese slaughtered by an eagle, prefiguring Odysseus’ slaughter of the suitors (19.535–58).

As we have already suggested, such episodes have their roots partly in the ages-old and worldwide folk inheritance of the Odyssey. But the particular cultural heritage of this story begins in the Mycenaean age, for it may well have emerged perhaps three millennia ago in the performances of oral bards before enthralled audiences. Over the course of four centuries, across the Greek Dark Ages (ca. 1150–700 B.C.) and up to the Archaic period (ca. 700–500), the folk tradition kept alive such scenes, developing new movements within an old structure. But can we say anything more precise about how these details were woven into the fabric of
a narrative that dealt with the most important of human events, the movement of a people through its history? We can at least try to hold in mind an image, however dimmed by the distance of time and place, of those moments when the poem was most fully alive, when its audience and its composer were engaged together in an oral-poetic performance, in its essence both public and intimate. Precisely this image eludes our sight, just as the ghost of Odysseus’ mother in Hades’ domain eludes her son’s grasp as he seeks to hold onto her so that they can “both take comfort in cold lamentation” (Od. 11.212). The vision of the sung performance that we get from merely reading the poem must remain fleeting.

Nevertheless, a clearer image of such an event is just what readers in the twenty-first century ought to ask for when we read a new translation of this most-translated poem. How much can we say about what this experience was like for its first audiences? One way to sketch that experience is to explore what we mean when we call the Odyssey a Homeric epic. The terms Homeric and epic have connotations for us that are virtually the same as those they had for listeners in the ancient world—they suggest vast extents of time and space and deep engagement with fundamental issues of life. A “Homeric epic” must have monumental reach if it is to fulfill the expectations brought to it by both ancients and contemporaries.

First, as to time, the events recounted in the Iliad and Odyssey themselves are of large temporal scope, the war in Troy lasting for ten years, the return of Odysseus for another ten. Though neither epic covers the full period in detail, both often evoke that length of time as signifying the immensity of the effort and the suffering incurred in both the Trojan War and the warriors’ returns. Beyond that, the poems refer to many other events that occur before and after those central ones. For example, we hear the stories of Eurykleia and Eumaios and of the birth and childhood of Odysseus; both Odysseus and Menelāos learn what will happen to them later on.

Even more important, the very antiquity of these poems was for the ancient Greeks and is even more for us a witness to endurance in time, the nearest human beings can come to immortality. The victory over Troy from which Odysseus is returning situates the dramatic date of the narrative at the end of the second millennium B.C., when historians and archaeologists have noted large-scale destruction of the major centers of cultural activity including Mycenae (Mykēnē in the translation in this book), Pylos, and Tiryns, as well as Troy itself. Of the numerous cities unearthed at Hisarlik, in northwestern Asia Minor, those labeled “VIIb” and “VIIa,” from about the mid-thirteenth century B.C., are the ones in which archaeologists have detected the most probable ghost of ancient Troy (for a recent discussion, see Luce 93–109). The Mycenaean period preceding these destructive events appears strikingly in such features of the Homeric
poems as the names of the characters. *Achilles, Nestor, Agamemnon,* and *Odysseus* are quite different from the Greek names familiar to us from classical times, such as *Plato, Demosthenes,* and *Socrates.* The Mycenaean period was indeed antiquity for these later Greeks, and the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides evoked that past by staging many dramas with Mycenaean characters (e.g., Ajax, Philoktētes, and Odysseus himself): they clearly thought of it as remote but accessible, to be bodied forth in artistic representations that helped them define what it meant to be Greek.

Thus, the sense of a temporal expanse traversing the history of a culture is firmly rooted in the notion of the epic. So too is the geographical sweep of the poems, especially of the *Odyssey,* in which Odysseus’ return takes him far across the sea, just as the Trojan War had brought warriors from everywhere in the Greek and Trojan world (as listed in the famous catalogs of book 2 of the *Iliad*) to join their respective confederations in battle over the fate of the city. Moreover, this geographical sweep appears in both legendary and realistic terms. Odysseus’ voyage takes him to the furthest extent of Greek mythical distance, Hades’ domain, the land of the dead, as well as to the legendary lands of the Lotus-eaters, the one-eyed monster Cyclopes, the witch Circe, the sun god, Kalýpsos, and the Phaiákians. Then, when Odysseus lands on Ithaka, he contrives realistic stories about his fictional origins in the distant but quite worldly regions of Egypt and Crete.

But beyond the quantitative scope of time and space that constantly informs the Homeric narrative, the poems have what we might call great qualitative breadth. That is, they—especially the *Odyssey*—touch on most of the common features of human existence: from family and domestic arrangements to the highest heroism and tragedy and to the ways the immortal gods interact with mortals; from dialogues between intimates to speeches in the assembly; from accounts of real habitations, such as the palace of Ithaka and the farm of Laërtes, to imaginative constructions of ideal ones—Scheria’s ever-productive fields and splendid court and the perfect climate of the dwellings of the gods on Olympos.

Wide ethical understanding, too, can emerge from our encounter with these events and characters. Take the fate of the suitors as an example. We must confront the cruelty of Odysseus’ revenge in book 22 and the fact that some suitors clearly deserve their fate more than others. Amphimón, notably, appears to be a good man, attempting to restrain the excesses of his fellow suitors. Yet he has participated in the unseemly pursuit of Penelope in her own home and thereby in the devastation of the household, so Athena and Odysseus will not exempt him from the final slaughter. Shall we take this as a model of justice or as a stimulus to discover more nuanced ways of dealing with degrees of wrongdoing? Whatever we decide, this culminating episode deepens the moral questions posed by
the Odyssey. In this case and others, the poem provides a clear image, perhaps even a provisional decision, but leaves the final judgment to its audience.

Origins

This broad scope of the epic is as significant for us as it was for the ancient Greeks, who regarded Homer as the foundation of their culture. But just how, in concrete terms, did the Homeric tradition arouse such admiration? How did the audience, to begin with and later on, receive these songs so as to secure them as the bedrock of cultural experience? These questions lead to further questions about both the genesis and the transmission of the poems, questions to which there are no uncontested answers. As to genesis, we know that some elements of the Homeric narratives extend back to Mycenaean culture, while other elements antedate them, reaching toward the pre-Greek Indo-European past (see Nagy, Best of the Achaeans). Still other elements derive from the rich cultures of the ancient Near East (see Burkert). For Mycenaean material, the names of the major palace centers, Pylos, Tiryns, and Mycenae itself, correspond to the evidence from the archaeological record, whereas the medium of dactylic hexameter verse and such story elements as the episode that starts off the whole epic cycle—the Trojan boy Paris' choice of the most beautiful among the three goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite—may stem from the time when the speakers of the original Indo-European language formed one unified people.

However, scholarly debate has lately tended to emphasize the more recent features to be found in the Homeric texts, especially as they provide evidence for the successive ages through which the earlier material was transmitted, elements from the Greek Dark Ages and from the Archaic period, which we have come to call the renaissance of the eighth century. Such transmission must have encompassed generation after generation of performers—young ones learning from their masters, singers in their prime exchanging ideas and innovations within their tradition, aged and respected elders in the singing community passing the torch to a new generation—until a fixed text came to be transmitted securely, first through memorization and then through writing, or even perhaps through a combination of both. More remarkable than the bardic fluidity that we moderns have labored so hard to divine is the fact that such a robust and vital tradition has somehow been captured and bequeathed to us in these two poetic monuments. Perhaps to repay that bequest, we cannot help but ask: What is meant by the name Homer? Who finally composed these great epics out of the mass of material the tradition gave him? The way we experience the poem may be affected by the answer we give, just as we expect different things of Dickens and Austen, of Tolstoy and Faulkner.
The twentieth century saw a great advance in our understanding of the way epic poetry was produced in ancient Greece. But as Adam Parry shows in his introduction to his father's collected papers, that advance had been anticipated by the suspicion that the Homeric poems were somehow different from other texts. When Herodotus, the first Greek historian (ca. 484–ca. 422 B.C.), asserted that "Hesiod and Homer are four hundred years older than I and not more" (2.53), he gave evidence of a controversy surrounding these early Greek traditions; we may call what he says the earliest assertion about the "Homeric question," which has caused so much ink to be spread over so many pages. Much later, Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century A.D., contrasted the Greeks unfavorably with the ancient Hebrews by contending that the literacy of the Hebrew texts made them superior to an oral Homer. That first assertion of Homeric orality came to an abundant harvest in the modern period, when, for example, the Abbé d'Aubignac, a French scholar of the seventeenth century (1604–76), suggested that our _Iliad_ and _Odyssey_ were collections of earlier songs pasted together in a haphazard manner. Perhaps more congenial to our sense of the process was the claim of Giambattista Vico, an Italian philosopher (1668–1744), that there was no Homer and that the "Greek people" had produced the texts. Following the assertion of the English scholar Robert Wood (1717–71) that Homer need not have been literate, Friedrich August Wolf (1759–1824) systematically argued that there was no written text until the sixth century, so that Homeric "texts" were on this score at least different in kind from later texts.

By the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, the controversy centered on sorting out the elements of Homeric texts in such a way as to locate the "real" Homer and segregate "accretions," elements that do not belong to the "central core." For the _Odyssey_, such a method can yield, for example, separate authors for the story of Telémachos (books 1–4), the tales Odysseus tells Alkinoös in Scheria (books 9–12), and the revenge of Odysseus (books 13–24, with some excisions). In response to this challenge to the unity of the _Odyssey_, some scholars in the early twentieth century—the so-called unitarians—tried to show how the travels of Telémachos, those of Odysseus, the revenge on the suitors, and the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope fit together in an organically unified work.

These controversies were fundamentally altered in what can be characterized as a major paradigm shift in Homeric studies, one of the most dramatic advances in the humanities in the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1920s, Milman Parry, a young scholar from California, determined to discover the nature of Homeric tradition by joining his own fine aesthetic sense to the linguistic methods he learned when studying with Antoine Meillet and others in Paris. He found that Homeric poetry not only reflected an oral tradition but did so systematically, basing this conclusion not on surmise or historical inference, as had been the case
since Josephus, but on the meter and language of the verse itself as these are compared with works of other cultures that ethnographers classify as "oral." Parry applied a rigorous analytical method to this data, examining systematically the way that meter and phrasing regularly interact to yield the most salient feature of Homeric poetry, its repetitive and formulaic diction. The result was to identify Homeric poetry as *oral-formulaic*, a term that has caused much controversy but that can easily be elucidated through the sample of Homeric language that provided the core of Parry's original research.

In Homeric poetry, nouns and adjectives come to be associated in formulas. Examples of similar associations from modern idiom are *heavy bitter*, *worthy colleague*, and *bed of roses*. *Heavy bitter* not only is a regular formula but also calls to mind the entire subculture of baseball. *Worthy colleague* is unlikely to be heard at the family dinner table but occurs often in speeches about fellow managers or legislators. *Bed of roses* has both a literal and a metaphorical meaning; which one is meant is determined by the context in which the phrase appears. Those who use such expressions feel the security of a familiar locution applied to a familiar situation.

But whereas we may consider such expressions clichés, perhaps to be avoided in writing or speaking to a discriminating audience, such phrases as *polýtlaς díος Odysséus*, translated “much-suffering noble Odysseus” (*Od*. 5.171, etc.); *períphron Pénelopéia*, “Penelope, thoughtful and prudent” (1.328, etc.) or “prudent Pene-lope” (4.787, etc.); and *nephelegeretá Zeús*, “the cloud-gathering god Zeus” (1.63, etc.), occur frequently and in regularly recurring metrical contexts. They are fundamental to the very existence of the Homeric poems. Parry’s definition of the formula is famous: “The formula in the Homeric poems may be defined as a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (Parry 272). Thus, *polýtlaς díος Odysséus* occurs thirty-seven times, always as the second half of a line, of which the first half also is usually formulaic. Similarly, both *períphron Pénelopéia* and *nephelegeretá Zeús* occur only in the last part of a line. (In the translation in this book, “prudent Penelope,” the alternative rendering of the former phrase, occurs at the beginning of the line when English syntax would be unpleasantly distorted by placing the subject late.) Sometimes, the particular qualities denoted by these “epithets” bear little immediate emphasis: Odysseus might be called “much-suffering” in contexts where his sufferings are less prominent than, for example, his wiliness, because the formula for the latter—*polýmētis Odysséus* (“Odysseus of many devices”)—may not fit the metrical context. Thus, the “essential idea” of Parry’s definition is in these cases the full identity (not merely the name) of the person or god in question.

Many have objected that a poetic procedure so defined must greatly limit a composer’s creativity—if he must confine himself to such rigid compositional elements, he has little opportunity for the free play of his artistry. But within an
oral-traditional context, the interaction of formula and meter is conditioned by another element, that of theme. In such a tradition, the idea that Odysseus is “much-suffering noble Odysseus” or that Penelope is “thoughtful and prudent” does not depend on any individual performance or text. In rhetorical terms, these aspects of the Homeric language do not rise from the “invention” of the poet but rather come to him as part of the language, the “vocabulary,” with which the poet makes the poem, with which the singer sings the song. In essence, each of these expressions derives from a larger theme, which it encapsulates briefly and memorably: the suffering, or endurance (polytisas could also be translated “much-enduring”), of the hero is central to his existence in this poem, just as identifying Penelope as “thoughtful and prudent” typifies her whole behavior with respect to the suitors and to Odysseus himself. Both expressions therefore straight out of the traditional conceptions of these characters, as do the other epithets that so strike the notice of a modern reader—for example, “thoughtful Telémachos,” “the goddess bright-eyed Athena,” “the great earth-shaker Poseidon.”

This notion of theme, so important as a control on our view of formula and meter, was a development of Parry’s work by his colleague and successor Albert Lord, as set forth especially in Lord’s *The Singer of Tales*. Though the word *theme* is used in different ways, it refers, for purposes of Homeric criticism, specifically to what Lord calls a “group of ideas,” such as the feasting theme that occupies so much of the *Odyssey*. We can debate exactly how the singers conceptualized such themes; but that recurring themes are fundamental to Homeric epic is clear. For example, as we shall show later in this essay in some detail, the important theme of guest-friendship courses through the entire *Odyssey*, from Telémachos’ warm and polite reception of Athena disguised as Mentor in book 1 to the late scenes in which the suitors confirm their unworthiness by abusing Odysseus, who is disguised as a beggar looking for hospitality. Another sort of theme appears in the *nostós*, “song of return,” as one type of tale, parallel to the *aristeía*, “song of a hero’s battle-exploits,” so prominent in the *Iliad*. The *nostós* theme is realized not only in the homecoming of Odysseus himself but also in passages recalling the homecomings of Agamemnon, Nestor, Menelaós, and other heroes of the Trojan War.

The Parry-Lord hypothesis about the oral-formulaic character of Homeric language and story construction leads to the wider conclusion that what we have of the tradition—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—are at each level traditional. Meter, diction, themes, characters, and the basic story all have living roots deep in the tradition. What has led to some confusion is the modern preconception that what is traditional is not shaped by a mind with a view to producing art but merely tends to reproduce received knowledge. In answer to such a pedestrian view of the vitality of this traditional medium, it can be said that Homeric language is an “art language” within and because of its traditional features but that, in the words
of one critic, "the art language cannot compose for the poet" (Nagler 61). The language of meter, formula, phrase, and theme provide what any language provides its speakers: units of discourse fraught with such connotations and associations as to allow meaningful utterances between speakers—in the oral-poetic context, between singer and audience. The traditional nature of these elements in Homeric song gives rise to and reinforces the audience's familiarity with the medium, and this can in turn encourage great inventiveness in a particular singer's management of the elements, since he can be sure that his audience fully understands the basic nature of his composition.

The consequences of Parry's conclusions are being felt even to this day, though not without controversy as to their exact bearing. What he discovered is crucial to a reading of the translation in this book, whose main claim is its sensitivity to the oral-formulaic medium, by virtue of which it tries to re-create as far as possible the poetic conditions of the Odyssey's original performance. In "Translating Homeric Song," the translator discusses this formulaic method of composition in somewhat more detail and tells how he has responded to the high degree of repetition inherent in this medium, including the way it can reinforce the narrative structure of this long and complex work by means of "musical" echoes. The more one reads the epic, the more one admires the singer's virtuosity and subtlety in using these traditional elements to make a song as accomplished as any novelist's work in its exploration of characters and situations.

*Transmission*

The original audiences of Homeric epic would surely have appreciated the aptness of the singer's combination of phrase, rhythm, theme, and tale to compose (literally, to "put together") a song; sensitized to the medium from childhood, singers and audiences alike could respond as readily to such matters as can contemporary Balinese villagers to a shadow-puppet master's virtuosity in presenting his age-old stories to them in word, image, and music. The epic scope of the songs must have motivated some of these listeners to preserve and transmit them. But how did these monumental works reach their present state? How did they come to be written down? Scholars still do not agree on responses to these questions, but new and persuasive ideas are emerging.

One reason for disagreement is the murky history of the period succeeding the events narrated in the poems. After the fall of the Mycenaean palace cultures and the destruction of Troy, from the end of the twelfth century to the beginning of the eighth, Greek civilization crosses the period that historians call the Dark Ages because of what appears to be a general decline in cultural vitality. Instead of featuring the large palaces of Agamemnon's Mycenae and Nestor's Py-
los, where scribes kept records of palace accounts and where royal functionaries administered the organization of the palace and the surrounding community, life in the Dark Ages was lived in small communities for whom writing seems not to have existed and grand social systems were only a memory.

Yet communities still existed, as did culture, however insensitive our historical instruments are in measuring it. Indeed, in maintaining the tradition, the Greeks who lived in that period made the next stage possible. Beginning in the eighth century B.C., there occurs a renaissance, called the Archaic period in most historical accounts, which stretches roughly to the end of the sixth century. This period sees many changes: a rise in population, especially marked by increasing emigration from the established centers; a growing challenge to older forms of social organization by a new social structure, the polis, or city-state, which allowed increased numbers of people to live together; a corresponding increase in the tempo of colonization in places as far apart as Massilia (present-day Marseilles), Syracuse in Sicily, and Asia Minor, providing homes and sustenance for the burgeoning numbers; and the development of such cultural institutions as the Olympian Games and other festivals, which gave coherence to these scattered Greek settlements. The Homeric epics play a crucial role in this new world. Like the rise of the polis and the adoption of a common Greek alphabet, these works are a hallmark of Panhellenism, the sense that all Greeks belong to the same cultural world despite their separation in space. Just as the establishment of the polis marks an achievement of archaic Greek social organization, so Homeric narrative is the supreme achievement of early Greek poetic artistry. All Greeks, from city to city and from region to region, readily saw Homer as belonging to Hellas, which they accordingly perceived as a cultural unity.

From our modern perspective, the Archaic period is the foundation for the Classical period (490–323), with which we are most familiar. For Panhellenism enabled the city-states to see themselves as part of a unified, if varied, social structure. Thus, when toward the end of the sixth century the Persians seek to destabilize Greece, the Ionian cities of Asia Minor, with some help from Athens, join in an unsuccessful revolt against the empire (499–494 B.C.). But when in the next generation the Great King Xerxes launches a massive and determined invasion, he is defeated by contingents from thirty-one city-states (480–479). The alliance that emerges (the Delian League) finally works to Athenian advantage, especially by accumulating in its leading city, Athens, the wealth that makes possible the achievements of her great age. Under these circumstances arise the hallmarks of Athenian society: the splendid architectural monuments on and around the Acropolis, the state-sponsored theater (tragedy and comedy), the philosophical thought of the sophists and Socrates, the brilliant beginnings of prose history (Herodotus and Thucydides), and, conditioning all of them, the startling Athen-
ian experiment in social organization that the Greeks themselves name *demokratia*, democracy. Athens stands out because its great achievements bring to fruition the development we have been describing. For the tragedians in the fifth century, Odysseus, Achilles, Agamemnon, Helen, and the other figures of Archaic art and narrative are still—some 600 years after the fall of Troy—the focal points for thought about power and love, sorrow and joy, despair and hope.

After these heady times came a period of strife, the Peloponnesian War, one of whose major results was to transform the power structure of the Greek world and open the way for its conquest by rulers from the provincial north, Philip II and his son, Alexander the Great of Macedonia. Alexander’s military prowess, inspired as it partly was by his admiration of the Homeric hero Achilles, led to a territorial expansion that enlarged yet further the scope of Panhellenism, from North Africa through the vast territories of the former Persian Empire and as far as northwest India. It also resulted in the seemingly paradoxical fact that we owe much of our information on the epics to a city far distant from the Greek homeland, Alexandria in Egypt, and to the scholars in the great ancient library there. The very cognomina of these scholars—Zenodotos of Ephesus (in Asia Minor), Aristophanes of Byzantium (modern Istanbul), Aristarchos of Samothrace (an island in the northern Aegean Sea)—betoken the movement from the Greek north to the Egyptian south. These men were just as intent on preserving the great epic tradition as their predecessors and contemporaries in Athens were, and they labored indefatigably to keep it “genuine” as they understood it, even launching the habit of distinguishing the “true Homer” from “interpolations” or “accretions.”

This history offers a range of hints concerning the recording and preservation of the *Odyssey* as we know it. One possibility often suggested is that the new technology of writing was responsible. According to the theory of the “oral dictated text,” our text of the poem originated, perhaps in the middle to late eighth century B.C., when an amanuensis patiently recorded a master singer’s long performance of the Odyssean story. This text is then presumed to have been passed down through the Athens of the sixth century B.C. to scholars of the third and second centuries B.C. in Athens, Alexandria, Pergamon, and elsewhere, who did much critical work on the text, codified it, and handed it down to the compilers of the surviving medieval manuscripts that are our main sources, supplemented by some ancient papyrus fragments and citations in ancient authors.

Another school of thought insists on the primacy of the text commissioned by the Athenian tyrant, Peisistratos (d. 527). On this view our text is ultimately based on this version, one of this ambitious ruler’s many public and artistic projects. Later, even more decisively, Hiparchos (d. 514), Peisistratos’ son and successor, decreed that the Homeric poems be recited in order in relays by reciters
called “rhapsodes” at every yearly celebration of the Panathenaic Festival. This
tidy approach usually assumes that writing, now a firm part of the cultural land-
scape, helped produce a stable Athenian version, which was passed down through
the later critics to become essentially the poem we have now.

In perhaps the most creative theory, Gregory Nagy proposes an evolutionary
model to account for what he thinks must have been a lengthy process, from oral
song to fixed text. Such a model takes fully into account the importance of the
Panhellenism we noted earlier and gathers under its wings the other features we
see by positing different stages in the development of our text across the tradi-
tional historical periods. The following five steps from fluid oral performance to
rigid text are based on Nagy’s account of his research (Homeric Questions 42; cf.
also Poetry as Performance):

1. An oral period when live performances by singers, with no written text, vitally
produced myriad versions of the Iliad, the Odyssey, and other songs like
them—including the poems of the so-called Epic Cycle—concerning the
Trojan War, as well as epics about Jason and the Argonauts and other subjects
from Greek mythology. These performances could have been of whatever
length the singer, his audience, and the circumstances required, from an
hour’s entertainment to large-scale recitations over perhaps several days.

2. A Panhellenic period, from the eighth to the mid-sixth century, when social
forces were drawing together the local Greek traditions and when the per-
formances of singers or reciters all over the Greek world inspired a demand
for Homeric poetry, as far-flung listeners began to feel that their participation
in such manifestations of Hellenic culture would be validated by hearing au-
thoritative Panhellenic versions.

3. A definitive, or “transcript,” period, from the middle of the sixth century (the
time of the Peisistratean Recension and the decrees of Hipparchos in Athens)
through the later fourth century, when transcriptions of performances of the
Iliad and Odyssey played a part and when rhapsodes would use transcripts as
supplements to oral recitation, especially at great festivals like the Pan-
athenaia.

4. A standardizing, or “script,” period, from the end of the fourth century, when
Demetrios of Phalerum reformed Homeric performance in Athens, to the
middle of the second century, when Homeric performances would have been
based on authoritative texts that tended more and more toward uniformity.
To this period belong the initial Alexandrian attempts to make definitive writ-
ten texts of the two main epics.
5. A "scripture" period, from the middle of the second century, when Aristarchos completed his work on the Homeric texts. The Alexandrian editions and others from Greece and Asia Minor made the epics into fixed texts copied and recopied for schools and other public institutions all over the Greek-speaking world; these formed the basis for the medieval manuscripts on which our texts are based.

Such a scheme will not satisfy the positivist's desire for Homeric dates, for the facts of publication of our Odyssey. An evolutionary model proposes for Homer what such a model proposes for nature, an overall pattern of development—we know or think we know the oral beginning and the fixed text at the end, but the middle is out of focus. Where do we place the minds that made the astounding artifacts we possess? Do we place them in the age before writing was widely practiced, or after writing became the civilized norm? To some extent, the model allows the partisans of writing to sit Homer at a desk with pen in hand, since the narrative might have undergone "literate" sorts of manipulation at the time it was written down. But the evolutionary model makes it more likely that the Homeric tradition was fortunate in taking shape, substantially as we see it embodied in the two great epics, before it disappeared into the major cultural developments that led to the Classical period—most importantly, the unification of Greek culture known as Panhellenism and its cultural flowerings in the poleis, or city-states, where writing was firmly established. Homer anticipated the polis, and in fact, the polis recognized Homer as its ancestor. Thus, though the phrase oral text may seem a contradiction in terms, it captures the movement from oral tradition to scripture that seems to have occurred.

READING THIS ODYSSEY: RE-CREATING THE PERFORMANCE

The Homeric poems, once purely oral, became over time the text whose translation you hold in your hand. In a real sense, that text, especially when read aloud and listened to (as the translator strongly recommends for this version), is a performance—the only kind left to us from the ruins of history. Though, like many Greek lyrics, the Odyssey is only a fragment of a large body of traditional material, it is a whole as a performance on its own, showing the unity and uniqueness that Albert Lord ascribed to the performance of oral texts: "The author of an oral epic, that is, the text of a performance, is the performer, the singer before us. . . . A performance is unique; it is a creation, not a reproduction, and it can therefore have only one author" (Lord 101–2). The Odyssey can best be considered, then, as a performance; here, the dichard partisan of writing and the advocate of fluid orality can find common ground, asking what distinguishes this particular performance.
As Gregory Nagy (Homerian Questions 111–12) has put it, the "Homer" who is a culture hero of Hellenism and the great teacher and who comes to life in every performance of the poem is our consolation for our ignorance of the author. Even beyond accepting it as mere solace, however, we might welcome such a solution, since the question of the author has been such a problem, plaguing almost every text, from Gilgamesh and the Bible to Shakespeare and Joyce. Consider the varying endings for Great Expectations, the revisions of Yeats’ poems, or the questions raised by a work so intertwined with its author’s life as is Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past. What were the respective authors’ “intentions”? Will knowing or guessing those intentions aid our understanding or cloud it? Even the magisterial Aeneid comes to us with the knowledge that its author, Virgil, wanted it destroyed. Thus, the authorial problem dogs us even—and perhaps especially—when birth certificates, diaries, biographies, and a wealth of detail make it possible to pinpoint the authors in space and time, when we can make reasonable inferences about how they lived and what they thought. Perhaps the modern reader of Homeric epic is at least absolved of the authorial problem.

Nonetheless, the performer of a Homeric song is the functional equivalent of its author, so this creature, whom we may as well call “Homer,” remains a kind of controlling mind that selects and orders the traditional material to create this performance, even as Odysseus performs this role for the Phaiáikians in recounting his adventures. As Albert Lord has shown (68–98), as we learn more about oral traditions now and in the past, we can see that oral performers can be identified as individuals by such features as their particular use of themes—each performer has his or her own performance style. In what follows, we will look at some of the significant features of this Odyssey that distinguish the performance that is our text. While the main story of the return of Odysseus is traditional, every performer will both select certain features for emphasis and use additive techniques—repetition of situations (e.g., feasting or sailing a ship) or of similar characters (e.g., women, crew members, or monsters) to convey a particular slant on the tale. By examining the ways such techniques are used within the traditional narrative grammar, we can reach some conclusions about the significance of this Odyssey.

First, let us consider the core story of the return of the ancient Greek warrior and hero Odysseus from the destruction of Troy to his home on the island of Ithaca. Like any tale, it can be told in chronological order. After the Achaians destroy Troy, the Greek warriors who have survived the ten years of war strive to make their way home. Some of them, such as Meneláos and Nestor, return safely to their homes; others, such as Ajax, meet their end on the way back; and in the case of Agamemnon, the return culminates in treachery at home, when he is slain by his wife, Klýtamnéstra, and her paramour, Aigisthos, who have usurped his
throne. Odysseus' return is obstructed by encounters with such monsters as the
Cyclopes, Skylla and Charýbdis, and the Laistrygonians, and by temptations to
stay abroad offered by the Lotus-eaters, Circé, Kalýpso, and the Phaiákians. His
very life is threatened by the gods—especially Poseidón, who is wrathful because
Odysseus blinds his son, Polyphémos, the Cyclopes—and he loses all his com-
rades. In his absence, his wife, Penelope, barely keeps at bay the young men from
Ithaka and the surrounding islands who are courting her. His son, Telémachos,
smolders with impotent resentment, but acting on Athena's advice, he journeys
to Pylos and Sparta to seek news of his father, discovers that he is alive, and re-
turns, escaping an ambush set by the suitors. Finally, Odysseus, with the help of
the goddess Athena and the friendly Phaiákians, in whose country he is cast on
shore, achieves passage home to Ithaka and meets the loyal swineherd Eumaós
and Telémachos. But he finds the suitors in his palace, assuming that his disap-
pearance will force Penelope to marry one of them. In disguise as a beggar,
Odysseus scouts out the situation and takes advantage of a contest that Penelope
sets for her hand in marriage, so that, armed and aided by loyal servants and Telé-
machos, he defeats and slays the suitors. Odysseus and Penelope, now reunited,
are still threatened by the vengeance-seeking relatives of the suitors, but Athena
and Zeus decree a truce between the feuding factions.

This account of Odysseus' return summarizes the tale much in the way that
Odysseus himself tells his story to the Phaiákians in books 9–12, beginning with
the fall of Troy and relating his sea adventures until he arrives at Scheria, the
Phaiákians' home. But the Homeric Odyssey that has compelled attention for three
millennia does not begin at the chronological beginning. Indeed, each performer
in a tradition faces his or her first challenge in selecting a clear "beginning" from
a tradition of multiple versions of any given tale. On this performance occasion,
this particular Odyssey puts us into the middle of the story, or, as the Roman poet
and critic Horace styled it, "in medias res" [into the middle of things] (Ars poetica
148). It then elaborates the story so as to highlight certain features of the hero's
return, features that complicate and deepen our experience of the traditional tale.

Tradition is far from merely a lockstep set of narratives repeated endlessly un-
til some bard innovates or until a restive audience finally stops listening. It is hard
for modern readers to understand that tradition is not just a holding place for the
repertoire of narratives used by traditional poets in their own compositions. It
includes the means by which those stories are shaped: the selection of what needs
to be used in a given context; the ordering or arrangement of the items selected
in ways that point to certain kinds of meanings; and the repetition of some items
to heighten those meanings. The result—the composition in performance of a
version of the traditional story—rewards both performer and audience for their
long training in habits of listening.
Before we further consider selection and repetition of narrative and thematic elements, a note on the work's manifest structure can bring us nearer to its actual performance. Any discussion of an oral poem's structure needs to take account of this problem, for an epic as long as the Odyssey probably would not have been performed in one sitting. It is unlikely that any audience, even an ancient Greek one, would want to sit and listen for the eighteen to twenty continuous hours that singing or reciting this whole epic might require. Indeed, Aelian, a writer of late antiquity, says that at an early stage, the poems were sung in much shorter episodes—"The Happenings in Pylos," "The Story of the Cyclopes"—which were collected to make the epics (see Nagy, Homeric Questions 78). This is perhaps a reminiscence of the fluid oral state, when a singer could choose what he thought appropriate from a vast body of tales—as Penelope says in book 1, asking Phemios to change his subject from the returns of the Achaians.

Phemios, since you know much else that to men is enchanting, deeds both of gods and of mortals, that bards make famous in story, sing them now one of those . . .

(1.337–39)

But any time there was an extended performance of the Odyssey (e.g., at a festival), there must have been multiple internally coherent sessions making it up. Indeed, as we shall see, the epic can be divided into six roughly equal four-book sections, each of them comfortably performable in one sitting.

In the translator's audio performance of the translation in this book, the recitation of the four-book sections takes around two and a half hours each (more precisely, between two hours and twelve minutes for the shortest section, books 5–8, and two hours and fifty-two minutes for the longest, books 9–12). Reciting the Greek original would probably take somewhat longer. Moreover, music would add more to the performance time. We know that other epic traditions make use of music in their performances. For example, in the Russian bylina, a medieval tradition from Kiev, melodies played an important part. So too the South Slavic traditions that Parry and Lord studied had musical accompaniment. In the Odyssey, both Phemios, performing at the court of Odysseus in books 1 and 17, and Demódokos, the blind singer performing at the court of the Phaiákians in book 8, have lyres in their hands as they sit to compose their songs. Though no historical verification is possible, these scenes suggest Greek oral performance—at the very least, the portrayal of these two bards is consistent with what the early audiences of our Odyssey must have considered authentic. Without knowing the music to Homeric song, we cannot know if it was simple accompaniment, if musical elaboration was used to mark transitions, or even if the

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epic text was performed in recitative mode, as a song, or as words spoken with
the barest musical accompaniment. But there is much fertile ground, especially
through comparative evidence from the world’s cultures, for speculation as to the
part that music might have originally played in a Greek oral performance. It can
at least be said that musical interludes may have lengthened a performance ses-
sion and that singing a text usually takes longer than reciting it.

As for the sections themselves, it has until recently been common to assume
that the “books” of our Odyssey were divisions made in the ancient library at
Alexandria as our written manuscripts were taking shape in the second century
B.C. But performance complicates and enriches the question. Many scholars now
are studying the book divisions as perhaps deriving from performance contexts
that may not be recoverable but that have nonetheless left their mark on the
structure of our text. In the spirit of such speculation, let us turn to the structure
of the Odyssey as a whole to see how thinking about such a six-part performance
division can help make the poem coherent for us. We can envision the actual per-
formance as taking place in these six sessions, perhaps over two or three days, be-
tween which there would be breaks for eating, for sleeping, and for other festive
events. Each session would probably last between three and four hours. Here is
a rough sketch of the six sections, with titles for reference.

Books 1–4. The Telemachia
After the proem and a council of gods, Athena rouses Telémachos, who reproves
the suitors both in the palace and in assembly; he then travels to Pylos and Sparta
and questions Nestor and Meneláos concerning his father’s return; both tell him
lengthy stories. The suitors plan to ambush Telémachos; Penelope grieves.

Books 5–8. From Ogygia to Scheria
Acting on the gods’ orders, Kalýpso sends Odysseus from Ogygia on a raft; after
a storm, he arrives in Scheria and meets Naúsikaä, daughter of the Phaiákian king
Alkinoös. She escorts him to the palace, where he receives hospitality from the
king and his wife, Arétê—feasts, songs, and athletic contests.

Books 9–12. The Adventures of Odysseus
While on Scheria, Odysseus relates to the Phaiákians his adventures before ar-
riiving at Ogygia, involving the Kikonians, the Lotus-eaters, the Cyklops, Aiôlos,
the Laistrygonians, Circe, Hades’ domain (the realm of the dead), the Sirens,
Skylla and Charýbdis, the cattle of the sun on Thrinakia, and the final shipwreck.

Books 13–16. At the Farm of Eurímaíos
Having been conveyed by the Phaiákians, Odysseus lands on Ithaka; stays with
the swineherd Eurímaíos and exchanges stories with him; meets Telémachos, who
has escaped from the suitors’ ambush on his way home; and makes plans with Athena to punish the suitors.

Books 17–20. The Beggar in the Palace
Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, goes to his palace with Telémachos and Eumaios and suffers abuse from the suitors and others. He is recognized by Eurykleia and, while disguised, talks to Penelope about himself, her troubles, and a prophetic dream she has had.

Books 21–24. Requital, Reunion, Resolution
Penelope sets up the contest of Odysseus’ bow for the suitors, and Odysseus, with help, slaughters them, reunites with his wife, reveals himself to his father, and faces the vengeful wrath of the suitors’ relatives; Zeus and Athena impose an end to the conflict.

This bare-bones summary cannot begin to convey the rich variety of incident and character in the Odyssey or the shifts in scenes that occur within each part, but it can be useful in showing how the singer of this epic structured his narrative and why he began it where he did. In this performance, “the middle of things” means the time when Odysseus is grief-stricken on the island of Ogygia and about to return home and when his wife and maturing son no longer find the conditions in the palace in Ithaka tolerable. By beginning here, the singer raises strong interest. How did Odysseus’ long absence and the dreadful situation in Ithaka come to be? What will be the outcome of the tensions portrayed? From there, it goes forward in time for two sessions, the first one relating Telémachos’ travels, the second one telling the final part of Odysseus’ travels, beginning with the last days of his seven-year sojourn with Kalypso.

But within the first session, we already see the flashback technique, first in book 2, when the suitors defend their long presence in the palace by telling of Penelope’s deceptive evasions, then in books 3 and 4, when Nestor and Menelaos tell of their own voyages home, their nóstoi. The latter accounts give perspective to Odysseus’ much longer story of his adventures in the third section, for the other returns occur in the known world, even if with occasional supernatural interventions. Odysseus’ complete account of his wanderings, beginning as Nestor and Menelaos did at the end of the Trojan War, explains how he finds himself in the twentieth year still far from home. The last three parts of the epic can then proceed directly forward, bringing the strands of the plot together and building to the destruction of the suitors and its aftermath. Now we are back in Ithaka with a complete understanding of the situation and of the states of mind of all the major actors.

The preceding summary also points to the versatility of the performance in modulating between the “ordinary” events on Ithaka and fantastic events as told
in the Adventures. A similar vitality carries the performance from the high context of the ceremonious feasting and guest-friendship in the palaces to the humble hospitality of Eumaios' hut, where the same social values appear among the peasantry. Moreover, these divisions suggest that, though the epic is continuous from one section to the next, an audience would have a different poetic experience in each session of the performance. Thus, they would think of each as a provisional unity, much as we think of the parts of a serial—for example, the installments of one of Dickens' novels as originally published, the operas in Wagner's Ring cycle, or even the episodes of a television sitcom or soap opera. One can easily imagine that moments of suspense ("cliff-hangers") provided a kind of transition between one section of a performance and another.

These six sections also provide for the coherent development of important themes of the work, so that listeners would come to each successive performance session prepared for learning something new about the various themes or for seeing them in a new light. We might compare these compositional procedures to those of our classical music, in which musical matter first appears in an exposition, then undergoes development to bring out its harmonic and rhythmic implications, and reappears finally in a recapitulation, a restatement deeply informed by all that the development has unveiled in it. In this epic, of course, this matter is narrative and thematic, and the performer's techniques of selection, arrangement, and additive repetition allow listeners to understand progressively its layers of resonance, its larger potential meanings. As we look at the overall form, we can see that, as in a musical composition, the "exposition" in books 1–4 of the Odyssey presents each theme in a normal setting, that is, in the world such as we can all experience it either at home or nearby. The themes themselves have this same character. The "development" occurs largely in a world quite outside of ours, where everything encountered is at extremes—the utopias of Ogygia and Scheria, the horrors of the Cyclopes' cave and the Laistrygonians' country. As these settings help us understand our own, so the themes also reveal their potential by being taken to extremes. It is as if a composer took his or her basic statement of musical matter and explored it by slowing it down, speeding it up, and putting it through harmonic convolutions and melodic inversions. Then, the "recapitulation" of the Odyssey happens back in the "real world," in Ithaka, in books 13–24, where we see the same thematic elements as presented in the first books, again in "normal" form, yet greatly enriched, with their implications brought out by the development they have undergone in the "fantasy world."

Here, we can only begin to suggest the wealth of thematic meanings in this performance. To do so, we shall focus on three "themes," of three different sorts: (1) the theme of hospitality (in Greek, xenia), which has to do with typical situations, or "type scenes," in which any and all of the characters participate in one
way or another (this goes to the ethical center of the poem); (2) the use of female characters to define the way gender affects the hero's striving and the issues with which the epic deals; (3) storytelling as showing most directly how the Odyssey singer's techniques work out certain themes according to the principles we have already discussed, by selection, arrangement, and repetition. For each of these topics, we can only suggest how the six sections add to the listener's understanding and total experience, leaving it to those who read or listen to the epic to work them out in greater detail and to find other, perhaps even more suggestive and interesting ways of seeing these themes and others. The Odyssey is far too rich to be interpreted finally by any one commentator.

Xenia

In Greek legend, the Trojan War originated when Paris, the Trojan prince, induced Helen to accompany him back to Troy, deserting her husband, Meneláos and thereby instigating the alliance among the Greek princes to recover her. This act of Helen and Pairs desecrated two hallowed institutions—most obviously, to our eyes, the marriage of Meneláos and Helen. But the other crime was equally if not more troubling to the Homeric Greeks: the violation of guest-friendship, in Greek, xenía. Paris was the guest of Helen’s husband when the fateful liaison began, and the violation was more than a matter of etiquette or custom: to the society presented in the Homeric texts, the institution of guest-friendship is as fundamental as marriage for regulating social relations. Though many cultures have rituals associated with the relationship between guest and host, the reciprocal relationship of guest-friendship is structured in a unique manner in early Greek society, as Moses Finley and other scholars have shown. This institution is so ubiquitous in the Odyssey as to make it seem that our performance sets out to explore the subject comprehensively. In particular, the suitors’ threat to Odysseus’ household, as to his marriage, is a test case for the significance of this social practice.

The Greek word meaning “guest,” xénos, also means “stranger” and “friend,” showing the cultural complexity of the corresponding institution, xenía. For us readers of Homer, it is important to see how this institution plays out in the narrative. From the opening of the Télemacheía to the death of the last suitor, guest-friendship is portrayed as an ideal human relationship that one violates only at great peril. And each of our six performance sessions puts the theme in a new light, displaying remarkably well the classical pattern of exposition, development, and recapitulation with added complexity.

In the first session, the Télemacheía (books 1–4), our performance gives a clear exposition of the theme, with preliminary development, in three different locales:
Ithaka, Pylos, and Sparta. The very first scene on earth, when Athena arrives in Ithaka in the form of Mentes, chief of the Taphians, presents the basic elements of guest-friendship: the host, Telémachos, acknowledges the guest, welcomes him, then offers tokens of hospitality, which here, as oftentimes, include being seated, feasted, and entertained by a singer. Only then can the question of identity come up. This part of the custom is neatly summarized in Telémachos’ first words: “Welcome, stranger—with us you will have kind greeting, and only / when you have eaten a meal shall you tell what you are in need of” (1.123–24). Then, at parting, Telémachos offers a guest-gift as a token of the relationship, with the understanding that his guest has a reciprocal obligation to become the host in turn at some future date, when the roles will be enacted again in reverse. Here, “Mentes” declines it, but in doing so, he explicitly recognizes the mutuality of the relationship: he will accept it on his way back home, and “it will bring an exchange to be valued” (1.318). The entire sequence gives coherence to social relationships beyond the familial bonds within the household. Thus, one’s guest-friend is part of a network of such people whose relationships cross both space (household to household, territory to territory) and time (generation to generation).

The importance of such an engine of social cohesion is powerfully invoked throughout the Odyssey, as much as the familial bonds among Penelope, Telémachos, and Odysseus. In the additive style of Homeric narrative, books 3 and 4 extend this exposition of the pattern already discussed: in them, guest-friendship institutes a bond between the son of Odysseus and the latter’s comrades from the Trojan campaign. At the very beginning of book 3, Telémachos shows his inexperience by his shyness on approaching the household of Nestor in Pylos. He need not have worried, as Athena (now in the form of Mentor) advises him, for “[s]eeing the strangers arrive, they all came crowding around them, / held out welcoming hands, and invited them both to be seated” (3.34–35)—the custom ensures a welcome even for strangers. After Peisistratos, Nestor’s son, seats them, the guests are given food and drink, and only after they have been hospitably treated does Nestor, their host, ask, “Strangers, who are you?” (3.71). After more hospitality and a sacrifice, Nestor sends Telémachos on his way to Sparta in a chariot with his son Peisistratos as his companion—not explicitly a guest-gift, but a signal extension of his welcome and the first occurrence of an important facet of the theme: a good host helps his guest continue his journey.

Thus, in the Telemachia, guest-friendship functions as a kind of rite of passage, as Telémachos engages in the guest-host relationship with the previous generation, that of his father. So, in Sparta, we can expect to see the ritual enacted once again. But here, our performance develops the presentation of the ritual, for Eteéoneus, a court attendant, sees the approaching guests and asks Meneláos whether they should be sent away or not (4.20–29). “Sorely dis-
pleased” at this question (4.30), Meneláos offers a poignant reason for observing the custom.

Certainly Helen and I ate many hospitable dinners others provided for us as we came here, hoping that Zeus would sometime soon put an end to our grief. Unharness the strangers’ horses, and bring the men into the hall to partake of the feasting. (4.33–36)

As we have seen, the original violation of Meneláos’ marriage was accompanied by a violation of xenía, and the couple have relied on the institution in their voyage homeward. Thus, Meneláos wants all conventions adhered to, and from lines 37 on in book 4, the guest-friendship ritual is enacted: the guests are led to the house, bathed, placed on chairs, and given food, and the all-important point concerning the inquiry as to identity is stressed by the host: “when you have finished / eating your fill of the meal, we will ask you who among mankind / both of you are” (4.60–62). In the event, however, Meneláos mentions Odysseus seemingly in passing, bringing Telémachos to tears; then Helen enters (4.120–37) and also guesses that this young man might be Odysseus’ son (4.138–46), a fact that Peisístratos confirms. This elaborated version of the motif of the guest revealing his name after dining depends on the understanding of the custom already established in this performance. The ritual, in other words, is put to poetic work by the singer.

Another aspect of this theme given strong exposition in the first performance session is its violation by the suitors who eat up their host’s possessions by staying in his house as permanent “guests.” Their excuse for this excess, given especially in the assembly Telémachos calls in book 2, is that even though Odysseus must surely be lost, Penelope refuses to choose a new husband. One of the suitors, Antínoös, tells the famous story of the shroud that Penelope wove and unwove to delay her decision (2.85–128). But no such reason can offset the blatant disregard of reciprocity in their actions; they never propose any compensation, as Telémachos complains—“with never a thought about payment” (1.377)—in a passage in book 1 that is repeated verbatim in book 2 (1.375–80 = 2.140–45).

The poetic elaboration, or development, of xenía continues even more strongly and in a more nuanced fashion in the next session (books 5–8), where we begin to hear of Odysseus’ return home. Kalýpsos has hosted Odysseus for seven years, providing lavishly for his wants and desires; but the situation does not meet the requirements of custom, because the host has been unwilling to let the guest go home. For a traditional return poem, the reluctance of the host to send the guest forward denies a salient assumption of the relationship—that the guest will leave the household and even be helped to depart, as Telémachos was
by Nestor and will be by Meneláos, who later puts the assumption with aphoristic succinctness: "offer your love to a guest who is present and speed him at parting" (15.74). In this case, it takes the god Hermes, at Zeus's insistence, to make Kalýpso send Odysseus on his way.

A similar problem arises in the seeming utopia on Scheria. The threat to Odysseus' nóstos in that idyllic place is that he might not be given a conveyance to his home; he has to win his hosts' sympathy for his plight. This situation is played out against the background of guest-friendship ritual: after Naúsikaā comes across Odysseus shipwrecked on Scheria, she takes care of him—in effect, hosts him—and invites him into her parents' household. There, Odysseus is treated as a guest—dined and bathed, treated to games and songs—without being asked his name. This feature of the ritual is played on to great effect in this performance, for Odysseus is not asked for his identity until after the three songs of Demódokos, during two of which, concerning Odysseus' own past, his tears all but give him away to Alkinoós. This entire sequence, from Odysseus' encounter with Naúsikaā in book 6 to the end of book 8, is a variant of the ritual structure of guest-friendship, and it climaxes in book 9 with Odysseus' resounding declaration "I am Odysseus, the son of Laërtes" (9.19). The story of Odysseus in books 9–12 forms a kind of reciprocating "gift" to the Phaiákians, whom he has never seen before and will never see again. When the Phaiákians themselves convey Odysseus home with gifts, the requirements of the institution have been not only met but elaborated on in the grand Homeric style, especially the precept to "speed him at parting," which they take to its extreme—just as they do the lavish gift giving ("treasures of bronze and of gold in abundance and garments," 5.38, 13.136)—in a kind of wish fulfillment. But in effect, the return of Odysseus depends on the convention of reciprocity at the heart of Homeric culture.

This idealized version of guest-friendship is taken to the opposite extreme—even inverted—in the next session, The Adventures of Odysseus (books 9–12), especially in his encounter with the Cyclopes. In this episode, we see clearly how important it is to attend to the culture-specific details concerning guest-friendship, for the institution seems violated in most of its important features. When they enter the cave of the Cyclops Polyphémos, the intruding Greeks take the Cyclopes' food, eat it, and prepare to steal more, with Odysseus going so far as to say he would not be persuaded to leave, "not till I saw him and found whether he might give me some guest-gifts" (9.229). His conception of the relationship seems to have degenerated to mere acquisitiveness, not much higher, ethically, than the rapacity he recently unbridled in looting the Kikonians' country. Ironically, his actions here closely parallel those of the suitors, who are consuming his own substance without payment—and both sets of transgressors will suffer requital, Odysseus right away when his men are eaten, the suitors at the climax.
of the epic. When Polyphemos returns from his daily rounds, he finds the intruders, only to ask them immediately: “Strangers, who are you . . . ?” (9.252), thus violating the rule we saw so often earlier concerning the guest’s name. In this instance, reciprocity seems to have become mutual rudeness.

That the issue of xenia concerns Odysseus becomes clear when—despite the fact that, even before he entered the Cyclops’ cave, he knew he was about to meet a “savage, with no true knowledge of justice or civilized customs” (9.215)—he says to the “host” whose space he has violated:

Come now, honor the gods, good man: we are supplicants asking.
Zeus himself, the protector of supplicants, keeper of strangers,
god of encounters, accompanies strangers to honor and guard them.

(9.269–71)

Such a naïvely brazen demand could come only from a man who has not yet developed a sense of the deeply human significance of the custom, and only such a person could be surprised by the total refusal that follows (9.273–80). Indeed, the Cyclops’ signature horror, his cannibalism, inverts the host’s duties: instead of feeding his guests, he eats them. Finally, the ritual’s concern with revealing the guest’s identity also takes a subtle turn when Odysseus gets the Cyclops drunk and tells him, “Nobody is my name” (9.366), with consequences that are comic in part because this naming plays against the expected ritual action. In these and other features, the Cyclops episode takes the guest-friendship ritual to its negative extreme. Both host and guest stumble at every step.

Later on in this session, the ideal of guest-friendship also helps define the visit to the Lotus-eaters, during which eating—always an important feature of the host’s entertainment—causes those who feed on the lotus to forget about home, thus symbolizing excessive hospitality. Something similar happens with Circe. Her initial reception of Odysseus’ comrades shows a nearly Cyclopean violation of the custom, when she invites them in but gives them a drink that transforms their bodies into those of swine. Only the intervention of the god Hermes, who gives Odysseus the counterdrug moly, keeps her from visiting the same fate on the hero. But once Odysseus has “tamed” her, Circe displays a hospitality as excessive as the Lotus-eaters’, allowing Odysseus and his men to stay on eating and drinking without any thought of a reciprocal obligation—unless Odysseus’ sexual liaison with her could be considered such. They remain a whole year, until his comrades, less well supplied with fleshly pleasures, remind Odysseus of his purpose, to go home.

If Telémachos’ voyages to Pylos and Sparta show the ideal of guest-friendship at the highest levels of society, the Scheria episode displays it as totally perfected, and the Cyclops episode shows it at its most dysfunctional, the encounter be-
between Odysseus as beggar and Eumaios in the fourth performance session (books 13–16) further develops the theme by displaying a humble but equally attractive version of this aristocratic institution. Though guest-friendship is idealized in the Odyssey, we can put it in historical context by pointing out that in democratic Athens, the institution was viewed with suspicion as a last holdout of aristocratic privilege. In this light, the Odyssey’s display of a fully functional guest-friendship between a beggar and a swineherd advances the ritual as good for everyone; as we shall show, it portrays the suitors as almost inhuman by contrast.

At the farm of Eumaios, Odysseus becomes the guest, ironically, of his own slave. The pattern is familiar: Eumaios sees the beggar (14.33–35), leads him to his cabin (14.45–48), seats him (14.49), welcomes him as a stranger and beggar who has the protection of Zeus (14.56–59; cf. what Odysseus said about Zeus in the Cyclops’ cave, quoted earlier), and provides him a humble feast—“Eat now, stranger, the food that a servant is able to give you” (14.80)—all without asking his name or any other circumstances of his arrival. The reciprocity of the relationship between host and guest is then cemented, significantly, by the most extensive exchange of stories in the epic. Odysseus tells his story to identify himself, and Eumaios later introduces his own story with a direct reference to their mutual pleasure: “we two now will enjoy each other’s afflictions and sorrows / as we recall them” (15.399–400). Eumaios understands that his enactment of guest-friendship differs from what the suitors are doing in Odysseus’ household. Moreover, he joins their maltreatment of Penelope to their violations of the reciprocal bonds of guest-friendship:

... they do not want in the proper manner to court his wife nor to go back home, but at ease they eat up his goods in arrogant wantoness, stopping at nothing...

(14.90–92)

The contrast could not be more starkly put: the fundamental institution of guest-friendship is upheld between the lowly swineherd and his downtrodden guest, while it is abused by the elite in the palace of Odysseus.

In the recapitulation of the theme of xenia in the fifth performance session (books 17–20), we once more see the suitors’ abuse of hospitality merged with their importunate courting of Penelope. But another element becomes even more prominent, for while the suitors only neglected “Mentes” in book 1, they here descend to outright abuse of Odysseus as beggar. Thus, they transgress against the hero in two different but complementary ways, both defined by the institution of xenia. The Odyssey has prepared us well to evaluate the suitors by the standards, positive and negative, developed in the earlier sessions. We see that the suitors’ behavior is in harmony with that of the Cyclops and dissonant
with the idealized behavior of the Phaiákian royal household. The greeting that the beggar gets from Antínoös in book 17, for example, presents exactly the kind of behavior toward guests that at the beginning of book 4 Meneláos abhorred when Eteóneus offered to send the visiting youths onward. Antínoös chides poor Eumaíos for bringing the beggar to the door.

Oh most notable swineherd, and why have you brought this fellow here to the city? Are there not vagrants enough for us, other wretched importunate beggars who scavenge at meals and defile them? Or do you take it so lightly that men are devouring your master's livelihood, gathering here, and invite this man in addition? (17.375–79)

Antínoös here compounds his violation of the Greek rules of hospitality by criticizing Eumaíos and the beggar even as he acknowledges his own excesses against Odysseus' household.

Telemachos rightly takes umbrage at Antínoös' behavior, and as he did earlier with Athena/Mentes, he orders that the "guest" be taken care of: "Take food; give to him; I do not grudge it; indeed, I command it." (17.400) This scene swiftly moves to its climax as Odysseus tells his lying tale about his high estate falling on bad times (17.415–44). Now occurs another strike against Antínoös, since he is not only a bad host but a bad hearer of tales, for he calls the beggar "this pain, this spoiler of dinner" (17.446) and rejects his request. Strike three comes when Antínoös hurls a stool at Odysseus and hits him on the back. The violence is of course a harbinger of the slaughter to come in book 22.

To make the violation even clearer in additive style, Homer gives another example in book 18—the entire scene, with some variation, is replayed again, with Eurýmachos taking over the aggressive role from Antínoös. In this case, Eurýmachos has taunted Odysseus with the perennial taunt of well-off people against the poor, "Get work!" (18.357–64). When Odysseus the beggar meets the challenge by claiming to be able to outwork and outfight the likes of Eurýmachos, he cannot—any more than he could when leaving the Cyclops—resist adding a taunt: "But if Odysseus should come and arrive in the land of his fathers, / quickly indeed would the doors, although in fact very broad ones, / be too narrow for you as you took flight out through the forecourt" (18.384–86). Just as Polyphémos hurled a boulder at the departing Odysseus, Eurýmachos, following Antínoös' lead, launches a footstool at Odysseus. But this time, in the manner of a Homeric battle scene, the missile misses its target and hits the wine server (18.394–98). An image from this sequence of inhospitable acts, "onto the ground fell clanging the pitcherc") (18.397) reminds us of the dining ritual whose violation the suitors have been flaunting.
This motif has one more significant recurrence, in book 20, where a minor suitor, Ktesíppos, is seemingly introduced to show how clumsy one can be in treating the beggar (20.287–302). When he hurls an ox hoof (20.299), the stage is set for the final battle. Violations of guest-friendship have culminated in violence in the household.

The women in this part also illuminate the theme. One of them, the maid Melántho, who has been sleeping with the suitor Eurýmachos, illustrates the way servants can be perverted from their duties. She abuses Odysseus twice, first in book 18 (321–36), then in book 19 (66–69); both times, she directly violates the canons of hospitality by scolding the beggar for not going outside. Penelope, however, reinforces the customary ethic by expressing displeasure at the treatment of the beggar (17.492–94) and even reproving her son for allowing such foul acts (18.215–25)—though we in fact know that he has gone as far as he could to insure good treatment (17.406), given that his father has told him not to try to stop the suitors’ abusive behavior (16.274–77). More positively, Penelope herself entertains the stranger; and though she does not go through the whole ritual before asking his name, one of its features—the offer of a bath—becomes the occasion for the nursemaid Eurykleía to recognize him from his scar when she washes his feet (19.357–475). Moreover, we see in the scene between Penelope and Odysseus as beggar the same reciprocity that we saw at Eumaiós’ cabin: the two exchange stories, Penelope leading with the tale of the shroud she wove and unwove (19.124–63), thereby encouraging the “beggar” to tell her of himself, despite his reluctance.

In the next performance session (books 21–24), the suitors receive requital for their violations of xenía, as they are all slaughtered, avenged by the man they have been abusing by attacking his marriage, exhausting his household, and mistreating the “beggar.” The performer of the Odyssey shows his individual power by producing a death for Antínoös symbolizing subtly but directly the suitors’ transgressions.

Thus he [Odysseus] spoke; at Antínoös then he aimed a sharp arrow.

He was in fact just starting to lift up a beautiful goblet,
twin-eared, fashioned of gold—in his hands already he held it—
so he could drink of the wine; and he took no thought in his heart of
slaughter; for who could imagine that one sole man among many
men then banqueting there, even if he were mighty in power,
ever would bring upon him so evil a death and such black fate?
He was Odysseus’ target—his throat he hit with the arrow
so that the point, penetrating the delicate neck, passed through it.
Off to the side he slumped, and the cup fell out of his hand...
This moment of truth is illuminated by the symbolic gold goblet: when Antínooës, about to drink from it, is cut down, the image draws together the frequent scenes of feasting throughout the epic, even as it recalls the downfall of the drunken Polyphémos. The arrow passes through his “delicate neck,” grimly perpendicular to the course wine follows from gullet to belly. Finally, the beautiful Homeric touch in the phrase “the cup fell out of his hand” subtly points to the brutal fact that the suitors’ way of being “guests” is at an end. The return of Odysseus means the restoration of decorous hospitality in the traditional manner.

Such restoration occurs especially in a triumphant final permutation of the theme, the recognition scene between Penelope and Odysseus, when the renewal of the marriage bond is accompanied by an affirmation of proper hospitality. Before Penelope is convinced of Odysseus’ identity, she gives him some of the defining features of the xenía ritual, a bath (by Eurýnomè, the housekeeper), good clothes to wear, and, above all, a place to sleep: the bed that he himself constructed is to be moved out of the chamber for him. The last gesture becomes the means by which his identity is confirmed, as he abandons his reserve and angrily tells the story of the bed’s construction. So the observance of xenía becomes the catalyst for the couple’s reunion, where the most intimate kind of reciprocity takes place—emphasized once again by an exchange of stories, she telling of her troubles and he of his travels (23.300–343).

There is even a sort of “coda” for this theme, a final brief restatement, when again we see Odysseus in a household of peasants, this time the farm of Dolios, where Laërtes has been living. Now the master mingles openly with his servants, yet the hospitality is just as unconstrained as it was when Eumaës regarded him as a beggar. We even see a subtle and humorous treatment of the name-giving feature: when the servants recognize him, Odysseus tells Dolios to put his amazement out of his mind so that they can eat (24.394–96)—as if it is premature to worry about mere identity before the “ravenous belly” has been appeased. Needless to say, they ignore his order and welcome him heartily before they start the dinner. So we see an affirmation of hospitable concord just before the final scene, when it will take Zeus and Athena to impose peace on Odysseus and the relations of the suitors.

In these ways and in many others that readers can discover for themselves, the Odyssey highlights social harmony through one of its major defining institutions. Guest-friendship is as important to this vision of the return of Odysseus as is the marriage between Odysseus and Penelope. The theme goes straight to the heart of one of the Western world’s central ethical principles: the respect that all people, regardless of origin or condition, should feel for each other simply on the basis of their common humanity. It falls outside the scope of this essay to discuss how far this is the revolutionary idea of our singer and how far it was im-
licit even in the aristocratic tradition of guest-friendship on which he drew. But there can be little doubt that the prominence of this performance in our own literary tradition has contributed mightily to the development of this principle of universal mutual respect, in Greek thought and in all that rose out of it. The society our singer portrays is not democratic; but one seed of democracy, we might hazard, was first planted on the swine farm of Eumaíos, where a master came on a servant who was at least his equal in the ethical humanity represented by the guest-friend relationship, and recognized his excellence.

Women

For many people, the Odyssey is so familiar a text that we might forget how surprising some of its features are. Most scholars would say that early epic, typified especially by the Iliad, puts men, warriors, in the major roles, but in this text Penelope, Athena, Circé, and even the nurse Eurykleia are at the heart of most readings. How should we conceive their function in an epic of a warrior’s return from laying waste to a city? Our first attempt at understanding might begin by evaluating the female figures. Though some have tried to domesticate Penelope into merely a faithful wife, she dominates the motives central to Odysseus’ return—his marriage, his continued kingship, and the order of the society he rules. Eurykleia’s importance to Odysseus’ return approaches that of Eumaíos the swineherd. Neither Circé nor Kalypso, dread goddesses though they are, is demonized by the narrative. The “female” monsters, such as Skylla and Charybdis, are right out of the cauldron of folk literature—they say as much about “women” as the Cyclops or the Laistrygonians say about “men,” defining them only by negative extremes. The relationship between Athena and Odysseus is more complicated than that between any pair of male characters in this epic. So anyone trying to assess the role of women in the Odyssey needs to step carefully, not merely to avoid removing gender from its social context, “essentializing” it, but also to account for the vital complexity of the way Homeric narrative thinks about women, men, and the world they navigate together.

No reader can finish this poem without having confronted questions of gender, at least unconsciously. How do women relate to the men who, at least outwardly, dominate them? How do they carve out a space for themselves in this male world? How far, indeed, are they in control, despite appearances? Happily, the performance sessions that we hypothesize for the Odyssey can help bring some order to the answers we might tentatively give to these questions. Each of these sessions advances our sense of women’s place and their peculiar kinds of consciousness. They help us to see progressively how men’s sense of themselves depends largely on the women in their lives, even when they think they are operating quite alone.
The Telemacheia, as exposition of this material, presents a wide range of women, both divine and human: the goddesses Athena on Olympos and Eidothéa (who rescues Meneláos in book 4) in the sea, Penelope and Eurykleía in Ithaka, Helen in Sparta, and Helen’s sister, Klýtaimnóstra, in Nestor’s tale of wanderings. In book 1, Athena provides a pattern for mortal women by deferentially but firmly taking over the conversation from her father, Zeus, after he complains of the way men blame the gods for the consequences of their own recklessness. Not only does she turn the talk to the plight of her favorite Odysseus, but she imposes her agenda for rousing Telémachos and rescuing Odysseus.

However, when Athena descends to encounter Telémachos, she appears as an authoritative man, Mentes, chief of the Taphians; even if Telémachos eventually realizes who she is, her male form surely makes the advice she gives more palatable. It is also as a man, this time Mentor, that she accompanies Telémachos on his voyage to Pylos. Her male guise sets the keynote for this session, where we see men firmly in ultimate control, however clever or determined the women are. When Penelope in Ithaka tries to exercise authority by asking the singer Phemios to stop singing of the returns of the Achaian, a song that causes her sorrow by reminding her of her absent husband, she runs into the burgeoning male self-consciousness of her son, who rudely orders her back to her room: “The men will attend to the talking, / . . . I above all, since mine is the rule of the household” (1.358–59). Before this moment, Penelope has already discovered how helpless a woman can be in a male world, even when she has the intelligence to shape a situation to her desires. We see this in book 2 when the suitor Antinoós blames her for postponing the question of marriage and tells the famous story of the shroud she wove by day and unwove by night (2.85–128). This ruse worked for three years, but she was finally betrayed to the suitors by one of her own women—no doubt, one of those women who, we find out later, have been sleeping with the suitors—and she finished it “unwillingly, under compulsion” (2.110). Here we see also how the theme of male power as reinforced by the betrayal of a woman’s natural allies, other women, is an ancient one.

The question of a woman’s power to influence events is raised also by Eurykleía, “the old wise-counseling woman” (1.438), who in book 2 tries unsuccessfully to get Telémachos to renounce his journey; indeed, in later appearances also we see her trying, largely without success, to influence the menfolk. She shows the traditional role of women: persuasion is the only weapon they have, and their own notions of correct action, however wise, are usually ignored. Two other women, Klýtaimnóstra, the wife of Agamemnon, about whom we hear briefly in Nestor’s story in book 3, and her sister Helen, the wife of Meneláos, who plays an important part in book 4, seem to have been more successful—destructively so—in their attempts to seize control. Yet in book 3 (255–75), Nestor elaborately
tells the story of how Klýtaimnéstra was seduced by Agamemnon's murderer Aigisthos against her own excellent judgment—thus pointing directly to another way in which male dominance asserts itself. As we have already seen, Klýtaimnéstra's sister Helen takes us to the very center of the Homeric story, for Paris' violation of her marriage to Meneláos started these events in motion. She too was the victim of seduction, but in book 4, we see her at first in control of the situation—she identifies Telémachos; she throws a drug in the wine so that painful stories of the past can be told (4.219–26); and she begins the tales told to celebrate Odysseus, so she seems more successful than Penelope in shaping narrative choice. But as we shall show in more detail later, these stories convey something quite different from admiration for the absent hero; moreover, her husband has the "last word," telling how his own wife tried to betray him and the other Greeks to the Trojans when they were sitting in the wooden horse inside Troy. Taken together, the stories suggest how infatuation with a woman can override considerations of prudence and justice, for though Meneláos ostentatiously mourns for the comrades who died in the war, he has not renounced the woman for whose sake he made it all happen. He goes to some length to humiliate her before his youthful guests, however, thus flaunting his male superiority.

The female figures of the second performance session (books 5–8) take up some of these themes and develop them at the extremes such imaginary places allow, for Odysseus' fate there falls entirely into the hands of females. The goddess Kalýpsó shows a woman in control of an unwilling mortal man, Odysseus—a reversal of the theme of male seduction—until the Olympians, at the instigation of Athena, intervene. Kalýpsó then utters a lengthy complaint concerning just what a candid mortal woman might complain about their promiscuous husbands—how the male gods begrudge female goddesses their mortal consorts (5.118–28). Moreover, the god to whom Kalýpsó must defer is not Athena, who has instigated the order, but Zeus, as both Hermes (5.103–4) and she herself (5.137–38) say in identical lines, thus affirming the hierarchy of power. Kalypso also displays the other side of a Homeric woman's nature, its nurturing sympathy, since she helps Odysseus on his way despite her disappointment. This side appears again in the sea nymph Ino, who spontaneously gives Odysseus a scarf to save him as he swims from his wrecked raft to Scheria.

The other two women in this session, the mother and daughter Arétè and Nausikää, live in the idealized land of Scheria and present idealized patterns of how women and men can relate to each other in this world of desire, passing encounters, and power relationships. One of Homer's great triumphs is his success in conveying the charm of the daughter, a young girl just coming of age; there could be no better foil for the conniving Helen, the murderous Klýtaimnéstra, or even, at this point, the conflicted Penelope. By means of a dream, Athena sends
Naúsikaā to help Odysseus and to provide for his journey to the palace. In her generosity and beauty, Naúsikaā presents even more of a temptation to Odysseus—who devotes to her some of the loveliest lines of praise in all of literature (6.150–69)—than had Kalýpso, who had promised him youthful immortality; the girl’s admiration of him makes the temptation even stronger. Yet like her equally admiring father, she gracefully eschews any attempt to hold him, once he has expressed his determination to return home. Arêtē, however, shows to perfection how a strong and vital woman of experience can exercise real power while allowing her husband to keep his role. According to both her daughter (6.303–15) and Athena appearing as a young girl (7.48–77), Odysseus must direct his entreaties for conveyance to his home to Arêtē, and the goddess tells how even men have their quarrels settled by the queen. She is the one who begins questioning the stranger and who instigates the giving of gifts. Yet, in every case, her husband gives the orders and has the outward authority. Thus, she models in human terms the paradigm set forth by Athena’s management of Zeus in the proem (1.44–95).

Such paragons of Homeric womanhood—who excellently exemplify, at their different stages of life, the virtue called by the later Greeks sōphrosūne, “temperance,” or “self-control”—point to enduring ways of negotiating gender relationships. They show how the Odyssey gives us in additive manner example after example of the way life can be lived in a world where desire and sexual relationships constantly accompany the hero. In the next session (books 9–12), the female figures present the opposite extreme, male fantasies in which female figures dominate or destroy men. In Tēlepylōs, some of Odysseus’ comrades meet the “comely daughter” of the Laistrygonian king, who takes them to meet her mother, an enormous woman “as huge as the peak of a mountain,” who calls home her cannibal husband, after which destruction promptly ensues for all of the galleys except that of Odysseus (10.103–32). This brief encounter has the quality of a nightmare, an enticing girl leading to a monstrous woman who betrays rather than nurtures.

The same sort of response is evoked by the most important encounter in this section, that with Circè, who transforms Odysseus’ comrades into swine, while Odysseus himself can only resist her with the aid of the herb moly provided by Hermēs. Yet Circè also shows, in dreamlike fashion, a male fantasy of how such a woman can be brought under control, in a scene as stark as any unreconstructed male chauvinist could wish for: Odysseus draws a sword and threatens her life, and she submits and invites him to bed. Afterward, she meekly releases his men from their enchantment and entertains them with feasting for a full year. Perhaps Odysseus’ dramatic (though in actual fact easy) conquest of the goddess contributes to his willingness to remain on the island, forgetful of home, until his comrades remind him of his goal. At any rate, we see here the fantasy pattern of
conquest of a powerful woman—even if the real power remains with the goddess. This discreetly ironic sense is confirmed at the end of book 10, when we see Circe providing Odysseus with full instructions for his trip to Hades’ domain, and again in book 12, where she advises him at length on the rest of his trip homeward, including a strong admonition to leave the cattle of the sun uninjured.

The other female supernatural beings in this section have little bearing on women in the world, but they luridly represent male fears. The Sirens’ song has in our world come to symbolize the temptation to yield to the attractions of destructive females, though in the case of Odysseus, it represents more the possibility of limitless knowledge (“we know all that is on the much nourishing earth generated,” 12.191). Even so, it is significant that this lure is presented as a feminine distraction from the male business of getting on with a voyage. Then come two figures quite at the opposite extreme of self-presentation from the enticing Sirens: Charybdis is the goddess of a whirlpool that threatens to swallow up hapless mariners ship and all, while Skylla is a six-headed monster who seizes in her mouths at least six men from every passing ship. Such nakedly nightmarish fantasies of being swallowed up by females reveal a dark extreme of the psychological world in which the Homeric hero moves.

That world receives illumination also from the heroines of old whom Odysseus meets in his journey to Hades’ domain, the land of the dead, in book 11—a catalogued encounter with mythical history, so to speak, in which the forebears of the Achaians speak to the uncertain possibilities of Odysseus’ present. These women itemize the fortunes of marital life. Some were taken by gods and brought forth heroes: Tyro bore Neleus and Peleus to Poseidon, and Alkménè bore Herakles to Zeus (11.235–59, 266–68). Others, such as Epikástê, who in ignorance married her own son Oidipous, brought disaster by their liaisons (11.271–86). The last woman Odysseus here mentions, Eriphylè, betrayed her husband (11.326–27). These and other possibilities of marital life, however, are overshadowed by the heroine Odysseus only hears of, directly from the husband she helped to murder: Klýtaimnêstra now appears as a full partner with Aigisthos, killing Kassandra and refusing even to shut her dead husband’s eyes and mouth (11.405–34). If Agamemnon unwittingly suggests Klýtaimnêstra’s resentment at her husband’s betrayal of their marriage bed, the horror of her actions, though explicitly contrasted with the situation Odysseus will face with his faithful wife (11.441–61), dominates his imagination as he goes on to Ithaka, for he will follow Agamemnon’s advice not to be trusting of women.

Thus, these two performance sessions have defined the full range of feminine potential in the Homeric world, going far beyond the scope of the reality most people know. In the fourth section of the epic (books 13–16), Odysseus finds himself firmly back in that reality. Just after his arrival, he has an interview with Athena
herself, who assures him of her solicitude in his behalf; finally, she can appear the nurturing helper, after having abstained out of proper patriarchal fear of the wrath of her uncle Poseidon (13.339–43). When Odysseus goes to Eumaios’ farm, he encounters no women, but there we hear of Penelope’s desire for messages concerning her husband (14.373–74), as well as Eumaios’ story of the treacherous maidservant who led him into slavery (15.389–484). So two alternatives for a woman’s behavior, fidelity or betrayal, remain in our minds from this session.

Not until the next performance session (books 17–20) does our singer bring Penelope back on the scene. Despite the long history of the Odyssey, we are only beginning to understand Penelope’s role. A flurry of books at the end of the twentieth century (see, e.g., those by Katz, Cohen, Felson-Rubin, and Segal listed in the bibliography) marked critical interest in Penelope as a character pivotal to the meaning of the epic. Regarding Penelope in this way serves as a belated response to the misogyny in so much Western literature, especially, perhaps, among the Greeks. For example, in Hesiod’s depiction of Pandora and her box of evils or in Semonides’ long diatribe against women, misogyny is not only a social pathology but a literary motif. That motif is best represented in the Odyssey by the advice Agamemnon gives Odysseus in Hades’ domain, not to trust women. Despite that advice and Odysseus’ apparent agreement with it, Penelope is a full partner with Odysseus in effecting his homecoming. We listeners or readers are prepared to see how this should be: with our minds so stored with images of feminine possibility, we can place Penelope. Which characteristics of the clever and masterful Athena will she have, which of the charming Nausikaä, which of the discreetly authoritative Arête? How can a woman in such a vulnerable predicament negotiate the fine line between keeping her feminine sensitivity and being exploited, between exercising firmness to achieve what she wants and becoming over-assertive or treacherous? How can she affectionately yield to her long-absent husband while letting him know that he is to take nothing for granted about her affection? Such questions still resonate with many women. In these last two sections, we see Penelope taking a leading role in what must finally be done.

Yet her entrance at the beginning of this fifth section recapitulates her earlier appearance. Again, as in book 1 (330), she descends from her upstairs chamber; again, Telemachos sends her back when she asks him for news (17.45–51). But her son is now not so harsh, and he later gives her the full story of his travels, thus recognizing her right to an answer. We next see her at the end of the book, when she hears that Antinoös has struck the beggar. Her reaction, to pray for Antinoös’ death (17.494) and to summon the “beggar” Odysseus to speak to her, shows her beginning to assert decisive power. But her summons is not heeded for two whole books, with much suspense building for the encounter. Will she recognize Odysseus? Will he, in his disguise, be able to restrain himself?
Meanwhile, we get an answer to one of the questions we asked earlier, for in book 18, Athena inspires Penelope to appear again to the suitors, and the goddess enhances Penelope’s appearance so that she exceeds even the youthful Naïsikaï in charm (18.192–96). When Penelope goes downstairs—on a verbatim recapitulation of the scene in book 1, complete with accompanying handmaids (18.207–11 = 1.331–35)—the suitors are correspondingly moved: “Then were the men’s limbs loosened, their hearts enchanted with passion; / they all loudly were praying to lie in the bedding beside her” (18.212–13, the second line exactly echoing 1.366). Eurýmachos tells her that if other Achaïans could see her, she would have even more suitors. But she belongs in another world than the Phaiákian maid, and she shows herself a true wife to Odysseus by taking firm and crafty control of the situation, exploiting the suitors’ responses to extract gifts from them—at which Odysseus himself rejoices.

In book 19, the beggar finally has an audience with Penelope. Putting forward his false identity as a Cretan of even higher birth than he pretended to be for Eu máios, he says that Odysseus had visited his house. But the beggar’s cunning intelligence is matched by Penelope’s, for after an emotional response, she tests the beggar, asking him what apparel Odysseus was wearing during his visit (19.215–16). This reminiscence of Arête’s probing about the clothing Odysseus wore on Phaiáki shows Penelope to be the equal of that queen in controlling the situation. She does not relinquish her control even when she weeps at finding that the beggar knows the garments Odysseus wore. Her immediate reaction is to accept the stranger as a welcome reminder of Odysseus without believing in his homecoming.

The question of Penelope’s control comes up again in an even more intimate exchange. Penelope asks the beggar to interpret her dream of domestic geese slaughtered by an eagle, though the eagle itself, in the voice of Odysseus, had interpreted its significance: the geese were the suitors, and the eagle was her husband who would be coming to kill them (19.536–53). For us, the dream gains added meaning in conveying Penelope’s complex attitude: in it, she rejoices at the living geese and mourns insistently for the dead ones; yet when she awakens, she notices that her real geese are still “feeding on wheat from the trough”—a marvelous image of domestic tranquility. When Odysseus confirms the dream eagle’s interpretation, however, Penelope is elaborately skeptical, and she goes on to tell of the test of the bow and axes that she has decided on as a way of choosing a suitor for the marriage she sees as inevitable. What is happening? Why does she ask a stranger for an interpretation of a dream so transparent and then reject what he says? Is her intention here to convey a message to the husband she already recognizes? Has she decided that everyone’s best interests are served by a postponement of outward recognition?
In thinking of Penelope’s role here, many have wondered if she secretly or perhaps subconsciously recognizes Odysseus without revealing it—Sheila Munraghan has written perceptively about this question. For Penelope to conceal such a recognition would be consistent with a masterful use of cunning intelligence on her part, and it would resonate with Odysseus’ own restraint in maintaining his disguise. But her welcoming treatment of the beggar and her intimate conversations with him are also psychologically consistent with the narrative moment. She has just been given gifts by the suitors; Telémachos is fully of age, which is when Odysseus told her she should get another husband; she is about to set the contest of the bow and axes for her hand in marriage; and she has just been told by the prophet Theoklýmenos that Odysseus is already on Ithaka: this combination of events in her life causes such tension in her predicament as to make her need this intimate exchange, even with one she thinks of as a stranger. In any case, the singer shows his own skill in arousing our suspicions but not letting us be sure.

Whatever we decide, Odysseus and we now know clearly that though Penelope will have no part in the actual killing of the suitors, that outcome is precisely the one she expects. Even if she will mourn the loss of their attention, her grief, she seems to be saying, will pass just as completely as it did when she awoke from her dream, once domestic harmony is restored by this drastic cleansing. Yet her soliloquy at the beginning of book 20 still assumes that Odysseus is dead and assumes also that another dream of Odysseus she has had was an evil illusion (20.87–90): she would rather be dead than have an inferior husband (20.79–82).

Two other women have significant roles in this session. One, Eurykleía, the old nurse, we have seen already in book 1. As she is washing Odysseus’ feet, she sees the scar on his thigh and becomes the first household servant to know who he is. The lengthy digression on how he got this scar became famous when Eric Auerbach used it as the starting point for a seminal essay on the poetics of Homeric narrative. But for the present discussion, the image of the old woman holding her master’s naked foot and almost blurtng out his identity to Penelope is more important. Here, as in book 2, Eurykleía is unable to affect the course of events, for Odysseus immediately stops her with the threat of death—thus showing how intransigent his distrust of women still is and how even an old nurse’s life matters less than his scheme. The other woman with a significant role in this session is Melántho, a maid who has repaid Penelope for her kind treatment by sleeping with one of her main suitors, Eurýmachos. Now we see how the maid’s submission to a rapacious male has affected her character (as it did that of the serving woman in Eumaías’ story), for she abuses the “beggar” twice within two books, equaling the suitors themselves in her contempt for canons of hospitality.

Melántho’s major importance, however, lies in preparing us for one of the most ferocious images of the epic, which occurs in the final performance session
(books 21–24), as one aspect of the requital there depicted. Ordered by his father to put to death “with the fine-edged swords” (22.443) the twelve maids who betrayed their master and mistress by sleeping with the suitors, Telémachos obeys. But when the time comes, he rejects the idea of a “neat clean death” for women who have been “heaping disgraces” on himself and his mother; so he strings them up in nooses, like birds in a snare, and they dangle there until a pitiful death comes (22.461–73). Not soon will the other maids forget that they must choose carefully the males to whose importunities they succumb. Telémachos leaves no doubt about his descent from an implacable father.

Also in this section, we see Penelope moving with sure mastery among the competing demands on her, showing herself the equal not merely of Arêtè but of Athena herself, adding wily devices to discreet control. First, she sets a contest whose terms, she must know in her heart, none of these suitors can satisfy: after all, her powerful husband, in the prime of life, last achieved what seems impossible, stringing the great bow and shooting one arrow through twelve axes (or their helve holes) in a line (19.572–81)—and moreover, as he had boasted to the Phaiákians, only Philoktétês surpassed him as an archer (8.219). Then, when she has provided this opportunity for the beggar to get his hands on the bow, she herself intervenes to make them let him try the contest, assuring the suitors that he will not expect to marry her if he wins (21.311–42). In a recapitulation of the scene in book 1, with four almost exactly repeated lines (21.350–53 = 1.356–59), Telémachos takes over the masculine role and orders her upstairs, and she goes, exactly the same as in book 1 (21.354–58 = 1.360–64). But the speech has made it clear where her sympathies are, and it spurs her son to action and makes him yet more unwilling to yield to the suitors’ reluctance to give the bow to the beggar—especially since his mother has recently scolded him (18.214–25) for sitting by as the beggar was abused. We see how recapitulation, far from being mere repetition, gives this mother-son relationship new depth and complexity.

But it is in the famous recognition scene of book 23 that Penelope’s circumspect control and crafty intelligence appear most admirably. After the suitors have been dispatched, when Odysseus has every right to be welcomed back as her husband, he expects the recognition token that revealed his true identity to the suitors (the bow contest) to convince her too. Instead, Penelope surprises her son and us by hesitating:

Long in silence she sat, and a daze came over her spirit;
sometimes full in the face she would gaze at him, thinking she knew him,
sometimes failing to know him who wore foul clothes on his body. (23.93–95)
Even after a good bath and the divine help of Athena have transformed him, Penelope holds back, saying,

You strange man, I am not being proud, nor at all do I slight you, nor am I overimpressed; I know very well what you looked like when you departed from Ithaka once on the long-oared galley. (23.174–76)

Odysseus’ own craftiness, one might say, has served him too well—he looks like himself, but it might be a trick. Penelope outbrawes Odysseus’ craft by doing exactly what she said she would in 23.109–10: she refers to a token that only husband and wife can know. When Odysseus gives up for the evening and asks to sleep alone (23.171–72), Penelope orders that the bed he himself built on the living trunk of an olive tree be moved outside their bedroom so that he can sleep in it. Odysseus falls for the trick, protesting in anguish, telling the story of the bed’s construction and thus confirming his identity. The bed simultaneously, if symbolically, confirms Penelope’s fidelity; for the bed is still in its place, it has not been cut from the olive tree.

We see in Penelope an intelligence that, unlike that of her husband, does not boast of itself but achieves astutely and exactly what the occasion demands. Beneath it lie firmness of purpose and determination not to be swayed by mere emotion at least equal to his: when both of the males in her life scold her, partly in identical words, for her unyielding heart (Telemachos at 23.96–103; Odysseus at 23.166–72; 100–102 = 168–70), she does not give in until she herself is fully satisfied that it is time to do so. When she finally explains why she waited, she first expresses her distrust of fair-seeming words—she was afraid “that a man might someday come and beguile me / merely by speaking” (23.216–17).

Penelope then shows a consciousness of “the lessons of history” that takes us once more to the heart of the Homeric story, the abduction of Helen by Paris.

Neither in fact would Helen of Argos, the offspring of Zeus, have mingled in love and in bed with a man from an alien people if she had known that the warlike sons of Achaians would bring her back once more to her home, to the much loved land of her fathers. It was a god who aroused her to do so shameful an action; never before she had laid in her heart such hateful and reckless folly, from which first came for us also affliction and sorrow. (23.218–24)

In comparing her own predicament with that of Helen, Penelope shows the complexity of her mind: as Helen did not know that she would be brought home by force of arms, neither has Penelope known that Odysseus would come back to
his home—indeed, she has repeatedly expressed the conviction that he has been lost. Yet the bare possibility of his return has been enough to keep her faithful, for she has learned from the lesson of Helen what general calamity may follow an act of folly, even one aroused by a god in an otherwise virtuous woman. So she has had to hold out for the highest degree of certainty before recognizing this man who has claimed to be her husband.

Perhaps Penelope gives Helen too much credit. But in comparing her own obstinate fidelity to the Homeric tradition’s central symbol of the fragility of relationships, she raises the question of whether Helen is to be blamed or exonerated, scorned or forgiven, whether, indeed, we must blame the gods or ourselves for what happens to us and to those around us as a result of our actions—the very same question Zeus raised in the proem of the epic. If any answer to this difficult question is ever to be found, the example of Penelope herself may come nearest to it. No Athena has been standing by her in her troubles; no Zeus has been sending a messenger god to make the suitors desist from their importunities. She has been told that Odysseus is alive, but how could she trust the tellers when so many of them have proved to be deceivers? Yet she has endured. Her postponement of action is the most courageous and intelligent action in the whole Homeric tradition. It challenges listeners and readers to take equivalent responsibility for their acts.

Another parallel too is important: as Helen was absent in Troy for many years and caused much devastation, so Odysseus has been away from Ithaka for twenty years, leaving a household and a society in disarray. We know better than Penelope ever will how much of that long absence was due to his own impetuous folly, just short of Helen’s. Yet he, like the Helen we saw so comfortably situated in Sparta, must be greeted with joy; his return must be adequate consolation for all that loss. Penelope knows enough to take the good when it comes, however great the regrets. So after Odysseus informs her of the journey Teirésias decreed for him, she says in the last words we hear from her:

If it is true that the gods bring forth an old age that is better,
then there is hope that for you there will be an escape from afflictions.

(23.286–87)

No one has ever earned more completely the right to utter words of such qualified optimism.

Storytelling

Finally, we come to the theme of storytelling, a key to “Homer’s” sense of his task and the way he carries it out. Once again we can see a clear development across the performance. In the first books, the stories mainly convey the credible
facts of the “normal world,” sometimes moralized. In the Adventures, Odysseus recounts his marvelous travels as sober truth, expecting his listeners to believe what seem extravagant fictions and stimulating deeper cogitation on the moral implications of actions. In the final books the stories again concern the world we know, but now many of them are outright fictions calculated to put the teller in a certain light and to have specific effects on those who hear them. Each of the six performance sessions advances our understanding of the manifold powers of storytelling as explanation, celebration, moral education, entertainment, and, not least, deception.

The explanatory function—recounting what has happened before as a key to understanding the current situation—begins early in the first session. Zeus himself alludes to the murder of Agamemnon at the hands of Aigisthos, whom Orestes then killed (1.35–43), a story that will be greatly developed but that is here merely sketched to show how men bring disaster on themselves despite knowing better. Then, Athena and Zeus together tell a brief story explaining why Odysseus is still in Ogygia rather than at home (1.48–75), a parallel to the first one: Odysseus brought his exile on himself by putting out the Cyclops’ eye and thus incurring the wrath of Poseidon. This bare statement will not be fully developed until book 9, when Odysseus himself tells the story—then we will find out whether it is fully parallel: should Odysseus have known better? The next story in this first performance session is similarly explanatory: in book 2, the chief suitor, Antínoös, tells how Penelope put off the suitors by weaving and unwrapping a great fabric until a maid informed the suitors, who forced her to finish it (2.93–110). Like the stories of Zeus and Athena, this one, though factual, has a moral dimension, for Antínoös uses it to prove that Penelope is to blame in deceiving the suitors and evading a necessary decision. For us, of course, it also shows how far she will go to maintain her loyalty to Odysseus. Unlike the earlier stories, this story has its full exposition here, but like them, we shall meet it later in other contexts with other resonances.

In books 3 and 4 occur two far more extended narratives, both coming in answer to Telémachos’ inquiry concerning his father. In Pylos the aged warrior Nestor tells of his own return and the returns of several other Greeks to explain why he knows nothing about the fate of Odysseus. Though this elaborate passage may humorously characterize the old man’s garrulity, it also serves to place Odysseus’ homecoming in a wider context of nostoi (returns) of the Greek heroes, thus filling out the bare allusion to them in book 1 when Penelope asks the bard Phemios not to sing of them (1.325–27, 337–44). Nestor also adds to our knowledge of the Agamemnon story. Like Athena in book 1 (298–302), he offers Orestes, the avenger of the murder of his father, Agamemnon, as a model for Telémachos (3.193–200), and he makes the story a warning not to wander too long
lest the suitors destroy his patrimony (3.313–16). Then in Sparta Meneláos tells an even longer story of his own nóstos, his wanderings as he came homeward, this time explaining how he came to hear about Odysseus from Proteus, an old man of the sea. Being even more closely concerned for his brother Agamemnon, Meneláos adds to the resonance of that story the sense that his own careless neglect of proper sacrifices, resulting in his not being at home to aid his brother against the usurper Aigisthos, was largely responsible for the tragic event (4.512–40). Thus, the central theme of absence, a wandering that brings about terrible upsets for one’s native country, is reinforced by a story parallel to that of Odysseus. Moreover, though Meneláos’ travels take place in the known world, he prepares us to hear the tale of Odysseus by introducing supernatural characters, Eidóthéa the sea nymph and her father, Proteus.

Two other stories in book 4, told by Helen and Meneláos, show how stories can have multiple implications and effects, even when they narrate facts. The explicit intent of these stories is to celebrate Odysseus for the sake of his visiting son, by telling of the deeds that “the strong man dared and accomplished” (4.242) in Troy. But in each tale, its teller has another less explicit but essential aim: to present Helen herself in a certain light. In her story (4.240–64) Helen says that when Odysseus entered Troy disguised as a beggar, she recognized but did not reveal him, and that when he slaughtered many Trojans—the people who had received her—she “only rejoiced,” for her heart had turned toward going home to her excellent husband. As if in deliberate response to her, Meneláos tells (4.266–89) of Odysseus’ steadfast resourcefulness later, inside the wooden horse. When at this last moment of the war, Helen tried, by imitating their wives, to make the Achaians—including her own husband, to whom she has just professed to have been so devoted—reveal themselves to their enemies, Odysseus restrained them and saved the day. From these stories, Helen appears hopelessly duplicitous, her husband hopelessly infatuated: this is the woman for whose sake he caused so many Achaians to be destroyed. Moreover, by their juxtaposition, these stories give us a glimpse of a household whose outward splendor is undermined by unreconcilable marital tensions.

In the second session (books 5–8), storytelling occurs only late, since the early parts are direct narration of the way Odysseus came to be among the Phaiakians. But once he is received in the royal palace, in answer to Queen Aréthè’s question concerning the clothes her daughter Naúsikaä gave him to wear, he begins to tell of his travels (7.236–97). His aim here is adequately served by relating only how he set off from Ogygia, was shipwrecked, arrived in Scheria, and was aided by Naúsikaä, who lent him the clothes the queen and her women made. We know he tells the tale with factual exactness, because we have recently heard it directly from the narrator. Again, the explanatory function of storytelling seems upper-
most, but the story also accomplishes another even more important aim: it elicits the listeners’ sympathy for the teller’s plight.

The story is also entertaining, and as we might expect of a society so given to the pleasures of life, this is the power we mainly encounter in the stories told in these three books. Even the two stories about Odysseus that the singer Demôdokos sings have this primary function, for neither of them so much celebrate the hero as recount how he was involved in the Trojan War. This is especially true of the first briefly summarized tale of the quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles that heralded the war (8.72–82). The song entertains the hosts, but it causes Odysseus to weep. Then, at the end of the session, Odysseus himself—as yet unidentified—asks for the story of the wooden horse, which will highlight his own courageous craft (8.492–520). Once again he weeps to hear of the events. What he requested as a song to exalt himself results in grief for the loss of his comrades and even for the destruction of Troy. Later, we will again see these unexpected effects of stories—what is wanted is not always what is achieved.

Between these two Trojan stories occurs one that seems even more to be sheer entertainment: Demôdokos’ famous account of how Hephaisotex exposed the love affair of Ares and Aphrodité by trapping them in his own bed (8.266–366). Even the “morals” drawn in the story—for example, “Bad deeds never succeed, for the slow man catches the swift one” (8.329)—seem calculated more to amuse by their patness than to illuminate by their depth. But on further thought, the story raises questions about the truth and the significance of narrative. We know the two lovers in the tale as powerful and deadly—in her patronage of Helen and Paris, Aphrodité was at the very root of the destruction visited on Troy, while Ares is the ferocious god of war—but they are shown here as feckless participants in a comic interlude, almost as the victims of a jealous husband. What authority can the singer claim for such a portrayal of them? Is he simply inventing, and are stories like this the only sort of revenge we mortals can take on the gods who victimize us? Or should we adopt the perspective of these peaceful Phaiàkians, for whom neither of these gods seems to present a real problem? We are told before this episode how they care little for the “martial arts” of fistfighting and wrestling, preferring to run, dine, sail, sing, dance, bathe, and sleep (8.246–49). As for Aphrodité, no such temptations as assailed Helen (and Klýtainméstra in Nestor’s story in book 3) even occur to the mind of the vital young woman Naúsikaà—she wants a husband, but only and strictly on the terms that her beloved parents approve, as she makes clear to Odysseus in book 6 (286–88). For these people, then, if this beguiling tale of adultery is cautionary, it is so in the sunniest way, employing laughter rather than tragic pity and fear to discipline the violations of marriage.

Aside from this story, those in the second section are apparently sober truth. However, at the end of his story of his arrival in Scheria, Odysseus gives a brief
but significant foretaste of a talent that will become prominent in the Ithakan sections: he can improvise on the spur of the moment, changing or inventing facts to suit his purposes. When Alkínoo is blames his daughter for not bringing Odysseus with her to the palace, Odysseus tactfully says that he himself was afraid of being found offensive if he came with her (7.293–307), whereas we know that it was she who feared being taunted when officious Phaiákians saw her with a man like him (6.255–99). Thus, he not only “covers” for Naúsikaa but also endears himself to her parents as sensitive and careful—to the point that the king immediately wants to marry him to his daughter.

But the factuality of most of the stories in the second performance session prepares the audience and us to receive as truth the astonishing adventures in the third session (books 9–12). Here, Odysseus becomes an accomplished performer in his own right: King Alkínoo signals as much when he says in book 11, “like some singer of tales, you have skillfully told us the story / showing the piteous woes of yourself and of all of the Argives” (368–69). That Odysseus succeeds gloriously as an entertainer is testified by the listeners and readers of almost three millennia, who have made this sequence of tales probably the best-known in the literature of the West. So entertaining are these tales, some would say, that, taking his cue from the Phaiákians’ love of pleasure, Odysseus must have set out to win them by extravagant inventions. The monsters he meets seem to have just that value—they give much pleasure, but are not of great human significance.

We cannot elaborate further here on the kinds of story that Homer puts together in this tale of wanderings: we referred to them briefly at the beginning of this essay when discussing the folkloric elements in the Odyssey. But we may recall that in the section on women, we suggested that just because they are fantasies, these stories can evoke deep psychological truths that we do not confront so directly in normal life—indeed, that is the very reason they entertain. As to the factuality of his account, Zeus himself (1.68–75) provides evidence for one of its most spectacular and grotesque episodes, that concerning the Cyclopes. Moreover, Alkínoo says that Odysseus cannot be supposed to be “one of the cheats or insidious charlatans” (11.364) who fashion lies and inventions. Most important, perhaps, Odysseus comes across as a teller of truths because he does not try to hide or mitigate his own culpability in many of the episodes: he alone was responsible for the decision to explore the Cyclopes’ cave, for the even more drastic decision to blind the Cyclopes (thus incurring the fatal wrath of Poseidon), and for the reckless taunt, using his real name, which added magical efficacy to the Cyclopes’ curse (book 9). It was he who, not having told his crew what was inside the bag of winds Aiôlos gave him, fell asleep within sight of Ithaka, with the result that the crew opened the bag to find treasure, let the winds loose, and condemned them all to further wandering (10.1–79). His was the idle self-indulgence
on Circè's island, lasting a full year, from which only his comrades roused him (10.466–74). Even more than with his earlier story of arriving in Scheria, his purpose in telling this story—beyond providing the explanation King Alkinoös has asked for—is to gain the sympathy of his listeners, so that they will give him conveyance back home. In this respect, his account succeeds admirably, for he shows himself a man who has learned from facing his own failures, who has used his wily intelligence and courage to achieve ends that his rebellious crew too often thwarted, and who finally has the gods on his side. But it cannot be denied that, above all, he has given his listeners a splendid entertainment, equaling or outdoing even the professional singer Demódokos: twice we hear that “all of the people were hushed in silence, / held by the charm of the tale all over the shadowy chamber” (11.333–34, 13.1–2).

Also in this section, in his account of the voyage to Hades' domain (book 11), Odysseus tells how he heard from Agamemnon himself the fullest and most authoritative account of that warrior's demise, one notable for emphasizing the part of his wife, Klýtaminéstria, in the murder (11.405–34). By doing so, Agamemnon turned the tale to account as a lesson for Odysseus (much as Athena, Nestor, and Meneláos had done for his son, Télémachos)—in this case, that women are not to be trusted, even Penelope, who, by Agamemnon's insistence, is nothing at all like his own murderous wife. Therefore, Odysseus must proceed cautiously, secretly, when he returns to Ithaka. Agamemnon's inconsistency here may seem extreme, but it outlines exactly the state of mind in which Odysseus approaches his wife: he sees incontrovertible proofs of her devotion and loyalty, yet he keeps her from knowing him until the very end. So we observe how an exemplary story may affect the minds of those who hear it.

Agamemnon's recommendation of secrecy (11.455) provides the keynote for the whole of the next performance session, At the Farm of Eumaës (books 13–16). On Scheria, Odysseus began his long tale of adventures with the intention of establishing his identity unequivocally, beginning with the ringing assertion “I am Odysseus the son of Laërtes, who am among all men / noted for crafty designs, and to heaven my fame has ascended” (9.19–20). Now, his purpose is to hide his identity, using fictions to establish a new one while explaining how he has come to be in Ithaka. Yet entertainment, the charm of the tale, remains a powerful means by which Odysseus accomplishes his ends. In both deceiving and entertaining, he remains the performer par excellence, and his stories also show us how selection and repetition can add force to a narrative point or direct a specific appeal to a listener.

In his performances at Eumaës' farm and later in the palace, instead of telling true stories about experiences that are hardly credible, Odysseus concocts false stories about quite believable life events. The response he gets is equally con-
trary: whereas the Phaiákians had no problem believing him, his listeners in these books stop well short of swallowing his stories whole. The first of those listeners is Athena, and her skepticism is that of a goddess. But after he gives her (disguised as a young man) a tale of his Cretan origin, his murder of Idómeneus’ son, his hasty departure from Crete, and his landing on Ithaca (13.256–86), she reveals herself and rightly characterizes the storyteller as getting pleasure from his fabrications, saying that even in his native land, he would not stop “telling the fraudulent tales that are dear to your soul from the ground up” (13.295).

In this first tale, Odysseus’ intention was to establish his identity as a Cretan who fought at Troy and to explain his arrival on Ithaca. The same intent informs the long story he tells Eumaios in the next book—the additive technique is clearly at work, since many of the same elements enter the story (14.199–359): he is a Cretan, the son of a lord, and a warrior at Troy. But he adds to this account an involved story of piratical wanderings with men who were not fully under control, and tells how he was shipwrecked (in a passage that echoes, often line-for-line, the narrative of his real shipwreck after his comrades had eaten the cattle of Helios) and how he was driven to Thesprotia, where he heard of Odysseus as returning home and whence he was brought to Ithaca and escaped from sailors who intended to sell him as a slave. While this story goes well beyond its immediate purpose of establishing his identity, it fully achieves one equally important end: his listener, Eumaios, is moved by it, so that he later tells Penelope, “Such good stories he tells, he would charm the dear heart in your bosom” (17.514). Moreover, this tale suggests by thematic echoes and repetitions what the wanderings of Odysseus (as told in books 9–12) might have been like if they had happened in the known world: both narratives show how bad fortune and bad weather, the teller’s own folly, rebellious comrades, and encounters with hostile or treacherous people and with kind and helpful people have interwoven to bring him where he is. But the present story fails to convince Eumaios that Odysseus is returning, and he in fact accuses the “beggar” outright of lying (14.364–65) even though his return is the only substantially true fact in the whole story. Eumaios, like Telémachos in book 1 (413–16) and Penelope in book 23 (215–17), is skeptical because of the proven falsity of previous reports concerning Odysseus. He and they know that unscrupulous men use such tales to charm their listeners into giving or doing something, and Eumaios explicitly says that Odysseus should not attempt it—“make no effort to please me with lies or to charm me” (14.387).

Nevertheless, Odysseus does exactly that at the end of the book, when he tells a story of the time he, the fictional Cretan, was third in command with Odysseus in ambush under Troy (14.462–506). His aim is to get the swineherd to give him a warm cover, so he tells how since he had come out without warm clothing, Odysseus cleverly obtained some for him. The story succeeds in its aim, for Eu-
maíos praises him for the story and gives him a mantle for “now: but again in the morning your own rags you will be flaunting” (14.512), strongly implying that he need not believe the beggar’s story about having been a chieftain of the Achaians at Troy to get its point. Probably a simple request would have gained the same end, but both men have gotten pleasure from the story.

Despite Eumaíos’ skepticism, both of these stories have made him even readier to entertain the beggar in his cabin, and in book 15 (398–484), he signals that hospitable spirit by telling his own tale: “we two now will enjoy each other’s afflictions and sorrows / as we recall them” (15.399–400). Significantly, the epic’s clearest examples of reciprocity in the guest-host relationship appear in exchanges of stories. Moreover, like the first tale of Odysseus, Eumaíos’ tale establishes his identity as the child of a lord and explains how he happens to have come to Ithaka, through the treachery of a servant woman who led him out of his father’s house to be taken away by Phoenicians who sold him to Laërtes. As will happen to his master, Eumaíos, after all his afflictions, has ended up in a good place, as Odysseus himself says: “after suffering much, you came to the house of a kindly / man who in fact has provided you plenty for eating and drinking” (15.489–90). Such repetitions of story patterns implant them in our minds, making us sense the variations within the common overarching trajectory of human life.

Though both tellers of these stories derive from noble stock, their present identities place them in the lower classes, and in this too they feel a commonality. In the next performance session (books 17–20), the scene moves to the palace, and Odysseus as beggar confronts men who are arrogantly conscious of their nobility. One important concern of these books is to show how thoroughly the suitors and their collaborators among the servants deserve the fate they are going to suffer. So though the story Odysseus tells them at 17.419–44 shows some of the former deceptive aim, to establish a false identity, it has an equally strong “moral” intent, to challenge them to recognize the principles of xenía we discussed earlier. In begging for food, he supports his plea by telling Antínooós that he also was a prosperous man and gave freely to vagrants but that now he is down on his luck after misfortunes suffered on his travels. Antínooós’ response is to reject the example offered, repudiate the teller as a “bold-faced beggar” (17.449), and throw a stool that hits Odysseus’ right shoulder. Even the other suitors are horrified at the way Antínooós tempts fate, lest this man should be some god coming in disguise among them.

Another feature of this tale excellently shows how selected repetition advances its teller’s moral intent. Of its thirty-six lines, fifteen (17.427–41) reproduce exactly the Egyptian episode of the tale he told Eumaíos (14.258–72), which recounted the fate incurred by the men who “yielded to wanton excess” in pillaging the country: they were killed or taken slaves. The end of the story is very brief
and quite different from the end of the one he told Eumáios; but it suits Odysses' purpose here to hasten to the end. It would be hard to imagine a clearer cautionary tale for the present company of wanton revelers who are pillaging the household of the king.

Something similar happens in the brief excerpt Odysses tells Melántho, the housemaid who has been sleeping with Eurýmachos, when she scolds the "beggar." He selects only enough of the previous story to achieve his aim—six lines (19.75–80), which reproduce exactly the first six lines of the story he told the suitors (17.419–24), in which he tells of his past wealth and generosity and how it disappeared. So he explains why he is a beggar, but in the moral that follows, he admonishes the maid to beware of an equal change of fortune, the loss of her beauty, and not to anger her mistress, who might cast her out. Penelope immediately reinforces this moral by scolding the maid.

An even more important exchange of stories occurs just afterward, when Penelope finally talks to the beggar, as she has requested. This first meeting of man and wife after almost twenty years of separation is charged with drama, and Odysses heightens it by his seeming reluctance to tell his story lest he be reproached for wine-soaked weeping (19.115–22). So Penelope begins with her story of sorrows, its centerpiece being the account of how she put off the suitors by weeping and unwrapping a great shroud, repeated line-for-line from Antínoös' telling in book 2 (19.139–56 echo 2.94–110, with some minor changes). Earlier, the story was aimed at blaming Penelope, but here it demonstrates her crafty fidelity to her husband—the man who is listening—and explains why now, having been caught at her evasion, she must marry.

In response, the "beggar" tells her a fiction whose main thrust is to assert his personal knowledge of Odysses and to assure her that he is returning. He gives himself a Cretan origin again, but here a more exalted one—he says he is Aithon, the brother of King Idómeneus himself. He tells her that he met Odysses when the latter was blown off course on his way to Troy. This part of his story ends with Odysses' ships parting for Troy, and Penelope's response is the twofold one we have encountered before with Eumáios: she is so moved that she dissolves in tears, but she distrusts the story's truthfulness and decides to test the storyteller. Odysses easily answers her questions about what clothes the "beggar" saw her husband wearing and about his comrades; having won her trust, he can reassure her about Odysses' return. In doing so, he tells the story he purports to have heard about Odysses, mentioning the incident involving the cows of the sun god, the destruction of his comrades at sea, and his visit with the Phaiákians, all facts, but going on to the fictions he told Eumáios about how Odysses went to Thesprotia and Dodóna. Even for us, "So did the numerous falsehoods he told seem like a true story" (19.203) that the boundary between "truth" and "false-
hood” becomes blurred. We see Odysseus in disguise mingling factual and invented happenings as if both to evade and to invite detection and focusing not on his fictional persona’s life but on that of Odysseus. It is no wonder that some readers have thought that Penelope begins to recognize Odysseus at about this time. Our sense of how fictions are made and of what they accomplish has become very complex.

Formally, both Penelope’s and Odysseus’ stories in book 19 are recapitulations, for they each incorporate earlier material in a new context, with enriched meanings. This is even more the case with the stories told in the final performance session (books 21–24). After Odysseus wins the contest by stringing his bow and shooting an arrow through the axes, then slaughters the suitors, his reunion with Penelope is partly consummated by the story he tells of his travels in response to a very brief summary of her tribulations, in indirect discourse (23.302–5)—a full account is hardly needed after her talk with the “beggar” in book 19. Odysseus’ longer story (23.310–41), also a summary in indirect discourse, though it covers his whole voyage, invites two quite opposed interpretations. For some people, it may indeed be merely a summary: its omission of details simply shows that the narrator does not feel the need to go over the ground carefully, and if we were hearing Odysseus’ own words, we would see him as quite open in letting Penelope know what happened. Others, however, would say that even as a summary, this recapitulation of Odysseus’ adventures is highly selective, unlike the frank confession he made to the Phaiákians, and is tailored for this occasion and listener just as much as his outright fictions have been. The summary gives no hint of the disastrous consequences of his very first raid, the death of many men—on which the original story enlarges far more than on anything that could be called conquest—but says, “he began how first he had quelled the Kikonians” (23.310). There is no word of his foolishness in approaching the Cyclopes, but he tells “all that the Cyclopes had done, then how he [Odysseus] had taken revenge on / him” (23.312–13), omitting also the calamitous outcome of that revenge, the deadly wrath of Poseidon. The mention of the Atolos episode leaves out Odysseus’ own sleep, which allowed his comrades to free the winds; it says, rather, that he “was not destined as yet to arrive in his own dear / fatherland” (23.315–16). As to the female figures he met on his voyage, about the goddess in whose charms he remained for a year, he apparently lets Penelope know only “the guile and the many devices of Circe” (23.321), while he goes into more detail about Kalýpsø, closely quoting three significant lines:

... how he had reached the Ogygian isle and Kalýpsø the nymph who kept on holding him fast—she wanted to make him her husband—
there in her spacious cavern, and gave him nurture, and told him
she would make him immortal and ageless forever and ever;
nevertheless, she never persuaded the heart in his bosom . . .

(23.333–37; cf. 7.257–58, 9.33)

As to the Phaiákians, the summary devotes three lines (23.339–41) to the honor
“as if he were a god” and the gifts they gave him—there is not a word about the
two women on whose gracious sympathy depended the homecoming of a man
reduced to total nudity. Many listeners or readers may conclude that Odysseus
of many devices, the accomplished storyteller, knows and says what is best suited
to a returned husband’s purpose, especially in emphasizing that he resisted one
goddess’s lavish promises rather than confessing that he willingly stayed with an-
other. He might do this not so much because he is devious but because he does
not want to cause his dear wife useless pain. Since we have been primed by his
own earlier fictions to notice how the selection of details is crucial to a story’s
meaning, we might not be unjustified in thinking that this summary points to
Odysseus’ desire to present himself in the best possible light, here as in any
episode when his behavior was not such as to rouse admiration. But we remain
unsure that this brief account fairly represents “all” that Odysseus said during
that long night’s narration. Perhaps the only certain conclusion to be drawn con-
cerns Homer’s mastery in making this story a sort of mirror, stimulating us to
look into our own hearts for what we prize in the marriage bond and how best
to maintain it—total frankness whatever the cost or tactful forgetfulness of
painful episodes.

In the final book, which begins with a recapitulation of the scene in Hades’ do-
main in book 11—this time it is the spirits of the suitors who go there—we hear
other stories, some of them also restatements. Responding to Achilles’ commis-
eration over Agamemnon’s “death most shameful,” the latter tells an extended tale
(24.35–94) of the glorious burial of Achilles, almost as if he were answering that
hero’s earlier repudiation of the idea that glory should be a consolation for being
no longer alive (11.482–91), but even more as a contrast with his own ignomin-
ious slaughter, explicitly drawing the comparison again at the end of his story. In
another clear counterpoint to Agamemnon’s shame, the shade of the suitor Am-
phimédon tells of the events leading up to the slaughter of the suitors. In the
course of his tale, he recapitulates once more, line for line, the story of Penelope’s
ruse to put off the suitors by weaving and unweaving the shroud (24.128–48).
Again, the new context gives it new resonance, for now it has its proper place in
the whole narrative of resourcefulness that led to the suitors’ punishment, and it
demonstrates Penelope’s equal participation in the overall achievement. This
judgment is highlighted even by the suitor’s own underestimation of her, for at
24.167, he attributes the plan of the contest with the bow and axes to Odysseus, while we know that it was her own idea and that Odysseus merely took advantage of it. After such a tale, Agamemnon has even more reason to congratulate Odysseus on his wife, in comparison with his own: here, he does not so much re-capitulate his earlier account as evoke it vividly, at 24.199–202, and he gives Penelope the highest accolade possible for a singer of tales.

And so the renown of her virtue
never will die; about constant Penelope will the immortals
make for the people on earth a delightful song in her honor.  

(24.196–98)

The song he mentions, it need hardly be said, is the great epic to which we have been listening. It is hard to think of an ancient prediction that has been more completely realized than this one.

But Penelope is not the last person with whom Odysseus has been anticipating reunion; in his encounter with his aged father, we see one of the most moving occurrences of storytelling in the epic. Odysseus chooses deliberately, but without any possible justification, to test the father who has been so grieved by his absence. Indeed, we can see his pleasure in fraudulent tales working itself out in this most inappropriate setting, for he seems to enjoy the approach to his self-revelation. After criticizing the old man’s dilapidated condition, he says (24.266–79) that he once met a man who claimed to be the son of Laërtes. Then, when his sorrowful father questions him, he tells how he himself has been driven to Ithaca from his native land, Sikania, and describes the good omens he had seen when Odysseus had departed from there five years ago. Far from preparing his father for the truth, this tale causes an entirely unnecessary emotional crisis: what are good omens against the five years since Odysseus left, presumably for home? The resulting “black cloud of distress” that “enshrouded his father” (24.315) cuts through even Odysseus’ self-control, and he leaps up, embraces his father, and reveals himself. True to his lineage, his father demands tokens, which Odysseus easily provides. But through the ensuing joy, we cannot forget how Odysseus has given unseasonable rein to his love of shaping a response by concocting a story. Unlike us, he is a hero beloved of the gods; but like us, he is still a human being who can too easily yield to his impulses.

Looking at these stories has shown us how conscious our performer, “Homer,” was of the way fiction works and of how people make use of it. Thus we can be even surer that his management of the complex material in his larger performance, our Odyssey, is equally self-conscious and skillful. Like Odysseus in his tales, he draws on story materials offered by the tradition which has shaped him, but he uses them for ends that are his own, transcending the tradition even
as he remains rooted in it. The more we look at the _Odyssey_ as a whole, the more we see how the bardic tradition supported a work of enormous and unique power, one whose performance, first by singers and then in written form, became itself a major foundation of the great tradition of storytelling in the Western world.

CONCLUSION

This introduction has dwelt on the particular features of the _Odyssey_ that has come down to us, to emphasize the ways it may have been distinctive as a performance within its tradition. The traditional elements that this _Odyssey_ brings to the foreground include the rituals and ideology of guest-friendship; issues connected with women (gender, power relations, erotic bonding); the way stories can tell the truth, can be manipulated to bring about some effect, or both; the disruption to the social order caused by a leader’s absence and an undisciplined group’s presumptuous ambitions; and the relations among persons at different social levels (beggars, servants, farmers, aristocrats, kings). Though we have necessarily been selective in highlighting how the poetic artistry of the _Odyssey_ presents these problems, readers who look more closely at this particular performance of a traditional tale will see how it puts these issues at the core of the epic.

The translation in this book, which attempts to convey the traditional language of Homer as far as a strict English hexameter can do so, provides the readers of the English Homer with a way to explore these topics on their own beyond this introduction. As the next introductory essay shows in some detail, the translator has tried to make more visible the way repetition brings out these significant features of this performance of an early Greek narrative. A particular performance is as much a part of the tradition as an individual sentence is a part of its language. What distinguishes sentences as good or bad is not that they are “against” their language but that the language has been made into something so fine as to be itself worthy of note. So too, if we imagine ourselves as audiences at performances of the _Odyssey_, we can scarcely help feeling that the tradition has bodied forth in this singer and this song a stunning exemplar. To make that imaginative leap is both rational and inspiring, whether we subscribe to an oral dictated text or to an evolutionary development. The text that you are about to read is both traditional and extraordinary at the same time. To read the _Odyssey_, we too must use _mētis_ (cunning intelligence), like that of its hero, disguising the twenty-first-century self to participate in the best fiction we have for an oral performance, so that we can sit by the hearth and hear the singer sing.