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FEDERAL AID UNDER ESEA
STATE PLAN - TITLE II

13

The Odyssey: its Shape and Character

THE *Odyssey*, like the *Iliad*, begins with an invocation to the Muse:

Tell, Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered far indeed, when he had sacked the holy citadel of Troy. He saw the cities of many men and knew their minds, and many were the sorrows which he suffered in his spirit on the sea, when he tried to win his own life and the return of his companions. But not even so, for all his desire, did he save his companions; for they were destroyed by their own insolence, when they ate the cattle of the Sun Hyperion; and he robbed them of the day of their return. From what point you will, goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak to us also. (1.1-10)

This presents several surprises. Unlike Achilles at the start of the *Iliad*, the hero of the *Odyssey* is not named but called 'the man of many devices', which indicates that his story is familiar, and this is confirmed by the last words when the muse is asked to 'speak to us also'. But the familiar story is outlined in a peculiar way. The fantastic adventures of Odysseus are inadequately, almost deceptively, suggested in the reference to cities and minds; almost the only city seen by him is the capital of Phaeacia, and minds are not what he marks in the Cyclops and other monsters. Next, the emphasis on his struggle to save his own life is fair enough and anticipates some of his bravest efforts, but he hardly does so much to secure the return of his comrades. He looks after them, but he takes risks with their lives, and more than once he is the cause of

their loss. Finally, not a word is said about the Suitors and the vengeance on them. They occupy more than half the poem and provide its central theme. The opening lines of the *Odyssey* are much less apt and less relevant than those of the *Iliad*.

Odysseus must have been the subject of many different stories, some of which survive outside the *Odyssey*, and even of the more constant stories there were variations, as we can see from the Homeric text. When Homer announces his theme at the start, he assumes that much will be known about Odysseus, and the special surprises which he has in store are not of the kind to be publicised now. It is enough that he should refer vaguely to the wanderings and the sufferings of Odysseus and that he should hint at his ultimate return home. It is more striking that he makes such a point of the comrades and their untoward doom, and this is more than a passing whim. One of the chief features of the *Odyssey* is that at the crisis of his fortunes Odysseus has to act alone. Calypso can do little to help him, and on Ithaca he has to find what support he can, first from Eumaeus and then from Telemachus. Therefore his comrades must be disposed of, and their eating of the cattle of the sun meets a real need in the story. Because of this Odysseus' last ship is wrecked, and he himself is cast up on Calypso's island. Homer does not actually give false clues, but his clues are a little delusive. His aim is to keep his audience guessing about how he will treat a familiar mass of stories, which none the less have to be selected and remodelled to suit his own taste.

The material of the *Odyssey* differs greatly from that of the *Iliad* and gives it a different character. While the *Iliad* tells of the 'glorious doings of men' and is heroic in the sense that heroes struggle against other heroes, the *Odyssey* uses a less specific and less exalted material. Its stories are ultimately fairy-tales or folk-tales, and are unheroic in the sense that the unquestionable hero Odysseus is faced not by his equals but by his inferiors or by monsters. In its own compass it displays two kinds of narrative. Books 1-4 and 13-24 tell the age-old tale of the Wanderer's Return and his vengeance on the Suitors who devour his substance

and try to marry his wife. In this there is not much fantasy or marvel. Instead we find what 'Longinus' calls 'a comedy of manners' (*On the Sublime* 9.15). By this he means that it is concerned with the behaviour of human beings at a familiar and not very exalted level, as he himself knew it in the comedies of Menander. So far as it goes, this is fair enough, as is also his judgment on Books v-xii, in which he speaks of 'a fancy roving in the fabulous and incredible' (*ibid.* 9.13). The two parts differ greatly in matter, scale, temper and outlook. The second consists of stories so ancient that they seem to have been polished and perfected by constant telling, while the first class, which deals with stories hardly less ancient but of a different kind, has a less confident and less accomplished, even more experimental and more tentative, air.

The *Odyssey* serves in some sense as a sequel to the *Iliad*. No doubt there were many such sequels, especially in the creative heyday of oral song. The tale of Troy had many consequences, and among these were the adventures of Odysseus. In time he became the chief of the surviving heroes, and his return the most famous of many. Once a figure becomes known for certain qualities, appropriate adventures, with which he may originally have had no connexion, are attached to him and marked with his personal imprint. Odysseus seems from the start to have been 'wily' and 'much-enduring', and stories which turned on wiliness or endurance were annexed to him. The relation of the *Odyssey* to the *Iliad* is obvious throughout. The past in retrospect is seen to have been disastrous, the story of 'evil Ilium not to be named' (19.260, 597; 23.19), words which do not occur in the *Iliad* and suggest a shift of attitude towards the Trojan War. At the start of the *Odyssey*, when the gods discuss the fate of Odysseus as he languishes on Calypso's island, they turn at once to the fate of his old comrade, Agamemnon, who has been murdered by his wife and her lover (1.35 ff.), and this broaches the topic of what happens to the heroes of Troy. The audience knows all about the Trojan War and can take any reference to it. So now it lies in the background as they hear about Odysseus and Ithaca.

In the *Odyssey* certain characters appear who have played a substantial part in the *Iliad* but need not necessarily play any part in the return of Odysseus. When Telemachus sails off to find news of his father, he visits first Nestor at Pylos and then Menelaus and Helen at Sparta. Nestor is just the same as in the *Iliad*, garrulous, generous, helpful, even wise. Actually he contributes very little to Telemachus' knowledge of his father, and Homer shows a flicker of playful malice when Telemachus, eager to embark on his ship at Pylos and get home, decides to do so without seeing Nestor, since this would waste a lot of time (15.199-201), and sends the young Peisistratus to fix things with him. Menelaus is a less marked personality than Nestor, but he shows the kingly qualities which we expect from him, and especially loyalty to the son of his old friend Odysseus. More striking is Helen, who makes only a few appearances in the *Iliad* but in all of them reveals the pathos of her doom and her desire to escape from it. Her capacity for affection is clear from what she says to Priam (iii 172), to Hector in his lifetime (vi 344 ff.) and about him after his death (xxiv 762 ff.). The whole adventure with Paris has been a sorrow and a disaster for her, but she has not been able to avoid it (iii 399 ff.). Now she is back with Menelaus at Sparta, happy and at peace. She recalls without distress episodes from the war, but the scope of her character is revealed when she sees that Menelaus and his guests are distressing themselves with reminiscences, and mixes a drug which she has brought from Egypt and which deadens pain and sorrow (4.219 ff.). She has learned from her sufferings, and the tenderness which is already hers in the *Iliad* is turned to new purposes.

Odysseus himself in the *Odyssey* is an enlarged and elaborated version of what he is in the *Iliad*. His main qualities there are cunning and endurance. He keeps his head when others lose theirs, notably after Agamemnon's ill-judged test of the army's morale (ii 166 ff.). He is throughout a notable leader, resourceful and brave. In the *Odyssey*, where he is far longer on the stage, some of his qualities are turned in new directions. First, his cunning is tested in unfamiliar conditions, as in the cave of the Cyclops,

where he takes on some qualities of a folk-hero and sustains them quite convincingly. Secondly, his need for cunning is enforced by his own recklessness. It is his fault that he is trapped in the cave of the Cyclops, since he has insisted on entering it, and equally it is his fault that he seeks out Circe's dwelling by himself. Thirdly, his abundant appetites, known from his taste for food and drink in the *Iliad*, are extended in the *Odyssey* to living with Circe and with Calypso, not perhaps in entire satisfaction but still competently. Lastly, the warrior of the *Iliad* becomes the returned wanderer of the *Odyssey* and needs all his powers of decision, command and improvisation. These he amply displays. The man who strikes Thersites and kills Dolon is not likely to spare the Suitors or the servants, male and female, who have worked for them. Odysseus in the *Odyssey* is a magnified version of Odysseus in the *Iliad*, but he remains substantially the same man and recognizable in his main being.

Finally, there are in the *Odyssey* two passages where Homer presents ghosts of the dead, and each includes some chief figures of the *Iliad*. At 11.385-567 Odysseus, at the end of the world, summons ghosts with an offering of blood, and among those who appear are Agamemnon, Achilles and Aias. All three have died since the end of the *Iliad*. Agamemnon has been murdered by his wife, in marked contrast with Odysseus, whose faithful Penelope holds out bravely against the Suitors. His story emphasizes the dangers that await those who return from Troy, but sheds no new light on his personality. Aias, in a brief appearance, adds a new dimension to his simple character in the *Iliad*, for in the interval he has killed himself because his honour has been wounded by Odysseus. Odysseus does his best to appease him, but Aias takes no notice and makes no answer. The most striking figure is Achilles, for his words complement by contrast what he says in Book ix when momentarily he rejects the heroic life. Now he knows what he has lost, for he would rather 'work on the land as the serf of a man with no property, with no great means of life, than reign over all the perished dead' (11.489-91). His only consolation is to know that his son Neoptolemus is already a

stout warrior (11.540). These three ghosts form a link with the *Iliad*, and when Odysseus speaks to them he speaks to his peers, as he does nowhere else in the *Odyssey*.

More mysterious is 24.1-204, where the ghosts of the Suitors are escorted by Hermes to the land of the dead and met by some heroes of the *Iliad*, notably Achilles and Agamemnon. Though the passage is thought to be a later addition, at least it has a part in the whole plan of the *Odyssey*. Achilles hears of his own death and funeral from Agamemnon (24.36 ff.); at it the Muses sang and the ceremony is a fitting climax to a heroic life. To this the Suitors present a complete antithesis. Their ignominious deaths are the proper end to their squalid careers. In this passage the poet seems to have aimed at more than one effect. First, when he makes Agamemnon say that Odysseus is indeed fortunate to have a wife like Penelope (24.192 ff.) and very unlike Clytaemnestra, he emphasizes a subsidiary theme of the *Odyssey*, but does not gain much by it. Secondly, the parade of the ghosts of Troy, in which Patroclus, Aias and Antilochus are named as well as Achilles and Agamemnon (24.16-17), provides a final curtain for great figures of the *Iliad* and of the heroic age. Their place here recalls them at the end of a long story, and the renewed attention paid to them brings various themes together in a last bow. Thirdly, there is a real contrast between the death and glory of Achilles, immortalized in song, and the miserable careers of the Suitors, who are at the other extreme from the true nobility of the heroic ideal. Whoever composed this passage, must have felt that the *Odyssey* must be brought into contact with the *Iliad*, and this he did by stressing what real heroes are.

When we look at the structure of the *Odyssey*, Books 1-4 look as if they could be omitted by bards who were pressed for time and wished to plunge *in medias res* with the more thrilling adventures of Odysseus, but this does not mean that these books do not serve a dramatic purpose. In fact they serve more than one. First, they show the general plight of Ithaca and the particular plight of Penelope in the absence of Odysseus. This is indispensable to any understanding of his difficulties on his return and of

the character of the Suitors, from whom he is to exact vengeance. It is bad enough that they should harry his wife and devour his substance and corrupt his servants, but they soon put themselves brutally in the wrong by plotting the death of Telemachus. In this situation everything turns on the possible return of Odysseus. The poet shows how little is known of him, how anticipations of his return vary between irrational hope and not impossible despair. This creates the suspense at which the poet excels. It is to some extent lessened when Telemachus gets news of Odysseus from Menelaus, but it remains vague and unsubstantiated, though omens and portents suggest that something is going to happen. These books build up a growing assurance in the return of Odysseus, and incidentally introduce the other characters with whom he will be associated. The *Odyssey* can be imagined without them, but they add to its range and richness and do much to set its plot to work.

Books 1-4 do more than this. They prepare the way for much that comes later. For instance, Telemachus is cast for a large part, and is not yet ready for it. But he begins to face his responsibilities and to test his powers. His access of courage takes the Suitors by surprise (1.381-2; 2.85-6), and before long they are sufficiently afraid of him to plot his death. By this means he becomes an important participant in the action, and he gives sturdy help in the vengeance. Again, these books anticipate in their manner the dual nature of the *Odyssey*, its element of domestic comedy and its element of fable and fancy. The first is to the fore here, and has a special charm. This manner is unadventurous and unexciting, but its human normality presents a fine contrast with the gluttonous revels and gross manners of the Suitors. Against this are set the stories told by Telemachus' hosts at Sparta, which take us either back to the heroic world of Troy, as when Helen tells how she recognized Odysseus when he came disguised as a beggar to spy in Troy (4.240-64), or forward to the world of marvels, as when Menelaus tells how he tricked Proteus, the old man of the sea, into revealing the fate of Odysseus (4.351 ff.). The main notes of the *Odyssey* are struck at the start, and in due course each is taken up to make its contribution to the whole design.

The middle section of the *Odyssey*, Books 5–12, has a notably distinctive character. Though its more extravagant actions are told by Odysseus himself, the first part, his departure from Calypso and his arrival and welcome in Phaeacia, are told in the third person with an outstanding objectivity, in which Odysseus emerges in all his gifts and dominates the scene. These books provide a skilful transition to the wonders that follow. The events are not yet marvellous, nor are there any monsters. Odysseus shows his physical powers by swimming in a rough sea for two days and two nights, and his resourcefulness by winning the help of the Phaeacian royal family. Yet Phaeacia is not real in the same sense as Ithaca. The seasons allow crops all the year round; the servants in the palace are made of metal by Hephaestus; the Phaeacians hardly mingle with other peoples and are consciously proud of their singularity; unlike authentic heroes they live not for war but for dance and song. Once Odysseus has arrived and been handsomely welcomed, we are ready to hear of the wilder wonders which he is about to tell. In Phaeacia these seem less improbable than in Ithaca, and the lively entertainment in Phaeacia prepares us for what lies outside the known world. At the start we have even left the sea, but it is soon present again when Odysseus tells his tale.

Even at this stage, and still more in the narrative of Odysseus, it is clear that the poet is familiar with different versions of a tale and has to make his choice between them. This is easy enough when Odysseus meets Nausicaa. The theme of Wanderer meeting the king's daughter is old and widely spread. A less human version is known from Egypt. A man is shipwrecked on an island. He finds it rich in fruit and trees, and is royally entertained, loaded with gifts and given a safe passage home to Egypt. But his hostess is a snake, thirty ells long, and her family is like her. She treats the castaway with much kindness and courtesy; this is a primitive version of the Nausicaa story, which has not yet assumed its fully human character.¹ The episode in the *Odyssey* shows no misfits or oddities, and looks like a complete tale, but it

¹ L. Radermacher, *Die Erzählungen der Odyssee*, Vienna, 1915, pp. 38–47.

may well have grown from humble origins. What is remarkable is that while Homer hints at a story in which the Wanderer marries the Princess, the Egyptian tale suggests nothing of the kind. So the treatment of Nausicaa by Odysseus has an ancient precedent. In this case variants have been absorbed into a final version, and Homer's choice was forced upon him by Odysseus' destiny to be joined again to Penelope.

In their long and widely scattered careers such tales develop variations, and the poet has to choose between alternatives. This is very much the case with the Cyclops. As the *Odyssey* tells it, the substantial, unchanged element is that the hero and his companion are caught in the cave of a one-eyed cannibal giant, and after suffering losses in their own number blind him and escape. This story occurs in many countries and is clearly primordial. Homer knew more than one version and made his own choice. First, there is the trick by which Odysseus says that his name is 'No-man', and so when the Cyclops calls for help and says 'No-man is hurting me' (9.408), his friends go away. The trick thrives happily in other contexts, but is well in place here. To set the Cyclops among other monsters of his kind makes him more formidable and increases the danger to Odysseus; the trick saves him at a critical point. Second, the Cyclops is blinded with a stake lying in the cave which is not yet ready for use. That is why the Cyclops will not take it with him when he goes out, and Odysseus can use it to blind him. The Cyclops eats his visitors raw after breaking their heads on the floor like puppies (9.289–90). This is perhaps more bestial than to cook them first, and since there is no need for a spit, the stake takes its place. Thirdly, in the escape from the cave there is one version in which Odysseus and his companions kill the ram and the sheep, clothe themselves in their skins, and behave like them as they walk out on all fours. But the Homeric version brings advantages, notably when the ram goes out, with Odysseus under its belly, and we are simultaneously afraid that the Cyclops will catch the escapers and touched by his affectionate words to the ram. Choices between competing versions had to be made, and were, usually with good results.

The episode of Circe, which reads very easily, contains traces of competing versions. She is a witch, daughter of the sun, who lives in a stone palace among woods on an otherwise uninhabited island. This is common form, and suggests her dangerous character. In such stories the adventurer is guided to her by some chance, and behind the story in the *Odyssey* we may discern a stag who did the guiding. Odysseus meets such a stag but kills it and with some effort carries it to his companions for their supper (10.156 ff.). Then having seen the palace, he decides to send a party to investigate. He does not go himself or take the lead, but divides his crew into two companies, one of which is chosen by lot to go. This procedure creates suspense and leaves Odysseus free to take action later and remedy the evils that have befallen the first party. This party finds wolves and lions which greet it in a friendly way, and are in fact men transformed by Circe. But this is their only appearance. When the companions are turned back into men from swine, nothing is said about these earlier victims. Their function is to reveal something sinister in Circe's dwelling, and when they have done that, they are forgotten. When Odysseus' companions are turned into swine, we are expressly told that they keep their wits as before (10.240), and this is not usual in this kind of theme, where the witch tends to instil forgetfulness of former lives. We may guess why Homer does what he does. He has already dealt with the theme of forgetfulness in telling of the Lotus-eaters, who forget all about their return home (9.94-7), and the theme is not suitable for repetition. Finally, on his way to Circe Odysseus meets Hermes, who tells him of the danger ahead and gives him a plant, *moly*, to protect him from Circe's spells. The plant is carefully described, and then we hear no more. We do not know how Odysseus uses it, or how it works; what we do know is that Circe's spells have no effect on him. In these ways Homer keeps the episode of Circe simple and circumvents obstacles in the tradition.

In the passage of years a traditional theme may assume new shapes, which are so different that they are really new tales. The *Odyssey* deals twice with the ancient theme of the witch who

detains the hero on his return by making him live with her. She need not be malevolent but she hinders his desire to go home. In the *Odyssey* she appears in two quite different forms, as Circe and Calypso. If Circe, who has a ruthless, cruel side, is the Hawk, Calypso is the Concealer, who keeps Odysseus hidden on Ogygia for eight years. Both live alone on remote islands, in circumstances of some beauty. Yet, allowing for this degree of likeness, the differences are great. Circe is subdued by the superior cunning and courage of Odysseus, and after admitting her defeat, welcomes him as her lover; Calypso saves him from the sea after shipwreck and her devotion to him is complete. Circe keeps Odysseus for a year and then releases him without complaint; Calypso keeps him for eight years, hoping to make him immortal but is told by the gods to give him up, which she does unhappily but graciously. Circe at the start has a sinister glamour; there is nothing sinister in Calypso. The two are distinct and distinguishable, but we can see why both are needed. The adventure with Circe is exciting for its own sake and entirely appropriate to the hero on his wanderings; the sojourn with Calypso has much charm and beauty but lacks dramatic variety. It is needed to fill a gap in the story. After his ten years of war at Troy Odysseus is away from home for another ten years before he returns to Ithaca. By the time of his shipwreck and the loss of all his companions only ten years have passed, and the remaining eight have to be accounted for. Homer does this by confining him to Calypso's island, where nothing can be heard of him and his fate remains a mystery to his family and his friends, and is almost forgotten by the gods.

Circe begins as a malevolent witch, but once Odysseus has subdued her, she becomes his helper and shows no signs of her sinister past. She then takes up another part which may belong to her original character—she foretells the future and gives advice about it. That heroes should have this happen is common enough, but Homer seems to have been faced by two traditional characters who prophesy. Circe is one, but she insists that Odysseus should consult the other—the ghost of the seer Tiresias.

This is a very ancient theme and bears some resemblance to *Gilgamesh*, where the hero crosses the waters of death to consult Uta-Napishtim. Odysseus sails to the edge of the world and calls up the ghost of Tiresias, who says very little about the immediate future, except in warning him not to eat the cattle of the Sun in Thrinacia (11.104 ff.), but gives him a precise forecast of his last days and quiet ending (11.121ff.), with advice on the ritual that will appease Poseidon. We may perhaps assume that in earlier versions Tiresias said more than this, and that his warning about the cattle is only part of a set of warnings and forecasts. But Homer transfers these to Circe. When Odysseus comes back to her, she gives him a careful forecast of the dangers that lie before him (12.37-141). This device keeps Circe still powerful, even if she has reformed her habits, but at the cost of a lengthy prevision of what will come soon afterwards. It all happens according to plan, but lacks the element of surprise.

In Books 13-24 we are back in Ithaca and a familiar world. Yet here too the main actions are derived largely from folk-tale, and old themes exploited with novelty. At some point the Wanderer must be recognized. No doubt there were many versions of this, and the recognition need not all come at once. Homer moves through a series of recognitions, each separate and distinct, and each marking a step forward. The first is when Odysseus, transformed into a shrunken old beggar is for a short time given back his old shape and reveals himself to Telemachus (16.166 ff.). Athene makes it possible, and to that degree it is supernatural. What matters is that Odysseus must not start on his vengeance entirely alone, and his obvious companion is his son, who stays with him for the rest of the poem. The second recognition is a stroke of genius. When Odysseus arrives at his palace, he sees lying in his midden outside the gates his dog Argos, whom he trained twenty years before. The dog is neglected and full of ticks, but he wags his tail and drops his ears and struggles towards his old master (17.291-304). Odysseus knows him at once and says a few words about him, and then the dog dies 'having seen Odysseus again in the twentieth year' (17.327). This

recognition is based on affection and loyalty and conveys swiftly, and surely how Odysseus belongs to Ithaca and how deep his roots there are. The third comes when Odysseus has his feet washed by his old nurse, Euryclea. It is dark, and Penelope is sitting in the shadow not far away. The nurse recognizes a scar which Odysseus got long ago on a boar-hunt, and is on the point of crying out, when the basin of water is upset and Odysseus puts his hand on her throat and enjoins her silence (19.386 ff.). This is the most dramatic of the recognitions, and the one in which the scar, used twice elsewhere, really creates a situation. Through it the recognition by Penelope is postponed until it can be most effective. In the fourth recognition, during the fight in the hall, Odysseus reveals himself to Eumaeus, who accepts his word and, like the nurse, recognizes the scar, but without any exciting reaction (21.207 ff.). Fifth is the recognition by Penelope, and this is the most unexpected. The signs that have satisfied others do not satisfy her, and she tries to test the stranger by telling Euryclea to make a bed, but the stranger knows that Penelope and he have their own special, secret bed made out of an olive-trunk in the heart of the palace. This is highly appropriate, as Odysseus and Penelope are man and wife and the bed is an intimate sign of it. Finally, Odysseus goes off to see his old father Laertes in the country and identifies himself first by the scar (24.331 ff.) and then by knowing the details of Laertes' orchard which he helped to plant. All these recognitions have a certain simplicity. If the scar does the most work, that is perhaps because it comes from the oldest tradition, while the dog Argos, who needs no sign, looks as if he were Homer's own invention. The accumulation of six recognitions suggests that there were many variants in the tradition, and that Homer gave a subordinate purpose to some which might have been of primary importance in earlier versions.

Somewhat different from the recognitions are two events which do not reveal the identity of the Wanderer but show that he is someone remarkable. These are the stringing of the great bow which Odysseus left behind when he went to Troy (21.39), and the exhibition-shot with it through a line of axes planted in the

ground.¹ It is conceivable that in earlier versions the two events were alternative and that either of them would suffice to prove who Odysseus is. Nor must we assume that, once the bow had been strung, the slaughter of the Suitors followed immediately. The *Odyssey* finds its climax in the combination of these events, but it is possible that originally neither event served just this purpose. The stringing of the bow may have been no more than a test of the Wanderer's identity, proposed by his wife, who is still not sure of him. So the exhibition-shot may have come from some other context, as when the Suitors compete for marriage with Penelope, and even then Odysseus need not take a part. In its present place it establishes his preeminence, and leaves him with the bow in his hands as an instrument for vengeance.

When a story belongs to a cycle centred on some main point, it may not fit in easily with others in a like position. Tradition is aware of its place, and the poet may feel that he owes it some attention, but it may lead to difficulties and to some awkwardness in his main scheme. This is the case, in the *Odyssey*, with the shroud which Penelope claims to be weaving for Laertes when he dies. She tells the Suitors that when it is finished, she will make her choice among them, but every night she undoes the work of the day, until a point comes when the Suitors catch her at it and know that she is deceiving them (2.85-110). We can see the story behind this. The shroud is a device to put off a decision as long as possible, and and as such Penelope reports it to the unrecognized Odysseus (19.136 ff.). The theme is not in itself very conclusive, and the discovery of Penelope's trickery by the Suitors does not force the issue of her marriage as we might expect. There was moreover a different version, which appears when the ghost of Amphimedon says that when Penelope finished the shroud, 'in that hour an evil spirit brought Odysseus from somewhere to the border of the land' (24.146-50). This comes from the suspicious conclusion of the *Odyssey*, but its author uses good and independent material; for this is just what the trick of the shroud should have done. Homer must have known it and rejected it for his own less

¹ It is still not clear how exactly this is done.

emphatic version because he did not wish Penelope's marriage to be confused with the return of Odysseus, and because he wished this return to be both prolonged and secret.

Another slightly inconclusive theme is that of the seer Theoclymenus. When Telemachus is about to sail from Pylos, Theoclymenus suddenly appears and asks for protection, since he is guilty of murder. Telemachus takes him on board (15.256-81). On arriving in Ithaca Theoclymenus asks where he is to stay, and Telemachus, rather strangely, says with Eurymachus, who is one of the Suitors and a prominent enemy. This conveys the depressed and defeated mood of Telemachus. At this point a hawk flies overhead carrying a dove, and Theoclymenus interprets this as an omen of success, with the result that Telemachus changes his mind and gives other orders for the reception of Theoclymenus (15.525 ff.). Later, at the palace, Theoclymenus meets Penelope and tells her with full assurance that Odysseus is already in his own country and plotting evil for the Suitors (17.152-61). As a seer he knows this from the omen of the hawk and the dove. Finally, when the doom of the Suitors is near and one of them has just thrown an ox's foot at Odysseus, they are seized with a frenzy of madness, and Theoclymenus in ringing tones foresees their doom (20.345-57). It is an apocalyptic moment, but it is the last for Theoclymenus. He has done his task, which is to forecast events by augury and vision, but we suspect that in some other version he must have done more, that he may have played a more prominent part in letting Penelope know of her husband's presence or in driving the Suitors to their destruction. The element of the supernatural which he represents adds something to the story but is not fully exploited.

In these loose ends and imperfectly exploited themes we can see traces of the different variants which Homer must have known and from which he had to make his selection. But this is not the problem with the end of the *Odyssey* from 23.297 to 24.548. Here there are indeed unexpected contradictions, and there is perhaps an explanation of them. The two great Alexandrian scholars, Aristarchus and Aristophanes, regarded 23.296, 'Then they came gladly to the place of their old bed', as the 'end' or the

'limit' of the *Odyssey*. We do not know why they thought this. They may conceivably have had external evidence that some good manuscripts ended at this point, or they may have made their decision on the strength of anomalies of language and narrative after this point. We cannot dismiss their view, nor can we deny that in some ways the 'continuation' differs in some ways from the rest of the poem, not merely in linguistic solecisms but in actual episodes, like Penelope's web. It is unlikely that the main poet of the *Odyssey* composed this part, but that does not deprive it of all significance. At least it shows how the Homeric manner persisted with adaptations, and how someone felt that the end of the *Odyssey* called for some sort of epilogue.

The *Odyssey* might, in our view, have had a perfectly satisfactory end when Odysseus and Penelope go to bed at 23.296. But someone must have felt that more should be said, and we may ask what advantages, if any, were gained by adding the last passages. Odysseus gives Penelope an account of his adventures, tactfully omitting his infidelities. The audience hardly needs this, and we could assume that Penelope will get the story sooner or later. The appearance of the Suitors in Hades indicates their inferiority to the men of Troy, but not much is made of this, and what is stressed is the comparison between Clytaemnestra and Penelope, which the audience might make for itself. On the other hand the recognition of Odysseus by Laertes has a quiet charm and shows Odysseus in a playful, teasing mood. It is family poetry, and there is something to be said for making Odysseus meet his father after he has met his son and his wife. Moreover the fight between the supporters of Odysseus and the kinsmen of the Suitors indicates that the slaying was not as final as it seemed, and it may have provided a start for new adventures in which Odysseus leaves Ithaca, as he seems to have done in the *Telegony*. The continuation serves no clear single purpose, but suggests a poet who would like to prolong the story in various ways for different reasons. He may have used old material, at least in Penelope's web, and he has a gift for quiet narrative in the scene with Laertes. Otherwise we miss the swing and the strength of the main poem.

The sources of the *Odyssey* are different from those of the *Iliad* and the difference explains some of its character. If it deals with marvels and monsters, so to a smaller extent does the *Iliad*. In both poems gods interfere with the course of nature. When Aphrodite spirits Paris away from the battlefield (iii 380) or protects Aeneas (v. 315-17), it is not very different from when Athene covers Odysseus with a mist in Phaeacia (7.15) or changes his appearance to prevent him being recognized (13.430-3). Though the *Iliad* contains the remarkable scene when the horse of Achilles speaks to him, it is because Hera has for this one occasion given it a human voice (xix 407 ff.), and this is well within the power of the gods. The *Odyssey* differs when its marvels are not caused by the gods but belong to the world of legend. The wind-bag of Aeolus, the transformations of Circe, the summoning of ghosts at the end of the world, the monstrosity of Scylla, are outside human experience and do not belong to the strictly heroic world of the *Iliad*. In face of them Odysseus conducts himself heroically, as when he insists on hearing the Sirens' song but forestalls disaster by getting himself lashed to the mast (12.178-9). But the monsters which he has to face are outside both human and heroic experience.

Homer evidently saw this and tried to bring his monsters as near as possible to humanity, to relate them to it, and even in some degree to humanize them. This is certainly the case with the Cyclops, who despite his single eye, his bulk 'like a wooded peak of tall mountains' (9.190-2), and his cannibalistic gluttony, is made real by his pastoral life, by his care for his flocks, by his affection for his ram. He is hideous and horrible, but not outside comprehension. Comparable in some respects to him is the queen of the Laestrygonians. She lives in a rocky fjord, and all looks easy until the scouts of Odysseus entering her palace, 'saw a woman as big as a mountain-peak, and they hated her' (10.113). She grabs one of them and plans to make her supper of him. She is of the same loathsome breed as the Cyclops, but since he has recently received full treatment, she is deftly conveyed in a short sketch. The Sirens, despite their gift of song which lures men to death and the bones of decaying bodies round them (12.45-6), are

careful to do no more than invite Odysseus to listen to them on the latest subjects of song (12.184-92). The exception to this realism is Scylla, who is a monster among monsters, aptly and fully described, with her twelve feet, her six necks, each with a head and three rows of teeth (12.89-91); she seizes six men from the ship of Odysseus and eats them while they are still crying for help and stretching out their hands, so that Odysseus comments:

'That was the most piteous thing that I saw with my eyes of all that I suffered searching out the ways of the sea.' (12.258-9)

Scylla must be descended from tales of sea-monsters, of giant krakens and man-slaying cuttle-fish, and perhaps because she has some basis in fact Homer feels that he must describe her exactly. She is far from ordinary, and yet one small touch brings her into the compass of living things—her voice is like that of a puppy (12.86). It is quite unexpected and almost absurd, and it is just this that brings it home. The monsters of the *Odyssey* are clearly visualized. Their horror comes not from vagueness but from clearly imagined actions and the menace of a horrible death which they offer. The only approximation to them in the *Iliad* is the Chimaera:

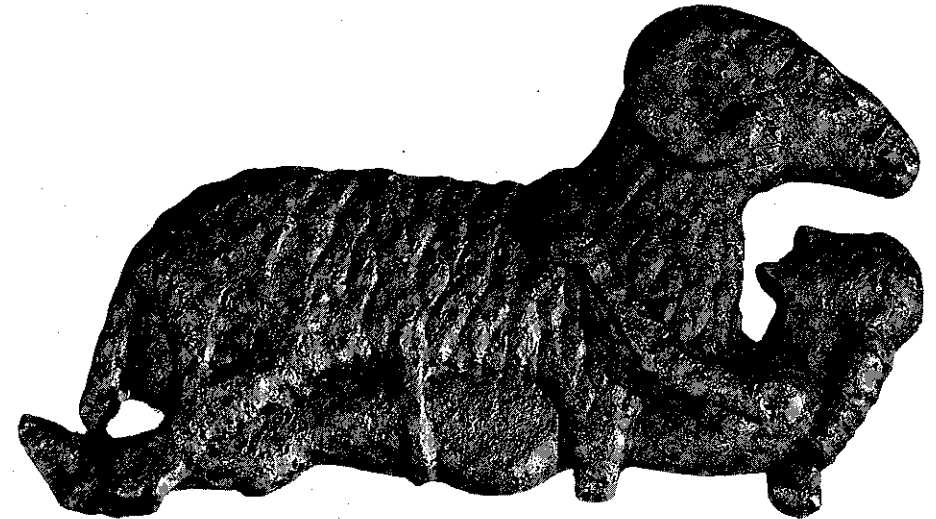
It was a divine creature, not of human race, in front a lion, in the rear a snake, and in the middle a goat, and it breathed the terrible strength of flaming fire. (vi 180-2)

Description is reduced to the barest essentials, but the Chimaera emerges clearly. This is the Homeric way of looking at monsters, and it is fully developed in the *Odyssey*. It is quite different from the shapeless horrors which the long northern night gives to its dragons.

This controlling realism informs most parts of the *Odyssey* and gives much of its special flavour. It accounts for a certain quiet poetry which is not very noticeable in the *Iliad*, but makes the *Odyssey* friendly and familiar. It finds poetry in quite unassuming and humble subjects, as when Telemachus goes to bed and Euryclea folds his clothes and hangs them on a peg (1.439-40), or his



33. Part woman, part hound, part serpent, the monster Scylla ABOVE of the *Odyssey* is shown below a crab on a silver coin of the fifth century
34. An archaic bronze of one of Odysseus' companions escaping from the cave of Polyphemos under a ram (see p. 125)



ship sets out in the evening and the wind fills the sail and the dark waves resound about the stern (2.427-9). Life in the palace, despite the disruption caused by the Suitors, follows a routine, and there is a quiet dignity in the reception of guests, the laying out of tables, the scrubbing of them with sponges. In making his raft Odysseus shows a high technical accomplishment, and the mere making has its own interest. It was this that Racine admired so greatly, when he compared its language with Latin:

Calypso lui donne encore un vilebrequin et des clous, tant Homère est exact à décrire les moindres particularités, ce qui a bonne grace dans le grec, au lieu que le latin est beaucoup plus réservé, et ne s'amuse pas à de si petites choses.¹

Yet, though the Homeric language can say anything that it likes and not lose its force, that is because the poetical vision for which it works is so direct and straightforward. It finds interest and charm everywhere, and is happy to say so.

The same kind of realism can be seen in the characters. We have marked how Odysseus is developed from his old self in the *Iliad*, but he is the only character of any complexity, and that is because legend insisted upon a more than common personality. The others go their own way, and make their individual mark. At the start Telemachus is only a boy, and conscious of it. But he wishes to assert himself, even though he lacks the authority and the experience to do so. His voyage to Pylos makes a man of him. On it he settles his own decisions, and, when he comes back to Ithaca, he is ready for action, and follows and helps his father. Penelope presents rather a special problem. Legend marked her as prudent, and she has kept the Suitors off for ten years, not merely by the stratagem of the web but by other postponements and evasions. Despite long hours of tearful lamentation for her lost husband she keeps her courage, and her sudden appearances among the Suitors reduce them to momentary acquiescence, which cannot all be ascribed to good manners. Her prudence makes her suspicious, and that is why she is so slow to recognize Odysseus as her

¹ J. Racine, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Pléiade, II pp. 755-6.

35, 36. Hardly a conversation piece between Penelope and her son Telemachus, but, framed by her loom, this drawing on a skyphos of c. 450 B.C. illustrates perfectly the legend of the faithful, patient wife (see pp. 122, 160). BELOW: from a pot of the same period, Odysseus dismays the suitors before slaying them with his bow (see p. 130)



husband. She and Telemachus are supported by the swineherd Eumaeus and the old nurse Euryclea, and though the first claim of these is their unswerving loyalty to their master, they display an innate nobility in their response to the demands made of them. The party of Odysseus on Ithaca is homogeneous in that it is held together by loyalty to him and hatred of the Suitors. It contains no very powerful personality except the great man himself, but its members are sufficiently distinctive to set him in a full perspective.

The Suitors are beyond dispute deplorable, not in the plebeian way of Thersites but as a degenerate corruption of heroes. They have a high opinion of themselves and no scruples about getting what they want. Antinous differs from Eurymachus only in being more outspokenly brutal. The others conform to type, except perhaps Amphinomus, who has some relics of decency but does not escape death because of them (22.89-94). Their deaths are deserved, as are those of the household of Odysseus who follow them. The beggar Irus, the goatherd Melanthius, the serving-woman Melanthe, begin by insulting the unrecognized Odysseus and come to suitable ends. In the Suitors it is hard not to see an embodiment of a heroic society in decay. This is the generation that did not fight at Troy, and their lack of heroic qualities fits the relatively unheroic temper of the *Odyssey*. It makes little attempt to maintain the lofty level of the *Iliad*, and the hero who holds it together is never matched by anyone of his own calibre. Even Alcinous, despite his wealth and kingly condescension, is not heroic, and some of his court, notably Laodamas and Euryalus, lack proper courtesy (8.132 ff.). This lower tone comes partly from the material of the *Odyssey*, which is concerned not with heroic prowess in war but with wild adventures and a cunning vengeance. It is significant that, when Odysseus kills the Suitors, he has every advantage over them, and though this is due to his foresight, it is not the way in which Achilles would take on an enemy.

In the *Iliad* the intermittent interventions of the gods and the frivolity of some of their actions provide a contrast to the dangers and destructiveness of heroic life; in the *Odyssey* such a contrast is

not needed, and the gods are treated with a different intention. The nearest approximation to the spirit of the Deception of Zeus is the song of Demodocus about Ares and Aphrodite (8.266-366), but its purpose is to provide relief before Odysseus starts on the tale of his adventures, and incidentally to throw light on the Phaeacians, who, having no heroic obligations or challenges, are well served by this kind of song. Otherwise the *Odyssey* treats the gods less freely than the *Iliad* and in a more calculated way. They are concerned with human actions, and the council on Olympus, which decides to do something about Odysseus, keeps an eye on such wrongdoing as the behaviour of Aegisthus (1.32-41). Poseidon is entirely justified in maintaining his wrath against Odysseus for blinding Polyphemus (1.20-1), which leads to his being wrecked on his raft, and incidentally to the ship of the Phaeacians, which takes him to Ithaca, being turned to stone (13.163-4). But apart from these special cases, the dominating part played by the gods in the *Odyssey* is the friendship between Athene and Odysseus. This recalls such occasions in the *Iliad* as when, in the panic after Agamemnon's false proposal to withdraw from Troy, Athene sets Odysseus to restore order (ii 173-82) or on night-operations keeps an eye on him (x 245, 277, 482, 497). In the *Odyssey* she is seldom far away. Both on Phaeacia and in Ithaca she is a constant helper and gives Odysseus advice and practical assistance, while in the intervals she instils confidence into his son. She even takes part in the slaughter of the Suitors by deflecting weapons aimed at Odysseus (22.256, 273) and frightening the Suitors by flashing her aegis from the roof (22.297-8). Her character as a virgin-goddess makes it impossible for her to be in love with Odysseus but she holds him in great affection and admiration. They treat each other on equal terms, as when she praises him for his cunning (13.291 ff.), or he recalls her kindness to him at Troy (13.314). The Homeric poems have no parallel to so close a companionship between a goddess and a mortal, and though later Greek literature occasionally allows such friendships, it makes much less of them than Homer does of this. It enhances the position of Odysseus as a heroic survivor in an unheroic

world. A man of this quality deserves the affection and the support of the gods.

In general the *Odyssey* lacks the sustained splendour of the *Iliad*, has fewer overwhelming moments and a less demanding conception of human worth. The slaughter of the Suitors provides a thrilling climax but lacks the profound pathos of the death of Hector, while the cold, vengeful anger of Odysseus is not comparable to the fiery, devouring passion of Achilles. All is set in a lower key, and this may be due to the nature of the subject and the traditional treatment of it. Folk-tales and fairy-tales, even tales of injured wives and revengeful husbands, need not summon the same powers as the wounded pride of Achilles or the fate of Troy. The *Odyssey* has moments of breathless excitement and moving pathos, but its normal level is less stirring and closer to ordinary experience. Even if tradition was partly responsible for setting this tone, there may be an additional reason for it in the poet's desire to compose a poem nearer to the life that he knew and to the events of every day. By combining these with impossible adventures and enthralling marvels he could set them in a new and brighter light. 'Longinus' thinks that this difference between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is due to the poet's advancing years, and he makes a good observation when he says:

Accordingly, in the *Odyssey* Homer may be compared to the setting sun, whose greatness remains without its intensity. He does not here maintain so high a level as in those poems of Ilium. His sublimities are not even sustained and free from sinking; there is not the same profusion of passions one after another, nor the supple and public style, packed with inventions drawn from real life. (*On the Sublime* 9.13)

'Longinus' assumes that both poems were composed by the same author, and that is something we shall discuss later. For the moment it is enough to assume that they have marked differences, but these can conceivably be ascribed either to a difference of kind established by tradition or to the difference of outlook and temper which a single poet may develop with the advance of years.

APPENDIX

BOOK 11 of the *Odyssey* presents problems of a special kind. Its theme, the visit of the hero to the edge of the world where he calls up the dead, is not ultimately different from the visit of Gilgamesh to Uta-Napishtim to enquire how to avoid death. A theme of this kind was specially exposed to dangers of interpolation to suit religious views, which are not strictly relevant to the story. This certainly seems to be the case with Book 11. The main structure is clear. Odysseus digs a trench and fills it with blood, which draws the ghosts. Those who drink of it regain their wits and speak to him. The first section ends with the incomparable scene between Odysseus and the ghost of his mother. Then comes a long passage, 225-332, in which a series of famous heroines appear, drink and are questioned by Odysseus. Each receives a few lively, dramatic lines, but the narrative is in the third person and Odysseus himself plays no part, while the heroines do not speak for themselves. The method of narration is quite different from what precedes and we may with reason think that the whole passage is an addition, which has nothing to do with Odysseus but profits from the presence of ghosts to tell some short biographies in a Hesiodic manner. After it there is an interval, in which Alcinous questions Odysseus (11.333-76), and then Odysseus resumes his tale in his first manner in a series of interviews with famous ghosts (*ibid.* 377-567), ending dramatically with the silence of the injured Aias. This is a good end to the heroes, and we would be happy if the passage stopped here. But in 568-629 the poet tells how Odysseus sees first Minos, judging the quarrels of the dead, and Orion, and then the three great sinners, Tityus, Tantalus, and Sisyphus, suffering their punishments. Since Odysseus is above the earth, there is a real and flagrant contradiction, for it presupposes that Odysseus is in Hades and sees what is there. These sinners do not belong to the Homeric world, but to the world of religious reform and speculation in the sixth century, and we can well understand that some reformer got the lines into the *Odyssey*

when its text was neither settled nor secure. It is odd that they begin with Orion, 572-5, who is seen hunting, but is not a great sinner, and end with Heracles, 601-27, who ought to be on Olympus but is here represented by a phantom. It is hard to surmise why these two figures precede and follow the sinners, but the whole interpolation is so inept that we can only lay the blame for it on some poet who wished to bring the underworld up to date.