

## THE NARRATIVE “OPENINGS” IN THE *ODYSSEY*

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Opening” is one of those messy terms that mean too many things. This is because it is a metaphor with deep roots in ordinary language: she gave me an opening, opening a can of worms, open hostility, open arms, open mike, open book. Then there are the further nuances created by the opposition between open and closed: openhanded, close-fisted; open-mouthed, close-mouthed; open-ended, conclusive. Open and shut case. They blew the case wide open.

So what do I mean by the “openings” in my title? When literary critics try to emulate the so-called hard sciences by limiting the meanings of terms for the sake of precision, we sometimes find ourselves in the situation of Menelaus trying to pin down Proteus. Even ordinary language, as the linguists have taught us, operates according to what *we* can’t help thinking of as the literary principles of metaphor and metonymy. And the literary genres we tend to study positively revel in the layered meanings of language. So rather than limit my definition from the beginning, I have deliberately kept it vague to accommodate a range of observations about the themes and structure of the *Odyssey*. Later in this paper, I will focus on a more technical sense of the term and explore the implications of one such “opening” in the narrative fabric.

I was emboldened to open up my topic in this way by two specific real-life “openings”: a semester of leave in the spring of 2000 and Jack Peradotto’s retirement, in honor of which these papers were first composed. No matter how hard one works while on leave, it has a different feel to it because, as we say, “our time is our own.” In this sense, it can be seen as a foretaste of retirement, of what we should be able to do when all the pressures of scheduling and earning and credentialing are removed. Of course there is an element of fantasy in this anticipation since other kinds of

realities will certainly encroach on the dream of freedom; yet it is a necessary fantasy and one with real consequences in the ways we think about the world. There is a reason why our word “scholarship” is derived ultimately from σχολή, “leisure.” So I am grateful to Jack for providing the occasion for these reflections and wish him the prospect of new openings in the days ahead.

In fact Jack has provided more than just the occasion for this talk. Like other contributors to this volume, he has “opened” specific new theoretical vistas on the *Odyssey*. His book, *Man in the Middle Voice*, is an exploration of the opposing tendencies in the poem that he calls “centripetal” and “centrifugal”—the first closing down or limiting the play of meaning by invoking the authority of social and divine hierarchies and the “ends” they impose, the second celebrating various forms of escape from these constraints. Jack’s emphasis was clearly on the second, on what he called at one point the “relative freedom [of literary narrative] to fashion and entertain alternative versions of ‘the world’” (1990.30). Surely freedom, relative though it must be, is one of the things we mean by “opening” and one of the values we associate with this property of a text.

By contrast, my own work on the *Odyssey* has tended to emphasize the redundancy in its narrative patterns, a redundancy that can be seen as “closing down” certain possibilities and limiting the freedom of both characters and audiences. I have not changed my mind about the ways in which I see the *Odyssey* as authorizing and even glamorizing certain forms of hierarchy, including gender hierarchy, but perhaps because of the occasion, and inspired by a spark of rebellion against the forces of determinacy, I have chosen to emphasize the openings this time. The fact that the same person can see different and even opposing values in the work at different times is testimony to the active role of the audience in making meaning out of a text—and this activity is in itself one of the most important openings that literature gives us.

The present paper, then, surveys a number of openings and indeterminacies detectable in the *Odyssey*: first in its subject matter and then in specific features of its narrative structure. I should add that, like Peradotto, I am always interested in the relationship between narrative and ideology, so the openings I see are not just structural but have ideological implications—even if we choose at times to ignore them.

The *Odyssey* describes a journey. To be sure, it is a journey with a goal, and when the hero is kept too long from that goal he feels distinctly “unfree,” as when he sits weeping on the shore of Calypso’s island. But the

vicissitudes of a journey are unpredictable. Thus, at each landfall, Odysseus wonders what sort of people live there and what kind of reception they will give him. A journey is episodic: the episodes succeed one another, for the most part, without the relation of cause and effect. Aristotle, who condemned the episodic plot as inferior, was anxious to exonerate Homer on this score and emphasized the *Odyssey's* unity of action (*Poetics* 8). And, in fact, the Wanderings of Odysseus are retold with hindsight, not just that of the epic narrator but of Odysseus himself. To this extent, they are "closed down" or, at least, framed. Yet even when the hero reaches Ithaca, he fails to recognize it and repeats the question about the inhabitants that he has asked at earlier landfalls: "What sort of people is it whose land I have come to?" (13.200–02 = 6.119–21 [Phaeacians] = 9.174–76 [Cyclopes]; cf. 9.88–89 [Lotus-Eaters] = 10.100–01 [Laestrygonians]). The question is appropriate, for although he is at home, he cannot be certain of his reception, any more than he could abroad. Until Athena dispels the mist she has shed over the landscape, he sees home with the eyes of the traveler, the stranger. Not only does it look different; it is assimilated to the indefinite sequence of "strange" places he has already explored.<sup>1</sup>

Nor is the journey just ended to be his last journey. As instructed by Tiresias, he will have to travel inland until he meets people who do not know the sea. Peradotto's discussion in *Man in the Middle Voice* (1990.63–80) of this journey foretold makes a strong case for it as a genuine opening in the narrative structure of the poem, since its outcome is never reported. Although Tiresias seems to imply that the hero will return home to make sacrifice to all the gods (11.132–34), the end of the prophecy is vague, involving a "gentle death" to come "from the sea" (or is it "away from the sea"?) when Odysseus is very old (11.134–37). We know from accounts of the lost *Telegony*, assigned to the early sixth century and possibly representing older traditions, that long before Dante or Tennyson there was the impulse to prolong the story of Odysseus simply by extending his travels. Clearly this impulse is rooted in the epic itself: in one of his own lying tales,

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1 Its inhabitants include some of both the kinds juxtaposed (as if mutually incompatible) in the formula ἦ ῥ' οἳ γ' ὑβρισταί τε καὶ ἄγριοι οὐδὲ δίκαιοι, / ἦε φιλόξενοι καὶ σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεουδής; ("Are they arrogant and savage, with no sense of right, or friendly to strangers and god-fearing?" [my translation]). The suitors are notoriously guilty of ὑβρις (e.g., 1.227 and 368, 24.282), while Penelope is compared to a king who is θεουδής (19.109), and Eumaeus, though never called φιλόξενος, is clearly a model host (14.56–58).

Odysseus describes himself as having left home again after returning from the Trojan War out of sheer restlessness and desire for gain (14.240–47).

A traveler crosses cultural as well as geographic borders and “learns the minds of many.” This exchange can work in two directions if the parties are open to it. Tiresias tells Odysseus to take an oar on his shoulder and walk until he finds a people so ignorant of the sea that they will mistake the oar for a winnowing fan. This striking detail of the prophecy describes the differences between peoples based on their frame of reference: their way of classifying and naming things, of organizing their world. Tiresias would make Odysseus a kind of ambassador for Poseidon, an ambassador who will “open up” a new perspective for the inland people by introducing them to a god—and a technology—they do not know. Of course there is always the danger that travelers will simply impose their own categories on others. If they do so, however, they may face dangers in their turn, as Odysseus learns when, after sizing up Goat Island from the viewpoint of a would-be colonizer, he meets with a native who shares none of his values or norms. The inclusion of Polyphemus’s speeches to his ram (9.447–60) and to Odysseus (9.507–21) force us to consider the hero, however temporarily, from a Cyclopean perspective. Thus the indefinite extension of the physical journey is doubled by the indefinite variability of cultural norms encountered by the traveler.

A successful traveler is ipso facto a survivor. The emphasis on survival is a third feature of the *Odyssey* that suggests a deliberate refusal of closure. Central to the Wanderings is the journey to the dead and back, which dramatizes the hero’s survival as a distinct heroic exploit comparable to a labor of Heracles. The greatest hero of the Iliadic tradition, Achilles, is brought in to contrast the value of survival with the value of his own static *kleos*—the fixed *kleos* of the dead. In characteristically extreme terms, this Achilles prefers survival in the meanest possible conditions to lordship over the dead. And indeed Odysseus must be willing to “lower” himself, to assume the identity of a beggar—an even more marginal figure than the laborer whom Achilles says he envies—for the sake of survival and to take the suitors by surprise. In narrative terms, the ultimate condition of continued action is continued life.<sup>2</sup> But as the example of Menelaus (in some ways

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2 Of course it is possible to imagine life continuing beyond the grave, but this is always on the analogy of earthly life. It is striking that most literary visions of the afterlife do not imagine the souls as embarking on new adventures there but as reliving some essence of their earthly lives. The exceptions are those authors who, like Plato or Vergil, see the souls as destined for reincarnation.

Achilles' opposite) shows, mere continuity of life is not enough to avoid immobility. Thus each of Odysseus's adventures ends with his *escape*, whether from the threat of destruction or from the more insidious threat of comfortable stasis. Odysseus's choice to leave Calypso is not just a choice of mortality over immortality but of action over inaction.

A fourth and related form of openness, also identified by Peradotto, is the namelessness Odysseus is willing to assume, epitomized by his use of the name Outis in the Cyclops's cave. Outis is the extreme case, the absence of naming as the ultimate disguise—a kind of vanishing act. But Odysseus is always reluctant to reveal his name, to "show his hand." By refusing to define or place himself, he keeps his own options open while denying others the forms of control over him that naming can confer.<sup>3</sup> He even makes himself a stranger to those who should be his intimates. As Pietro Pucci has noted (1998.22), this deferral of naming is thematized by the epic narrator, who withholds his hero's name at the very opening of the poem, replacing it by that pregnant phrase, "the man of many turns."

The hero is not just reluctant to name himself but willing to assume false identities and to elaborate alternative stories about his past. This, too, can be a defensive strategy designed to draw others out by eliciting their reactions to a hypothetical self. But it can also, or at the same time, be a form of play, as the unnecessary length of the false tales suggests. And it overlaps with the activity of the epic poet in important ways. As Bruce Loudon has recently pointed out (1999.57), the longest of the false tales—to Eumaeus at 14.191–359—is introduced, like Odysseus's tale to the Phaeacians, by an appreciation of the leisure and abundant food and wine that provide opportunities for spinning out a tale at length.<sup>4</sup> Yet one performance takes place in the palace of a king and the other in a swineherd's hut. Loudon suggests (1999.65) that this parallel should alert us to the possibility of a range of social contexts and audiences for Homeric poetry, since both Alcinous and Eumaeus—and only they in the *Odyssey* we have—compare Odysseus to a skilled bard. Certainly the false tales are carefully adapted to their audiences, as Odysseus selects or invents details to evoke sympathy or to suggest correspondences between his own experience and his interlocutor's. This

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3 The most salient and protracted example is the withholding of his name in Scheria (Books 6–8), but Circe and even the suitors are obliged to guess his identity from his actions (10.330, 22.45); he does not name himself to them. One of Vergil's most effective ways of suggesting Aeneas's distinctiveness in scenes based on Odyssean prototypes is to make him identify himself unbidden (e.g., *Aeneid* 1.378, 595–96).

4 Cf. *Odyssey* 14.193–97 and 9.5–11.

flexibility of the “singer of tales,” and of his hero, is a potentially radical opening in both the narrative fabric and its ideological underpinnings. In particular, the fact that the hero triumphs not once but several times by making himself a “nobody”—by withholding his name, giving a false name, or lowering his apparent status—suggests not just that anonymity is powerful, but that the “lower orders” may have a kind of power by virtue of their anonymity, their invisibility. Within the *Odyssey* we have, this opening is contained by Odysseus’s resumption of power and by his portrayal as a benevolent king who rewards his loyal servants according to their deserts. It is also important to note that he rewards not those who were maneuvering for higher status in his absence, like Melanthius or Melanthe, but those who put their master’s interests first. Perhaps the very harshness of the punishment dealt out to Melanthius and the slave women is an index of the danger they represent to the social order.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the *Odyssey*, in contrast to the *Iliad*, admits the possibility of both upward and downward social mobility. And by casting its hero in the role of beggar, as Peter Rose has pointed out, it portrays the insolent aristocratic suitors “not in straightforward contrast to their social, economic, political superior, the king, but from the perspective of the powerless, the dispossessed, the humiliated victims of their arrogance” (1992.106).<sup>6</sup>

One more source of openness in the subject matter of the *Odyssey* is its inclusion of fantastic and magical elements: one-eyed giants, ships that think for themselves, and a goddess who turns men into pigs. Fantasy and magic suspend altogether the laws of probability and necessity, Aristotle’s εἰκός and ἀνάγκη. To a certain extent, these marvels are cordoned off within the *Odyssey* by being restricted to the Wanderings.<sup>7</sup> The false versions of his

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5 In the account of his own past, Eumaeus includes the fact that his slave nurse, who used him as the “fare” for her own passage to freedom, died on the journey. Her rebellion, too, is punished. Among the interesting changes made to the *Odyssey* plot by the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott in his stage version (1993) is the portrayal of Melanthe as self-consciously seeking to advance herself (15, 19), and of Penelope as protecting her slaves against the anger of Odysseus (155).

6 Ahuvia Kahane has offered what may be the most radically open reading of the *Odyssey* by arguing that we have only the hero’s word for it that he is the man who left Ithaca in the first place rather than a substitute in the mold of Martin Guerre. While I would argue that the epic narrator and even Zeus “vouch for” Odysseus’s identity, Kahane successfully shows how radically destabilizing are the hero’s disguises and lies.

7 Even in Ithaca, however, Athena appears to Odysseus in her divine shape, transforms his physical appearance, and lengthens the night for his reunion with Penelope.

adventures that Odysseus tells in Ithaca substitute more realistic antagonists and helpers for the goddesses and monsters. Yet it is a paradoxical realism that is flagged by the narrative context as "false": in this poem, the fabulous version of the Wanderings is the "true" version. I will return to this paradox later in my paper.

To recap, these are the elements of the *Odyssey's* subject matter that lend themselves to openness: the journey, survival and escape, namelessness, disguise, social mobility, impromptu storytelling for a range of audiences, and fantasy and magic. How do the formal qualities of the epic, its style and narrative structure, sustain or conflict with these potential openings? In recent years, Homerists have examined the compositional texture of the epic from the level of the particle to that of the tradition as a whole. Though there is disagreement on many specific points, there is also a consistency to the picture that emerges that might be described (in Albert Lord's term) as one of "fluidity."<sup>8</sup> At the level of the line, Egbert Bakker has shown that the old picture of oral composition as a specialized kind of bricklaying should be replaced by a model closer to that of ordinary speech, which is, in his words, "a dynamic process evolving in time," reflecting "the flow of successive ideas through the mind" (1997a.44–45). And at the level of the wider tradition, Gregory Nagy (1979.5–9) has argued that the fixed text we see as normative was, in fact, a late development, at odds with the essential openness of "re-composition in performance." The bard's, and even the rhapsode's, need to please a live audience that changed with each venue would have required the kind of flexibility we expect of our own improvisatory performers, such as stand-up comics (and college professors). It is just such changes of venue and of audience that inspire Odysseus's virtuosic "lies."

I do not mean to ignore the fact that these same compositional techniques were used to produce the very different *Iliad*, not to mention the Homeric Hymns and the Hesiodic poems. But Sheila Murnaghan (1997.36) has shown that even the *Iliad*, which we tend to see as antithetic to the *Odyssey* in its insistence on the finality of death, uses the same strategy of deferral in its series of abortive truces and even in its ending, which "displaces" the death of Achilles and the fall of Troy onto the death of Hector, leaving its hero alive and its war still in progress. I would argue that the very

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8 A similar phenomenon in troubadour poetry, *mouvance*, has been described by Paul Zumthor and related to the Homeric text by Nagy 1996a.

length of the epic texts we have reflects an unwillingness to “make an end.” If we can take the *Odyssey* itself as any kind of guide to the original performance contexts of oral epic, even the 2200 lines of the Wanderings make for an unusually long song.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the impulse that led to recording this kind of poetry in writing, it encompassed a desire for inclusiveness—perhaps to preserve as much of the tradition as possible, perhaps to reflect an already expanded genre designed to make the most of opportunities for serial performance on a grand scale.

Of course these larger wholes, as we have inherited them, are hardly amorphous. Following Lord, critics such as J. B. Hainsworth, Bernard Fenik, and John Miles Foley have identified themes, sometimes called type-scenes, which recur with variations and can be combined to produce elaborate narrative sequences such as those detected by Bruce Loudon.<sup>10</sup> Despite its episodic detours, the action of each epic has a linear trajectory and a decisive outcome. It is even possible to find detailed correspondences between earlier and later books that contribute to a sense of closure. Thus Telemachus’s rebuke of Penelope in Book 1 for trying to stop the performance of a *Nostos Achaiôn* (“Return of the Achaeans”) that excludes Odysseus is balanced in Book 23 by her husband’s recitation of his own *nostos* for her alone.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these patterns in the narrative content, there are patterns in the narration and its attendant focalization that can be seen as further delimiting the scope of each epic. As I have argued in detail elsewhere (Doherty 1995.161–77), the *Odyssey* deploys an elaborate hierarchy of internal narrators that gives more “voice” and more credibility to some than to others.

Thus both the narrative sequence, the “plot,” and the narrating voices are involved in patterns that close down some of the openings I have described. To argue for the disruption of these patterns, we must look for openings in a more technical sense: the kinds of internal contradiction, silence, or “slippage” that deconstruction has taught us to identify. Such

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9 This has also been noted by Nagy 1999a.18–20.

10 See, e.g., John Miles Foley 1999. The “extended narrative pattern” seen by Loudon, most fully summarized on p. 2 of his book, includes Odysseus’s arrival at an unknown island, his meeting with a divine helper, his need to win the support of a powerful female figure, and his rivalry with or opposition to a band of unruly younger men. This sequence can be seen not only in the Scherian and Ithacan portions of the epic but also in the Circe episode.

11 In the *Iliad*, Briseis is taken from Achilles in Book 1 and sleeps with him again only in Book 24. Other detailed parallels between the opening and closing books of each epic have been identified by Whitman 1958.249–309.

narrative lapses have the most important implications for the ideological consistency—or inconsistency—of the epic. I will cite just a few that have been explored by others before looking more closely at one in particular.

Peradotto (1990.77–82) has discussed the epic narrator's silence about the fate of the Phaeacians, leaving them in mid-line as they are sacrificing to avert Poseidon's wrath. This is a large opening indeed, as it leaves unresolved the question of whether listening sympathetically to Odysseus's tale was good or bad for his audience. Pucci (1987.209–13) has examined the song of the Sirens, with its power to derail the plot of the *Odyssey* by turning its hero into a perpetual listener. Here is a singular admission of the ambiguous power of *θέλξις*, the spellbinding effect of narrative.

I would identify another such opening in the counterpoint between the "false tales" and the "true" adventures of Odysseus. By their systematic recasting of the Wanderings in apparently realistic terms, the tales can be said to destabilize the veracity of Odysseus's earlier accounts. Yet in the narrative frame of the epic we have as shaped by the perspective of the epic narrator, it is the fabulous version that we are asked to accept as "true."<sup>12</sup> What are the possible effects of this inversion: the "realistic" flagged as false, the implausible as true?

First we must consider what Odysseus edits out of the false tales. Of course his own heroic identity is muted and disguised (though his participation in the Trojan War is not). All the marvels are gone: the cannibal giants, the winds confined to a bag, the magic of Circe, and, a fortiori, the trip to the dead and back. The face-to-face dealings with gods are gone: the intervention of Hermes and Ino/Leucothea, the sexual liaisons with Calypso and Circe. Even the females are gone, and not just the goddesses: Nausicaa's role is taken by a king's *son*, while Arete's role disappears (14.316–33).

How are we to read these omissions? On one level, they imply that there is an essential difference between Scheria and Ithaca; Scheria is still part of the heroic world (or "transitional" between it and Ithaca),<sup>13</sup> while

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12 The epic narrator's confirmation of the Wanderings includes the proem, especially 1.6–9, plus parenthetical references to a son of Aegyptius killed by the Cyclops (2.19–20) and to a knot Odysseus learned from Circe (8.448). Zeus is portrayed as aware of the Cyclops episode (1.68–71), and Odysseus himself recalls it in a soliloquy that cannot be designed to fool anyone (20.18–21).

13 As Alcinoos tells Odysseus, the gods have been in the habit of appearing without disguise to the Phaeacians and sitting down to banquet with them (7.201–06).

Ithaca is resolutely part of the “real” world. Its inhabitants, we are meant to infer, would not swallow the marvels that the Phaeacians took in hook, line, and sinker. Sometimes this difference is seen as one of epoch: the heroic age has ended with the Trojan War, and, in the age to follow, when “no two men” will be able to lift the stones that a single hero lifted easily, belief in marvels will be confined to the past.

Yet the *Iliad* contains little or no magic; true, its heroes meet gods face to face, and Achilles talks once with his horses, but the ghost of Patroclus visits him only in a dream, and there are no monsters or metamorphoses. Thus some scholars have seen the difference as one of genre, identifying the magic and monsters as borrowings from “folktale.” While there is probably some truth to each of these views, the effect, in the context of the monumental *Odyssey*, is one of differential realism, explicitly raising the issue of credibility and, beyond that, the issue of what is possible for human beings.

Odysseus gauges his audiences well and wins praise and rewards from all except the suitors. But even his realistic tales contain a piece of truth that his Ithacan audiences cannot digest: the fact that Odysseus is alive and on his way home. The paradox is most pointed and ironic in the case of Eumaeus, who accepts every detail of the “beggar’s” longest tale except this one unadulterated truth (14.361–65). Of course both Eumaeus and Penelope are reluctant to believe in Odysseus’s survival because they want it so badly and have been disappointed in earlier reports of his return. But the ironic effect is the same: his survival is itself a fabulous detail, on a par with those he has scrupulously edited out. Skepticism and disillusionment, however understandable, are the wrong responses in this case because the unbelievable has happened.

The false tales resemble the Wanderings in ascribing dramatic changes of fortune to their protagonist. In the false tales, these are primarily changes of social status, the realistic effects of such factors as illegitimate birth, daring and luck in raiding expeditions, or misplaced trust in a trading partner. In the Wanderings, by contrast, the dangers are larger than life: cannibals, monsters, Sirens. Even realistic dangers such as storms or whirlpools are lifted out of the ordinary as the divine machinery behind them stands revealed. In this world, class status is seldom the issue—or rather, the gulf between earned and ascribed status, characteristic of hierarchical societies, is magically filled. As in folk or fairy tales, the hero, reduced to extremity, is able to live by his wits, and, when he succeeds, the world is

forced to acknowledge his superiority.<sup>14</sup> Destitution has no inevitable social consequences: when Odysseus is naked on the beach, deprived of all external signs of status, his golden tongue, in effect, reclothes him, assuring him of a princely reception. In "transitional" Scheria, class distinctions rear their heads for a moment as the young Euryalus suggests that the stranger has the look of a merchant (8.159–64); but one throw of the discus is enough to deflect this slur. In Ithaca, by contrast, class distinctions cut deep. Here strength and prowess are not necessarily recognized as proof of nobility. Even when granting the "beggar" permission to take a turn at bending the bow, Penelope adds that he is not a contestant for her hand; that would "never, never do" (οὐδὲ μὲν οὐδὲ ἔοικεν, 21.319). The suitors are opposed to his even trying, not because it would elevate *him* in status, but because it would make them, the young nobles, look bad. In light of these differences, what is achieved by inverting the truth values of Odysseus's fabulous adventures and realistic-but-false tales? If the fabulous version is the true one, the hero's earned and ascribed statuses really do match; the world is harsh, but not unfair, because it rewards ability, stamina, and self-control. In this view, even downward mobility or absolute anonymity are "openings" to one who can seize the day and make it his own.

In the realistic ambience of the false tales, Odysseus's female helpers and antagonists, divine and human, are edited out or replaced by male figures.<sup>15</sup> The implication is that, in the "real world," women do not take the kinds of initiative or enjoy the kinds of power that the goddesses do in their world and that even the fairy-tale princess Nausicaa does in hers. Surely women *are* more circumscribed in Ithaca and elsewhere in the Homeric world, with the possible exception of Sparta. But given the inversion of truth values between the Wanderings and the false tales, the effect is not to dismiss Nausicaa and Circe as figments of the imagination but to insist on their reality. This shift may even influence our perception of the women of Ithaca or, at least, of Penelope and Eurycleia, who, at second glance, wield powers disproportionate to their status and to their self-presentation. As critics have noted, Penelope is even like Circe in her power to keep a crowd of men in thrall to her, eating and drinking with bestial disregard for custom and honor.

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14 For the "utopian" or "emancipatory" potential of traditional folktales, see Zipes 1979.

15 Athena does this also in Ithaca when speaking to Telemachus about his father: "Savage men," she says, "are keeping him against his will" (1.198–99).

Yet if the fabulous world of the Wanderings is the “open” world, why does Odysseus deliberately reject it in favor of Ithaca? If survival is an opening in itself, why does he reject Calypso’s offer of immortality? The answer is that survival on Calypso’s terms is not an opening—certainly not in epic terms, since it would hide the hero from his peers, but not even in narrative terms more generally, since it would suspend narrative. We tend to associate opening with freedom, with possibility, with pleasure. But to be truly open, a narrative must admit the possibility of risk, defeat, and loss. Why are we so bad at imagining an interesting eternity? Because this quality of risk, of repetition with *difference*, is removed. In this perspective, mortality is the only “open” choice. It leads, to be sure, to death, an end if ever there was one, but without the risk and the eventuality of death, eternity itself, conceived as repetition of the same, can seem “closed.” To be mortal is to know there will be an ending, even to know in a way what it will be, but not to know when it will come or what will come before it.

Yet given the need for an end, there is also a desire to extend the “middle” as much as possible. And paradoxically, the narrative that by its beginning, middle, and end emulates our mortal condition also suspends the ordinary time in which we live. While this can be true of any tale, it is especially so of the epic with its length and indefinite capacity for expansion. Thus, to Alcinous, the night seems endless as long as Odysseus will “go on telling marvelous things” (11.373–76). Even in realistic Ithaca, the “beggar” tells Eumaeus that if the food and wine held out, and there were others to do the work, he could talk for a year about the vicissitudes of his roving life (14.193–98). In fact the one way in which magic does enter the Ithacan world in the second half of the epic is in Athena’s suspension and reversal of time for the hero. Sheila Murnaghan (1987.9) has shown that Odysseus is allowed, by virtue of Athena’s transformations, to treat age itself as a disguise he can put on and off. Athena can also extend the night by curbing the horses of Dawn until the reunited husband and wife have had their fill of love and storytelling. On this one point, perhaps, the Wanderings are *more* realistic; they include the admission that listening to marvelous stories, as the Sirens’ victims do and as the Phaeacians do, can have serious consequences: it can lead to stasis and death. But in the *Odyssey*, the pleasure of telling and listening outweighs both the pain of the experiences retold and the pain that may follow the telling. Surely the end of Book 24 strikes us as arbitrary because it *is* arbitrary: this story will continue as soon as the bard has had a drink and a bite to eat.