

THE REMOVAL OF THE ARMS, THE
RECOGNITION WITH LAERTES, AND
NARRATIVE TENSION IN THE *ODYSSEY*

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THIS PAPER WILL DISCUSS two extremely familiar problems in the *Odyssey*, the removal of the arms and the recognition with Laertes. Although both are problems because in both sequences Odysseus' actions are hard to understand, the two sequences do not appear to be closely similar, nor are they closely connected in the narrative progression. Nonetheless, a combined discussion is profitable, because a thematic development common to both leads to a common narrative technique: the narrator seeks to generate both suspense and significance by misdirecting the audience about the role the gods are to play in the action. This misdirection requires that the narrator leave Odysseus' motives obscure. Nonetheless, although Odysseus' motives are not explicit in either sequence, the context indicates plausible motives. The reasons for Odysseus' actions are in themselves practical and straightforward, and the real problem lies not in the character's motivations, but in the narrator's failure to explain them.

Any attempt at solving a narrative problem in Homer raises broader questions of interpretive method. From antiquity onward, critics have treated actions without adequate motivation as "problems." The scholarship, however, often shows considerable disagreement about what kind of solution is appropriate for such problems: does the explanation lie with Homer, or with the character? To what extent does the implied audience of the Homeric poems expect internal, mimetic motivation for the characters' actions? Different genres and periods have different expectations for the balance between mimetic motivations, belonging to the world of the story, and aesthetic motivations, the thematic and artistic goals of the implied author.¹ In Homer, the case is especially difficult because we know so little about the original cultural and generic contexts. The comparative method suggests that the aesthetic should dominate. In oral or orally-derived narratives worldwide, performers make mistakes at the mimetic level without alienating their audiences, and traditional patterning is more important than psychological verisimilitude.² Expectations based on the modern novel are

1. Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 127; Sternberg 1978, 246–50.

2. For theme above mimetic coherence, see Lord 1960, 94–95; Foley 1991, 46–48. There is extended discussion of a singer's mistake in Foley 1990, 359–87.

obviously misplaced for Homer.³ On the other hand, implicit mimetic motivation is found in Homer: the audience may need to infer, for example, that tact leads a messenger to modify the original message.⁴ As a working hypothesis, therefore, it makes sense to begin by looking at aesthetic motivation, but without assuming that mimetic motivations do not matter.

The *Odyssey* creates considerable narrative tension around the extent and nature of divine intervention in determining the final outcome of the action. The assembly of the gods that begins the action tells the audience that Athena and Zeus care about the situation of Odysseus and his family, and that they take an interest in the process of justice among mortals. The example of Aegisthus suggests that those who do wrong will suffer (1.32–43). Repeatedly, signs and prophecies warn of the doom of the suitors. The narrative movement demands that Odysseus kill the suitors and that he escape vengeance from their families. Against both the suitors and their families, Odysseus and his followers face overwhelming odds; yet narrative logic demands that he win. The narrative deliberately prepares the audience for Odysseus to kill the suitors even without the favorable conditions the bow-contest ultimately provides. So, for instance, Menelaus' confidence that the return of Odysseus would guarantee the death of the suitors impresses us along with Telemachus (4.335–46).⁵ He has no doubt, and he knows Odysseus well. Tiresias authoritatively predicts that Odysseus, if he returns home, will kill the suitors, "either by cunning or openly" (11.118–20).

Nonetheless, the odds against Odysseus are tremendous. Homer avoids telling the audience just how Odysseus will kill the suitors. It may be that everyone in the original audience was familiar with the story as we know it, and could therefore expect the bow-contest and its outcome; yet even this fixed plot could differ greatly depending on how particular details were emphasized, varied, or omitted. To be sure, even an audience that knows a story's outcome can feel suspense, but uncertainty makes the effect stronger.⁶ By not telling the audience how Odysseus will win, despite the odds against him, Homer generates suspense; he especially avoids clarifying in advance to what extent the gods will directly assist Odysseus.

This uncertainty surrounding divine involvement does more than create narrative tension for its own sake, because divine interventions are thematically significant. The epic narrator's knowledge about the gods distinguishes

3. Felson-Rubin 1994 eloquently defends "psychologizing," treating the characters as if they were people (esp. 124–26), but does not fully confront the difference between how an ancient audience might have constructed character and how a modern one does.

4. Nausicaa, the narrator tells us, is too embarrassed to mention her marriage to her father, but he recognizes her hidden motive (*Od.* 6.66–67). Several times in the *Iliad*, a character does not speak exactly according to directions given earlier: Thetis does not remind Zeus of her help against a conspiracy as Achilles tells her to (1.408); Odysseus does not repeat to Achilles Agamemnon's claim to be "more kingly" than Achilles is (9.160–61). Characters also tell "white lies." Cf. Griffin 1980, 56–65.

5. Sternberg 1978, 75–77, discusses how the poem establishes the extraordinary abilities of Odysseus in order to make his defeat of the suitors plausible.

6. Morrison 1992 demonstrates how often the *Iliad*-poet creates inaccurate expectations of the plot to come, even though these expectations violate basic "facts" about the Trojan War. At least one psychological study has demonstrated that even a simple narrative can create suspense about facts well known to the audience; see Gerrig 1989.

him radically from any ordinary human speaker.⁷ If Odysseus succeeds because the gods directly help him, the implications of the tale are very different from those of a version in which his own courage and cleverness are decisive. By creating uncertainty about the participation of the gods, the narrator encourages the audience to pay special attention to the gods' place in the action. The more suspense the audience feels about the role of the gods, the more significance attaches to what the gods finally do and do not do. When scholars think of the gods in the *Odyssey*, they typically consider the complex problems of theodicy raised by the Adventures and the extent to which the poem as a whole exemplifies the moral pronounced by Zeus in the opening scene (1.32–34).⁸ In the Adventures, divine vengeance is morally ambiguous, but it manifests itself spectacularly when Zeus destroys Odysseus' ship and when Poseidon turns the Phaeacian ship to stone. In the Ithacan books, by contrast, right and wrong are clear, but the exact workings of the gods are less so.

I. THE REMOVAL OF THE ARMS

Shortly after Telemachus' recognition of Odysseus, as they make their first plans against the suitors, Odysseus tells Telemachus that the arms must be removed from his hall (16.282–98). Odysseus, who will be disguised as a beggar, will nod as a signal, and provides two excuses to give the suitors when they ask why the arms are being removed: that they are dirty, and that they could contribute to violence. Finally, Odysseus orders Telemachus to leave two sets of arms for themselves (16.282–98):

“ὅππότε κεν πολύβουλος ἐνὶ φρεσὶ θῆσιν Ἀθήνη,
νεύσω μὲν τοι ἐγὼ κεφαλῇ, σὺ δ' ἔπειτα νοήσας
ὅσσα τοι ἐν μεγάροισιν ἀρήϊα τεύχεα κείται
ἐς μυχὸν ὑψηλοῦ θαλάμου καταθεῖναι ἀείρας
πάντα μάλ'· αὐτὰρ μνηστῆρας μαλακοῖς ἐπέεσσιν
παρφάσθαι, ὅτε κέν σε μεταλλῶσιν ποθέοντες·
“ἐκ καπνοῦ κατέθηκ’, ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι τοῖσιν ἐφάκει
οἷά ποτε Τροίηνδες κιὼν κατέλειπεν Ὀδυσσεύς,
ἀλλὰ κατήκισται, ὅσπον πυρὸς ἵκετ’ αὐτμή.
πρὸς δ' ἔτι καὶ τόδε μείζον ἐνὶ φρεσὶ θῆκε Κρονίων,
μή πως οἰνωθέντες, ἔριν στήσαντες ἐν ὑμῖν,
ἀλλήλους τρώσῃτε καταισχύνητέ τε δαῖτα
καὶ μνηστύν· αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐφέλκεται ἄνδρα σιδήρος.”
Νῶϊν δ' οἴοισιν δύο φάσγανα καὶ δύο δοῦρε
καλλιπέειν καὶ δοιὰ βοάγρια χερσὶν ἐλέεσθαι,
ὥς ἂν ἐπιθύσαντες ἐλοιμέθα· τοὺς δέ κ' ἔπειτα
Παλλὰς Ἀθηναίη θέλξει καὶ μητίετα Ζεὺς.”

Whenever Athena who makes many plans puts it into my mind, I will nod my head, and you, when you notice, pick up all the weapons of war that lie in the halls, and put them down in the inner corner of the high storeroom. But when the suitors miss them and ask,

7. Jørgensen 1904 is the classic study of how, within epic, the narrator provides precise information about divine actions, while characters attribute the same events to “a god” or “Zeus.”

8. Critics who find the preface inconsistent with the Adventures include Fenik 1974, 208–27 and Clay 1983; arguing for theological coherence are Olson 1995, 205–27 and Segal 1994, 195–227; Kullmann 1985 sees the entire poem as motivated by issues of justice, in sharp contrast to the *Iliad*.

trick them with gentle words: "I have put them away out of the smoke, since they no longer look like the ones Odysseus left when he went to Troy, but they are dirty, as far as the smoke from the fire reaches. Also it has come to me that perhaps when you are drunk and quarreling you could wound each other, and shame your feast and your wooing. For iron itself draws a man on." Just for us leave two spears and two swords, and two shields for us to grab with our hands, so that we can rush over and grab them. Then Pallas Athena and Zeus will bedazzle them.

At the beginning of Book 19, Odysseus and Telemachus are alone in the hall. With a different opening ("Τηλέμαχε, χρὴ τεύχε' ἀρήϊα κατέμεν εἶσω"), Odysseus repeats lines 16.285–94, but omits any reference to leaving arms for themselves or to attacking the suitors (19.4–13). Odysseus and Telemachus, with Athena holding a light, put the arms away. The suitors do not notice that they are gone until too late. During the battle, Telemachus must go to the storeroom and collect arms, since none were kept. The inconsistency is an old Analytic difficulty; Zenodotus and Aristarchus already doubted the passage at 16.281–89. Not only does the original plan, in which Telemachus alone is to remove the arms, not correspond to the actual event; but there is also careful preparation for an objection from the suitors that never takes place.

The difficulties are both aesthetic and mimetic. Aesthetically, it is uneconomical for Odysseus to make plans that are not carried out, and it seems especially wasteful that he twice directs Telemachus about how to answer questions from the suitors, although the suitors never pose any questions.⁹ Mimetically, even if we are not troubled by Odysseus' failure to carry out his original plan, it is hard to understand why, having first thought of leaving armor for Telemachus and himself, he then fails to do so. Unitarians still see the removal as a problem, though most Homerists probably agree with Russo in the recent Oxford commentary that such minor inconsistencies are characteristic of oral poetry.¹⁰

H. Erbse has most extensively defended the transmitted version.¹¹ Though he does not distinguish the different levels, he tries to defend the narrative both mimetically and aesthetically. Aesthetically, he argues that the failure to carry out a plan as it is announced is not anomalous in the *Odyssey*, and that the inconsistency is the result of the narrator's effort to make the bow-contest a surprise. On the mimetic level, Erbse points out that some of the inconsistency between the plan and its fulfillment is fully naturalistic. Odysseus must make his original plan without knowing whether he will succeed even in being able to stay in his house. He must assume that he will not have the opportunity to help Telemachus remove the arms. Indeed, Odysseus' planning in his first discussion of strategy does not agree with the actual events at all. Until Penelope announces her intention to hold the bow-contest, Odysseus' plans cannot be very much like the actual events to come. His original plan, as he proposed it to Telemachus in Book 16, is that he

9. This is particularly clear in the discussion of Fenik 1974, 111–13.

10. Russo in Heubeck 1992, 75 (on 19.1–50). Hoekstra in Heubeck 1989, 278 (on 16.291–98) suggests that 16.295–98 derives from an incomplete performance, at a point at which Book 19 had not yet been composed.

11. Erbse 1972, 3–41.

and Telemachus will simply, at a good moment, grab the retained arms and attack. Erbse, who emphasizes the weaknesses of this plan, argues that Odysseus never seriously intends to carry out this plan, but is only trying to encourage Telemachus.

If we look more closely at the scene in Book 16, it is indeed odd. Odysseus asks Telemachus to tell him about the suitors, so that they may consider whether they should fight them alone, or should seek allies. Telemachus, not surprisingly, is shocked at the idea that the two of them should fight the suitors (16.241–44):

“ὦ πάτερ, ἥ τοι σεῖο μέγα κλέος αἰὲν ἄκουον,
χεῖράς τ’ αἰχμητὴν ἔμεναι καὶ ἐπίφρονα βουλὴν·
ἀλλὰ λίην μέγα εἶπες· ἄγῃ μ’ ἔχει· οὐδέ κεν εἴη
ἄνδρε δύω πολλοῖσι καὶ ἰφθίμοισι μάχεσθαι.”

“Father, I have always heard your great reputation—that you are a spear-fighter in action and intelligent in planning. But what you have said is too much. I am in shock. It couldn’t happen that two men fight with many strong opponents.”

He continues by cataloguing the suitors: fifty-two from Doulichium, twenty-four from Same, twenty from Zacynthos, twelve from Ithaca, and some followers besides (he includes the herald and the bard in his list, though neither will fight). Odysseus responds with a very brief speech (16.259–61):

“τοιγὰρ ἐγὼν ἔρέω, σὺ δὲ σύνθεο καὶ μευ ἄκουσον·
καὶ φράσαι ἥ κεν νῶϊν Ἀθήνη σὺν Διὶ πατρὶ
ἀρκέσει, ἥ εἰ τιν’ ἄλλον ἀμύντορα μερμηρίξω.”

“Therefore I shall tell you, and you listen and hear me, and say whether Athena along with Father Zeus will be enough, or whether I should think of some other defender.”

Telemachus responds that these are powerful helpers, who rule even the other gods. Odysseus insists that these gods will be present at the battle against the suitors (16.267–68): οὐ μὲν τοι κείνω γε πολλὸν χρόνον ἀμφὶς ἔσεσθον / φυλόπιδος κρατερῆς.¹² Odysseus’ response shows that Telemachus has spoken skeptically. While Telemachus does not doubt that Zeus and Athena are sufficiently powerful, he is not certain of their help. Odysseus, however, after expressing his confidence that the gods will assist him, declares his plan to remove all but two sets of arms and attack suddenly. Throughout, Telemachus views the danger of the suitors realistically, while Odysseus relies on the gods.

The retained arms are clearly essential to Odysseus’ scheme. They would also, surely, invite the suitors’ suspicions (as Erbse points out). For the excuse to work, the retained arms would have to be hidden, and if they were

12. Commentators disagree about Telemachus’ tone here. Stanford 1959 and Monro 1901 (ad loc.) think that Telemachus is sarcastic, while Hoekstra in Heubeck 1989 points out that ὦ τε καὶ ἄλλοις / ἀνδράσι τε κρατέουσι καὶ ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι (16.264–65) has no ironic ring, and that Telemachus by now has experience of Athena’s help. Yet Odysseus’ response sounds as if he is answering doubt. Telemachus has not sarcastically implied that these would not be good helpers, but he has not, perhaps, sounded convinced that the gods would intervene as drastically as Odysseus’ plan requires.

hidden, they could not be at hand for a sudden, surprise attack. If Odysseus is simply trying to impress his son with his confidence, and has no real intention of attacking this way, the impracticality does not matter. However, this scheme is clearly the best that Odysseus can contrive at this early stage, once he does not pursue the possibility of seeking outside help. The auditor must assume that either he intends the plan seriously, or that it is a stopgap, meant to provide a provisional basis for action until he can form a better scheme after entering the house and observing the situation himself.

In either case, the planning scene in Book 16 blatantly misdirects the audience along with Telemachus.¹³ Fenik points out that the discussion between Odysseus and Telemachus in Book 16 “seems to suffer from congenital non-fulfillment.” Odysseus suggests that he and Telemachus test the male slaves (16.305–7), but Telemachus sensibly responds that such testing would waste precious time. Odysseus (who rarely accepts advice) agrees, and they further agree that he will learn about which of the women in his halls are faithful and which are not. Odysseus (more characteristically) refuses Eurycleia’s offer to identify the treacherous ones (19.500–501), yet after he kills the suitors, he has her do exactly that. The decision not to test the male slaves makes Odysseus’ sudden test of the herdsmen and subsequent recognition at 21.188–225 a surprise, while the participation of Dolius in the final confrontation with the suitors’ families is even more surprising.

In Book 19, Odysseus has at least managed to stay overnight in the house. Since he remains after the suitors leave, he does not need to signal to Telemachus. Odysseus repeats the invented excuses, because he cannot predict that the suitors will not notice the arms are gone. This repetition, therefore, is not a problem mimetically. Aesthetically, though, we may ask why the poet has Odysseus repeat the excuses. Thematically, the excuses are not superfluous here. Telemachus calls Eurycleia (19.16–20):

“μαῖ’, ἄγε δὴ μοι ἔρῳξον ἐνὶ μεγάροισι γυναῖκας,
ὄφρα κεν ἐς θάλαμον καταθείομαι ἔντεα πατρός
καλά, τά μοι κατὰ οἶκον ἀκηδέα καπνὸς ἀμέρδει
πατρός ἀποιχομένοιο· ἐγὼ δ’ ἔτι νήπιος ἦα.
νῦν δ’ ἐθέλω καταθέσθαι, ἵν’ οὐ πυρὸς ἴξεται αὐτμή.”

“Old woman, come, shut the women in the hall for me, so that I can put away my father’s fine war-gear in the storeroom, which the smoke is damaging in the house, since it is uncared for with my father gone. I was still a child; but now I wish to put it away where the breath of the fire will not reach.”

In response, Eurycleia praises him for this attention to household management! When Eurycleia asks who will carry the light for him, Telemachus answers that the stranger will provide light, because he will not allow a lazy man in his house (19.21–28). This little episode provides an ironic development of the “maturity of Telemachus” theme, since his remarks to Eurycleia demonstrate a concern for his household far beyond their ostensible content. The incident also prepares for the importance of Eurycleia in the

13. Olson 1995, 145–48, has an excellent discussion of the misdirection here.

coming Homilia: she is more dangerous right now than the suitors.¹⁴ The incident has a thematic point: even Odysseus is unable to plan for everything. Throughout the Ithacan books, the narrative stresses Odysseus' exceptional competence and ability to plan, but places limits on his, indeed, on any mortal's, ability to control events.¹⁵

The failure to retain arms for Odysseus and Telemachus is the one genuine mimetic problem in the scene, because Odysseus neither fulfills his original scheme, nor explains to Telemachus (and the audience) that he has changed his mind.¹⁶ Behind the mimetic question lies an aesthetic one: Why does the narrator organize the plot this way, and why does he not tell the audience what Odysseus is thinking? The general aesthetic problem is clear enough. The poet needs Odysseus first to suggest leaving arms for Telemachus and himself, because he wants the audience to expect that the two will simply attack the suitors. On the other hand, the narrator also needs to prepare for what will actually happen: Telemachus' trip to the storeroom is important to the plot. Leaving arms would thus create more severe mimetic problems later. In any case, the plan dependent on the retained arms would not work. Since Penelope's announcement of the bow-contest will soon turn the plot in a new direction, it would be clumsy for the narrator to provide Odysseus with another interim plan that would soon be abandoned. To explain that Odysseus lacks a clear plan at this point would ruin the delicate balance between Odysseus' planning and its limits. A temporary gap, during which Odysseus' precise intentions are opaque, is preferable. The narrator mitigates the difficulty by the lines that frame the removal (19.1–2 = 19.51–52): Αὐτὰρ ὁ ἐν μεγάρῳ ὑπελείπετο δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς, / μνηστήρεσσι φόνον σὺν Ἀθῆνῃ μερμηρίζων. These lines inform the audience that Odysseus still needs to think about how he will kill the suitors, and reassure them that even if the action lacks a clear direction, Athena is in control. Even after Penelope announces the contest, the narrator encourages the audience to expect that Athena will intervene directly to help Odysseus; she promises the anxious hero her protection, and declares that the two of them could rout fifty companies (20.44–53).

Because arms were not kept for Odysseus and Telemachus, they must be fetched when the arrows fail. Because Telemachus fails to lock the storeroom, Melanthius is able to provide arms for the suitors. After making it seem realistically possible for Odysseus to win by introducing the bow, the narrator then contrives that he have a genuine struggle, by providing arms for both sides. During the slaughter, Athena comes in the form of Mentor, but she is explicitly said not to "give" victory, but to "test" the valor of Odysseus and Telemachus (22.235–360), only making sure that the suitors' spear-casts fail. In fact, the slaughter is an ἀπιστεία, and she helps only as gods regularly help heroes on the battlefield.¹⁷ As earlier scholars have

14. Kirk 1962, 243–44, notes that Telemachus uses the excuse for Eurycleia, but regards the inconsistency as an oral poet's lapse. Rutherford 1992, 136 (on 19.19) comments on the irony in Eurycleia's praise of Telemachus—she little knows how well he is caring for his property.

15. Murnaghan 1987, 127–40 discusses the ways in which Penelope's actions show the limits of Odysseus' control.

16. Woodhouse 1930, 164–68, has a good description of the mimetic problem.

17. Müller 1966, 136–44.

pointed out, the suitors themselves recall the story-pattern in which a god in disguise tests human beings and punishes the inhospitable (17.482–87); Odysseus replaces the god of the folktale.¹⁸

The slaughter of the suitors should end all narrative tension surrounding the role of the gods. Yet it does not. When Odysseus warns Eurycleia not to cry out in triumph over the dead, he attributes his success to divine vengeance (22.413–16):

“τούσδε δὲ μοῖρ’ ἐδάμασσε θεῶν καὶ σχέτλια ἔργα·
οὐ τίνα γὰρ τίεσκον ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων,
οὐ κακὸν οὐδὲ μὲν ἐσθλόν, ὅτις σφέας εἰσαφίκοιτο·
τῷ καὶ ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐπέσπον.”

“Fate from the gods overcame these men, and their wicked deeds. For they honored no one among humans on the earth, neither base nor noble, who came to them. So through their folly they met a cruel fate.”

In refusing dangerous praise and boasting, Odysseus seems merely pious; he is not trying to deny his agency or responsibility. Nonetheless, Penelope echoes his words when she suggests that the killer of the suitors was, literally, a god and not Odysseus (23.62–67):

“ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔσθ’ ὅδε μῦθος ἐτήτυμος, ὥς ἀγορεύεις,
ἀλλὰ τις ἀθανάτων κτεῖνε μνηστῆρας ἀγανούς,
ὑβριν ἀγασσάμενος θυμαλγέα καὶ κακὰ ἔργα.
οὐ τίνα γὰρ τίεσκον ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων,
οὐ κακὸν οὐδὲ μὲν ἐσθλόν, ὅτις σφέας εἰσαφίκοιτο·
τῷ δι’ ἀτασθαλίας ἔπαθον κακόν.”

“This story is not true, as you say, but some one of the immortals killed the arrogant suitors. For they honored no one among humans on the earth, neither base nor noble, who came to them. So through their folly they suffered evil.”

Her false guess exploits Telemachus’, and the audience’s, earlier doubt about how Odysseus could kill the suitors. The narrative first points toward a killing by Odysseus alone, or by Odysseus and Telemachus, to be accomplished entirely at close quarters. Such an action could be believable only if the gods made it happen. Then Penelope’s own decision to hold the contest of the bow makes it possible for Odysseus to kill the suitors without relying on direct divine help. Compared to the task of attacking so many enemies with a spear, the battle with the bow is naturalistically credible. Once the fight is won, however, this battle appears to Penelope almost as difficult as the original plan would have been, so that Penelope thinks that the gods have taken vengeance themselves.

Yet the final comment on the event is Laertes’ (24.351–52):

“Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἧ ῥα ἔτ’ ἐστὲ θεοὶ κατὰ μακρὸν Ὀλυμπόν,
εἰ ἐτεὸν μνηστῆρες ἀτάσθαλον ὑβριν ἔτισαν.”

“Father Zeus, you gods really do exist on great Olympus, if in fact the suitors have paid for their reckless violence.”

18. Kearns 1982; Reece 1993, 181–87.

Laertes knows that Odysseus has killed the suitors, and Odysseus has not mentioned divine help at all; from at least one point of view, therefore, the gods can demonstrate justice without themselves intervening. The narrator contrasts those who imagine that the gods must have acted directly with those who perceive divine forces behind human actors.

Despite Odysseus' intimacy with Athena, the role of the gods is sometimes opaque even to him. Even for the epic audience, with their extraordinary access, much is unclear. Although the final result fulfills human expectations of divine justice, just as the epic characters can only claim that the action proves divine justice because they believe that the gods made it possible, even the epic audience are not led to think that they know the mind of Zeus. The narrator does not tell us to what extent Zeus brought these events about, or to what extent Zeus was motivated by concerns for justice.¹⁹

The inconsistency of the removal of the arms, therefore, is probably not an inadvertence. Mimetically, Odysseus changes his mind about how to fight the suitors, and plans for a difficulty (the suitors' asking why the arms have been removed) that does not arise, although his plans are useful for a difficulty he did not expect (Eurycleia's interest). Odysseus changes his mind because the situation turns out to be other than he expected. His plan's failure precisely to match events shows the limits of even the cleverest mortals. At the same time, the narrative also tricks the audience, creating a false expectation of visible divine intervention.

II. LAERTES

Of all the problems presented by the last book of the *Odyssey*, the testing of Laertes is among the worst, because it seems so entirely unmotivated. The old man is deliberately deceived even though there is no longer any reason for Odysseus to conceal his identity, and even though he clearly does not doubt his father's loyalty to him. Many solve the problem analytically, by treating the scene as an incompetent addition.²⁰ Among the many readers who find Odysseus' behavior here cruel, but do not assume multiple authorship, there is considerable disagreement about whether to attribute the cruelty of Odysseus' behavior to the poet or to Odysseus. Many see it as the poet's inappropriate use of a traditional theme: having built so much of his narrative around delayed recognition, he automatically extends the recognition here.²¹ Erbse agrees with this argument, but also stresses the satisfying emotional effect of the delayed recognition.²² Others, though, argue that testing others is so strong a habit for Odysseus that he cannot suppress it even when it is out of place.²³ Some readers have tried to defend

19. I therefore disagree with Winterbottom 1989, who argues that the Homeric gods are amoral, and that justice is only attributed to them by mortals.

20. Even some Unitarians see the episode as interpolated (e.g., Eisenberger 1973, 317–18; Kirk 1962, 249–51). Heubeck 1981, p. 73, nn. 1 and 2, has bibliography. There are, of course, also linguistic objections: see Page 1955, 104.

21. Lord 1960, 175–78, gives parallels from oral poetry; Fenik 1974, 47–53, sees it as a clumsy use of the reiterated motif.

22. Erbse 1972, 101–2.

23. Focke 1943, 378, calls it “πειρα for the sake of πειρα.” Wender 1978, 56–57.

Odysseus' test mimetically without criticizing the hero, arguing, for example, that Laertes is so crushed that Odysseus must attempt to raise him from his misery gradually.²⁴

Once again, the critic needs to connect mimetic and thematic considerations. Thematically, the sequence prepares for the rejuvenation of Laertes and the final tableau of the three heroic generations of the family. Athena makes Laertes' rejuvenation possible, just as she intervenes to end the conflict between Odysseus and the suitors' families at the conclusion. In the last book, the balance between divine and human action, so subtle in the earlier narrative, shifts strongly towards the divine: while Athena intervenes only slightly in the fight with the suitors, she appears in her own person, preceded by Zeus' thunderbolt, to make peace between Odysseus and the suitors' families. Correspondingly, Odysseus is less effectual in the final book than he has been earlier.

At the mimetic level, Odysseus' behavior towards his father needs to make sense, though it does not need to be the most admirable course of action. His motive has to be adequate for Odysseus, not for any other person in his situation. Since Odysseus has already performed so many tests, the motive required need not be as compelling as it would be for any other character; but if we can infer no plausible reason for Odysseus to test his father, the narrative is weak. While it is, of course, not impossible that the narrator has simply failed to consider proper mimetic motivation, a motive entirely in character for Odysseus is available: Odysseus tests Laertes because he needs him as an ally against the families of the suitors. The old man he finds in the orchard is in no condition to help him, and the test is Odysseus' attempt to prepare Laertes to fight.

Testing does not just reveal others' feelings; the tester manipulates them. Odysseus "tests" Eumaeus (14.459–61) in the hope of getting an extra covering. When Odysseus tells his false tale to Penelope in Book 19 (his treatment of her is a "test," *πειρήσεαι*, at 13.336 and a "provocation," *ἐρεθίζω*, at 19.45), his goal is not so clear, but his conversation leads directly to her decision to hold the archery contest. The test rouses her to action. Agamemnon's test of his army in *Iliad* 2 is very controversial, but critics have agreed that if the passage is the work of a competent narrator and belongs to a unified *Iliad*, the audience should be able to guess at Agamemnon's intentions. In the most common interpretation, he is not just trying to learn the state of their morale, but to improve it. The problem he confronts is plain: he needs to prepare his army to attack in full force, although they have apparently not been fighting pitched battles and are likely to be demoralized by the plague and the quarrel. He assumes that if he pretends to be discouraged, and the other leaders respond by displaying fierce enthusiasm for the war, the army as a whole will be heartened.²⁵ This plan fails dismally when the troops react too quickly and the leaders do not react at all. Although

24. Heubeck 1981 and 1992.

25. The effect would be the same whether the object of *ἐρηρύνειν* at 2.75 is the army (as most commentators) or Agamemnon himself (bT and Katzung 1960, 50–51)). Heubeck 1981, 82, effectively argues this interpretation.

critics disagree about exactly how the test is supposed to accomplish its purpose, Agamemnon's general intention is clear, especially when he expresses genuine discouragement in similar language at 9.17–28, and Diomedes insists that he will fight even if he has to fight alone (9.31–49).²⁶ Odysseus similarly tries to manipulate his father into heroic behavior, but fails.

Such an interpretation is consistent also with the details of the test of Laertes. Odysseus first tells his companions that he plans to test his father (πειρήσομαι, 24.216), to see whether he recognizes him or not after his long absence (24.216–18). Because Odysseus is no longer in disguise, when Odysseus first announces that he will test Laertes, he may mean no more than that he will not identify himself immediately, but see whether his father knows him without prompting. The test which actually takes place, however, seems to be inspired by the sight of Laertes. When Odysseus actually sees his father, Laertes is not only old and worn, he is wearing the clothes of the poorest of ordinary field workers, a torn and ragged chiton, and gardeners' leather leggings and gloves (24.226–31). Πένθος ἀέξων is the narrator's comment, "increasing his grief."²⁷ Laertes' behavior is clearly excessive. The moment Odysseus sees him, he hides behind a tree to wipe his tears (24.232–34). Then Odysseus ponders whether to announce himself directly, or to test his father (24.235–40):

μερμήριξε δ' ἔπειτα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν
κῦσσαι καὶ περιφῶναι ἔδον πατέρ', ἥδ' ἕκαστα
εἰπεῖν, ὥς ἔλθοι καὶ ἴκοιτ' ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν,
ἧ πρῶτ' ἐξερέοιτο ἕκαστά τε πειρήσαιτο.²⁸
ὥδε δέ οἱ φρονέοντι δοάσσατο κέρδιον εἶναι,
πρῶτον κερτομίους ἐπέεσσιν πειρηθῆναι.

Then he pondered in his heart and mind, whether to kiss and embrace his father, and tell him everything, how he had come and reached his fatherland, or first ask him and test him in everything. And the latter seemed to him more cunning, to first test him with ironic words.²⁹

This passage announces the test for a second time, and it dramatizes Odysseus' decision to conduct the test. By emphasizing the decision to test, the narrator invites the audience to consider why Odysseus makes this decision. At the same time, the deliberative scene provides no information to help the audience understand Odysseus' motives, except that it emphasizes that Odysseus is acting with deliberation, and not frivolously. This test may not

26. Whitman 1958, 158, supposes that Agamemnon is trying to confirm his dream by forcing the gods to intervene; Knox and Russo 1989, 351–58, argue that he is manipulating a traditional command for cowards to leave, obligatory in a war commanded by divine power. McGlew 1989 argues that the test, which manipulates the Achaeans through inspiring shame, is in fact a success.

27. See Heubeck 1992 ad loc. The phrase echoes the earlier description of Laertes at 11.187–96.

28. The authenticity of the line is disputed, for the speech contaminates different formulae for decision-making. But I am unconvinced by the arguments against it.

29. Two terms here are both crucial and difficult, κέρδιον and κερτομίους. Jones 1989 and Heubeck 1992 ad loc. try to avoid the sense "mocking" for the latter, but it seems to me perfectly appropriate for Odysseus' pretense of not recognizing Laertes' status, which is in itself insulting.

be exactly what Odysseus originally planned. In particular, the test Odysseus announced would not have required that he speak κερτομίους ἐπέεσσιν. It is striking that Odysseus not only lies about himself to his father, but also pretends to have misunderstood the social status of his father.

Odysseus' speech to his father has two parts. In lines 245–55 he praises the state of the orchard, and (with an apology for his bluntness), draws an unfavorable contrast between the condition of orchard and that of the old man. He implies that the contrast makes no sense, since the old man must work hard to maintain the orchard so well, so it cannot be that his master neglects him because he is lazy. He comments further that Laertes does not actually look like a slave (24.251–55):

“οὐ μὲν ἀεργίης γε ἄναξ ἔνεκ’ οὐ σε κομίζει,
οὐδέ τί τοι δούλειον ἐπιπρέπει εἰσοράσασθαι
εἶδος καὶ μέγεθος· βασιλῆϊ γὰρ ἀνδρὶ ἔοικας.
τοιούτῳ δὲ ἔοικε, ἐπεὶ λούσαιοι φάγοι τε,
εὐδέμεναι μαλακῶς· ἢ γὰρ δίκη ἐστὶ γέροντων.”

“It cannot be because you are lazy that your master does not take care of you. And in fact there is nothing slavish visible in you, in your form or size; you look like a king. Such a man should sleep in a soft bed, after he bathes and eats. For that is the right of old men.”³⁰

Maintaining his pretense of believing that Laertes is a slave, Odysseus asks him who his master is, and whose orchard he is caring for (24.257). Only then does he proceed with his lie, claiming to be a guest-friend of Odysseus and asking whether he is alive or dead: a wayfarer told him he was on Ithaca, but would not tell him about Odysseus. The lie evokes the first segment in a common epic narrative sequence, the “Maiden at the Well / Youth on the Road” motif, in which a young man or girl helps the stranger to find the palace. This motif indicates that hospitality is a narrative theme.³¹ Odysseus does not mention his name at any point in the speech, but says that his guest claimed to come from Ithaca, and said “that his father was Laertes, the son of Arcesias” (Λαέρτην Ἀρκεισιάδην πατέρ’ ἔμμεναι αὐτῷ, 24.270). The patronymic is as important as the name within Homeric practice, and can even replace it completely, so that Odysseus' avoidance of his own name is notable but not socially unacceptable.³² The patronymic within the patronymic, however, is not part of normal Homeric naming practice. Odysseus also enumerates the valuable gifts he pretends to have given himself.

The unusual naming points to the purpose of the test. Laertes not only looks like a slave; he looks like a slave whose master takes no care of him. Odysseus has just disguised himself as a beggar in order to recover his own status. But why should anyone choose to look this way without purpose? Laertes is, in effect, in disguise.³³ Odysseus has indeed been told (by his dead mother, in Hades) that Laertes lives miserably in the country (11.188–96), but her statement that he “wears poor clothes” (κακὰ δὲ χροὶ εἵματα

30. I have cited and translated the text with Bentley's conjecture ἔοικε for the MSS ἔοικας.

31. On the convention, see Reece 1993, 12–13.

32. Webber 1989.

33. So Murnaghan 1987, 28–33.

εἶται) is hardly sufficient preparation for his appearance, and the excellent condition of the farm only sharpens the contrast. Laertes' behavior is bewildering. It inspires both pity and the need to test, because if Laertes is helpless, he is a liability in the face of the threat from the families of suitors. So Odysseus begins with an implied rebuke to Laertes for his neglect of himself, and an implied request for some explanation. By pretending to be deceived about his status, he encourages him to resume an appropriate way of life. The correct response to being mistaken for a slave would be anger.³⁴ This should be the case for any hero, but touchiness is characteristic of Laertes' family in particular. At the very end of the poem, Laertes is pleased because Telemachus reacts angrily to his father's exhortation (24.510–15); Telemachus' annoyance with his father is very similar to Odysseus' anger with Agamemnon in a similar situation in the *Iliad* (4.350–55).

Odysseus' lie about himself works along the same lines. By listing the gifts "he" gave Odysseus, he stresses his own correct behavior and the magnitude of the appropriate recompense, while the peculiar patronymic reminds Laertes of his own noble ancestry, together with the standards such ancestry imposes on him. If the stranger is a guest-friend of Odysseus, Odysseus' family has obligations towards him.³⁵ Behavior in guest-friendship is a crucial test in the *Odyssey*, not only dividing the hospitable and godfearing from the wild and unjust (6.120–21 = 9.105–76, 13.201–2), but defining the heroic qualities of civilized participants in its proprieties. For example, Telemachus' self-confidence is tested by his decision whether to receive Theoclymenus; he at first plans to send him to Eurymachus (15.313–520), but after Theoclymenus provides him with a favorable interpretation of a bird-omen when he arrives in Ithaca, he has his friend Pieraeus entertain him until he himself returns (15.540–43). Odysseus' story therefore implicitly but powerfully challenges Laertes to provide him with hospitality.

Laertes does not respond at all to the implicit question about his own neglected condition, nor does he reply directly to the question of the ownership of the land; he is interested only in Odysseus. In fact, he does not identify himself explicitly at all, and continues the play with naming in Odysseus' speech, for he names neither Odysseus nor himself, but identifies himself only by referring to the stranger's guest-friend as his son (ἐμὸν παῖδ', 24.289; cf. 24.292). He seems certain that Odysseus has died, and is certain that the stranger has wasted his gifts, since Odysseus cannot offer any return. He thereby emphatically fails to respond to Odysseus' invitations to behave in accordance with his status, for he is not offended at being mistaken for a slave, nor does he offer any hospitality. Even as he asks when Odysseus visited the stranger, he muses about how Odysseus has not received funeral rites (24.291–92). He asks in detail about the stranger: who he is, and where his ship is, if he has not come as a trader on another's ship.

34. As pointed out by Thornton 1970, 116. The importance of the theme explains the hapax δούλειον. Other uses of the stem are confined to δούλη at *Il.* 3.409, *Od.* 4.12, both contrasting slave concubines with wives (the first again a deliberate insult), and δούλιον modifying ἡμαρ, where the context is the transition from freedom to slavery (*Il.* 6.463, 15.340, 17.323).

35. Penelope promises the pretended guest-friend of her husband honorable treatment in her house, though it is not possible to give him the escort Odysseus would have given him (19.313–28).

These questions underscore his failure to behave heroically, since he asks a stranger's identity without having served him a meal, a blatant impropriety.

Odysseus answers the questions. He has come on his own ship (a trader would be of lower status); his ship is nearby, far from the town (perhaps implying that hospitality here in the country would be especially appropriate); Odysseus left five years ago, with good omens: *θυμὸς δ' ἔτι νῶϊν ἐώλπει / μίξεσθαι ξενίῃ ἢδ' ἀγλαὰ δῶρα διδώσειν* (24.313–14). Once again, he practically demands an invitation, but instead Laertes collapses in tears, and the test ends. From the practical point of view, the test has been a complete failure, for Odysseus has failed to elicit a single heroic response from his father. The entire sequence stands in striking contrast to Odysseus' other elaborate test, that of Penelope. There, instead of insulting his interlocutor, he begins with rich flattery (19.107–14). Even though he pretends to be a man who, like “Eperitus” in the scene with Laertes, is a guest-friend of Odysseus, he pretends to be unwilling to identify himself (19.115–22). When he seems to have proven that he is a guest-friend, Penelope promises the guest her friendship and respect (19.254), as soon as she has recovered from lamenting. Although she does not believe his claim that Odysseus will be home very soon, she orders the stranger a bath and a warm bed, and announces that if any of the suitors mistreats him, that suitor will have no future success (19.317–24). Throughout, she reacts exactly as a noble should. At the end of the scene, in announcing the contest of the bow, she shows—however we interpret her hopes and intentions—that she is able to initiate action. Laertes, in contrast, does not react appropriately, and Odysseus' test is a complete failure. The narrator avoids explaining Odysseus' goals at least in part in order to avoid emphasizing this failure.

After the recognition, however, Laertes changes. After he expresses his renewed faith in the gods, he immediately shows his anxiety about the suitors' families (24.353–55):

“νῦν δ' αἰνῶς δεῖδοικα κατὰ φρένα μὴ τάχα πάντες
ἐνθάδ' ἐπέλθωσιν Ἰθακῆσιοι, ἀγγελίας δὲ
πάντῃ ἐποτρύνωσι Κεφαλλήνων πολίεσσι.”

“But now I am terribly afraid in my mind that soon all the Ithacans will come here to attack, and send messages in all directions to the towns of the Cephallenians.”

Such a concern may not characterize Laertes as brave, but his remark certainly shows that he is aware of practical realities. Indeed, his good sense resembles Odysseus'. Odysseus, though, simply tells him not to worry. They go to the farmhouse, and after Laertes bathes, Athena beautifies him, to Odysseus' wonder. Laertes then delivers a wish of a characteristically heroic type (24.376–82):

“αἱ γάρ, Ζεῦ τε πάτερ καὶ Ἀθηναίη καὶ Ἀπόλλων,
οἷος Νήρικον εἶλον, εὐκτίμενον πολίεθρον,
ἀκτὴν ἠπειροῖο, Κεφαλλήνεσσιν ἀνάσσων,
τοῖος ἔων τοι χθιζὸς ἐν ἡμετέροισι δόμοισι,
τεύχε' ἔχων ὤμοισιν, ἐφεστάμεναι καὶ ἀμύνειν
ἄνδρας μνηστῆρας· τῷ κε σφέων γούνατ' ἔλυσσα
πολλῶν ἐν μεγάροισι, σὺ δὲ φρένας ἐνδον ἐγήθεις.”

"If only, Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo, as I was when I took Nericon, that well-built town on the coast of the mainland, and I commanded the Cephallenians—if I could have been as I was yesterday in our house, with armor on my shoulders, able to stand and fight off the suitors! I would have killed many of them in our house, and you would have rejoiced in your heart."

This sounds very much like Nestor. It is particularly significant because there is no earlier reference to any heroic deeds by Laertes, and he has not been the subject of the verb ἀνίσσιν earlier.³⁶ Laertes is referring to a heroic identity that the poem has thus far left completely obscure. The wish is unfulfillable, and includes a disconcerting role reversal, with the son as witness of the father's valor, but although Laertes is not yet ready for heroic action, he can at least imagine it.

The narrator, as so often, avoids informing the audience too fully of what is to come. Instead of developing the transformation of Laertes, he announces at 24.469–71 that Eupheithes will perish instead of avenging his son Antinous, and uses a conversation between Zeus and Athena to tell the audience that the goddess will bring about a reconciliation between Odysseus, who will be king "forever," and his people (24.472–86). He does not, however, say how Athena will bring this about. As Odysseus and his supporters prepare for battle, Laertes expresses his delight that his son and grandson are arguing over valor: his restoration is complete (24.513–15). Athena then encourages him to pray to her and throw his spear. She breathes μένος μέγα into him, and he kills Eupheithes. Athena then intervenes directly to end the fighting. Her voice puts the Ithacans to flight, but a thunderbolt and a direct warning are needed to stop Odysseus (24.539–44).

The sequence is thus exceptionally clear. Odysseus completely fails to provoke his father into behaving as his parentage and standing demand, but after the recognition, with Athena's intervention, Laertes quickly begins to act as a hero. Furthermore, the gods intervene to end the battle very much as Odysseus implies they will intervene to help him when he first plans the killing of the suitors. If the removal of the arms seemed designed to make the audience expect more direct intervention by the gods than the narrative finally presents, in the last episodes, the role of the gods could hardly be more emphatic.

The Ithacan narrative as a whole thereby avoids any single view of the role of the gods in the action. While manipulating the possibilities of their intervention to surprise the audience, the narrator also delivers a message about the role of the gods in human affairs. The gods bring about the unexpected, as we might expect, and enforce justice: but they can do so by keeping their distance as well as by direct involvement in the action. The narrative does not stress only the fact of divine vengeance for wrongdoing, however. It emphasizes also the complexity of events, and the unpredictability of the divine. Odysseus' victory over the suitors has several causes: he is successful because he and Telemachus are cunning, strong, and patient; because Athena helps him; and because Penelope decides to hold the

36. Finley 1978, 86.

bow contest. When Odysseus tries to rouse his father, his cunning is no use at all.

In both the removal of the arms and the recognition with Laertes, aesthetic motivation is primary. The narrator generates suspense and surprise, and these narrative effects in turn serve thematic purposes. The narrator does not, however, make Odysseus behave in ways that make no sense. In both cases, Odysseus wastes some of his effort. He plans a sudden attack on the suitors with reserved arms, but then uses the bow; he tells an elaborate lie aimed at provoking a heroic response from his father, but his father only weeps. The narrator avoids emphasizing Odysseus' false moves, and so does not explain them, but his plot implies that even wily Odysseus cannot hit the mark every time.

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