

XIII.—The Formulation of the Revenge Motif in the *Odyssey*

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Structural analysis of the parts of the exposition of the *Odyssey* which state and develop the theme of the hero's vengeance on the suitors shows that, in nine short passages comprising three triadic series, the theme is gradually formulated into a group of memorable related phrases. This shaping process gives it a strength that will keep it alive in the hearer's mind until the actual revenge comes to be narrated in the second half of the poem.

The *Odyssey* has four main themes: the wanderings of Odysseus, his return home, the crimes of the suitors, and his vengeance upon them. If the poet, writing for a public of hearers, had in his mind from the start the construction of the poem as we know it, then one of his hardest technical problems faced him at its threshold. The tale of the revenge itself was not to be begun until fully half the recitation was over, and yet the whole poem aspired to that consummation. How could this dominant theme be so impressed upon the audience that their concentration on it would not be diluted during the lengthy narratives of the voyages and encounters of Telemachus and his father? The poet's solution of this problem is visible if we analyze closely his handling of the Revenge theme in the Ithacan scenes comprised in the exposition (Books 1, 2). Here, during a development extending over almost 700 lines, or about one-twentieth of the poem, the theme is given unforgettable verbal stature. I shall summarize, then comment on, the nine principal passages<sup>1</sup> in which this is achieved.

The theme is announced as the curtain rises on Scene I, after the Prologue in Heaven. Telemachus is discovered: watching the suitors gamble and carouse, he "fancies his father's sudden arrival from somewhere, somehow (*ποθεν ἐλθών*), and the scatter there would be, through the palace" (1.113ff.).<sup>2</sup> Then his thoughts become words, addressed to the stranger whose appearance interrupts the

<sup>1</sup> That is, statements giving positive force to the thought and plan of Odysseus' vengeance, not those which comment on it from other standpoints (e.g., the example of Orestes, 1.298ff.; the suitors' incredulity, 2.243ff.). These keynote passages total 65 lines.

<sup>2</sup> I take these and some other phrases from T. E. Lawrence's translation of the *Odyssey* (1935).

daydream: "If they but saw him returning to Ithaca (*Ἰθάκηνδε νοστήσαντα*), they would pray for fleet-footedness, not wealth" (163ff.). In the ensuing conversation, the stranger (Athene, as Mentès) takes up this vision of vengeance and enriches it with details: what a swift doom would befall the suitors if Odysseus were to appear now (*νῦν ἐλθὼν δόμου ἐν πρώτῃσι θύρῃσι/σταίῃ*), with helmet, shield and spears, as "Mentès" once saw him long ago! (255ff.). And soon the mood of vengeance moves from wish to plan. "Mentès," having given Telemachus instructions for the voyage to Pylos and Sparta, bids him consider, on returning, "how he may kill the suitors within his halls, either by fair fight or by stratagem" (*ἐνὶ μεγάροισι τεοῖσι/κτείνῃς ἢ δόλῳ ἢ ἀμφοδόν*): for he is of an age to put away childish things (293ff.). So, when Athene goes, Telemachus faces the suitors "like a peer of the gods" and re-phrases her parting words as his first warning to them: he will call upon the ever-living gods for vengeance, that the suitors may be "destroyed in this house, scot-free and for nothing" (*νήπιοι . . . δόμων ἐντοσθεν ὀλοισθε*, 380). On the following day, during the assembly, he repeats this threat (2.143ff.) in a more intense context of longer and more ominous appeals to divine wrath (*θεῶν μῆνιν . . . ἀγασσάμενοι κακὰ ἔργα*, 66f.). In immediate response to this heightened fervor, Zeus sends an omen of fighting eagles. The seer Halitherses, interpreting it, makes the first concrete statement of imminent vengeance (160ff.): Odysseus is already close, "bearing the seeds of murder and doom" for all his foes (*φόνον καὶ κῆρα φυτεύει*). The assembly disperses; and Athene, appearing again (as Mentor) in answer to a second prayer of Telemachus, reiterates the certainty and nearness of revenge (281ff.): "They do not apprehend the death and black fate (*θάνατον καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν*) hovering over them, to overwhelm them all in a day." Heartened, Telemachus utters a third and final warning to the suitors (314ff.): this time no appeal to deity, but a bare assertion of individual intent, most mature in tone for the temperamental youth who that very morning dashed his sceptre to the ground in tears: "Now that *I* am grown, and finding out things from what others tell me, and *my* mettle is mounting within me, *I* shall try how *I* may hurl a terrible doom upon you" (*κακὰς ἐπὶ κῆρας ἰήλω*). This declaration of war sums up the central drives of the exposition: the development of Telemachus' character, the help of the gods (Athene being the "others" from whom he learns), and the theme of Re-

venge. Swiftly the crisp words become action: in an hour or two Odysseus' son is bound for Pylos.

These key passages fall into three groups of three each: a triad of triads<sup>3</sup>—the most elaborate construction of this type in the poem, exerting great mnemonic force by evenly distributed stress on the three vital components of the theme of Vengeance: its agent, the absent Odysseus; its object, the suitors' *hybris*; and its instrument, Telemachus and the contrivances of Athene in general. The first triad expresses hope for revenge, in three visualizations, mounting in scope and intensity, of Odysseus' return and the effect it would have on the suitors. The second definitely announces vengeance, by three assertions that the suitors will be slain for their wrongdoing. And the third drives the point home by crystallizing the theme in three powerful phrases of almost identical length, in the same metrical position, all sounding the dread word *κῆρ* like a battle-cry—the last and most menacing being given to Telemachus. The demarcations of these triads, and the order of their assignment to the characters, correspond to the entries of new subjects and motivations. First, after the council of the gods, which has emphasized Odysseus' present plight, his past glory and future fulfilment are suggested by the figure of his son and the things on which he broods: a mood of retrospection and hope is expressed by Telemachus, and then intensified by Athene. This leads her to state her plan,<sup>4</sup> which changes the boy's mood to a purposeful one: and his ensuing words to the suitors, with their reiteration in the next scene, balance the two sighs of longing which have introduced him. The highest dramatic level of the exposition is reached with the omen from Zeus, a symbol of fulfilment vouchsafed to the hero's son at the crisis of the

<sup>3</sup> The principle of triadic structure—definitively expounded, for Homeric and other epic, by Drerup and Stürmer in *Homerische Poetik*, 1 and 3 (1921; see Indices *s.v. Dreizahl*)—can be illustrated from most narrative and dramatic poetry, e.g.:

When went there by an age, since the great flood,  
But it was fam'd with more than with *one man*?  
When could they say till now, that talk'd of Rome,  
That her wide walls encompass'd *but one man*?  
Now is it Rome indeed and room enough,  
When there is in it *but one only man*.

(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, I, 2). This is triadic heightening at its simplest: addition to a repeated *phrase*; but the principle is the same in the more complex repetition of *ideas*, with or without that of phrase, in the Homeric passages under discussion.

<sup>4</sup> The change of tone is clearly marked (1.267ff.): ἀλλ' ἦ τοι μὲν ταῦτα, κτλ. . . . σὲ δὲ φράζεσθαι ἄνωγα, κτλ.

emotions Athene's plan has roused in him. On this final level, the theme of Vengeance finds a new mouthpiece, Halitherses, whose message of imminent doom is again uttered, in the two concluding scenes, by Athene and Telemachus. Thus the total context of decisive events, not the formal factor of scene-change,<sup>5</sup> determines the grouping of the nine passages and their symmetrical order of appearance (Telemachus, Telemachus, Athene; Athene, Telemachus, Telemachus; Halitherses, Athene, Telemachus).

The integration of the three triads with one another and with the total context emerges in all its richness when they are examined separately.<sup>6</sup>

The first triad intensifies three themes concurrently: Hybris, Nostos and Revenge. Each visualization of the vengeance makes the suitors' guilt appear more grave, Odysseus' return more specific, and his vengeance more crushing. At first the Hybris theme is only implied: Telemachus dreams of his father "recovering *his* honor and property"; then he speaks of the suitors' desire for "gold and fine clothes"; and finally, after Athene has broached the subject of their wooing (1.226) and Telemachus has explained the matter (245ff.), this cardinal point of their guilt appears in the word *πικρόγαμοι*. In harmony with this heightening of the Hybris theme, Odysseus' return is first envisaged vaguely as "from somewhere," then "home to Ithaca," and finally "at the outer gate of the house"; and his revenge is first suggested by the single word "scatter," then made more vivid by portraying the suitors' terror on seeing him, and finally bodied forth in detail by Athene's vision of him "with helmet, shield and two spears, laying hands on the shameless suitors." The last of the visualizations is especially masterly in that it subjects the content and phrasing of the theme to an expansion and a contraction both supremely dramatic in effect. The description of Odysseus at Ephyra, an apparent digression, really strengthens the themes of Nostos and Revenge by associated ideas and presages.<sup>7</sup> Its evocation of the Ithaca that was adds overtones to the note of longing for the master's return, and its picture of him as a bowman in quest of poison for his arrow-tips patently foreshadows the killing of the

<sup>5</sup> Always a subsidiary element in Homer: cf. S. E. Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* (1938) 33ff., on Homeric use of this and the time element.

<sup>6</sup> Henceforth in this paper the term "Hybris" is used for the theme of the suitors' guilt; "Nostos" and "Revenge" for those of Odysseus' return and vengeance.

<sup>7</sup> Telemachus' later informants, Nestor and Menelaus, also use recollections of Odysseus' prowess in this connection (3.218ff.; 4.341ff.).

suitors.<sup>8</sup> And hard on this "digression" follows a phrase which fuses the Revenge and Hybris themes into two words: "swift-doomed and bitterly married"—the shadow of retribution swooping over the thought of the suitors' wooing almost as soon as it is uttered.

Athene renders Telemachus active in her plan for the return and vengeance. The second triad concentrates on the Revenge theme, reinforcing it with detail and widening its frame of reference. Complementing their visualizations of the vengeance, which concentrated on the avenger, Athene and Telemachus color the picture of his victims: adjective grows into verb: the suitors, scattering, terrified, *ᾠκύμοροι*, will be utterly destroyed (*κτείνης, δλοισθε*), in the heart of the palace at whose gate the avenger appears, and without hope of counter-retribution. This last touch comes from Telemachus when he turns on the suitors to voice Athene's plan as a threat: the added detail fits the heightening of emotional tone. On his repetition of the threat next day, the invocation of divine wrath effects a further heightening; it also leads into the omen scene, and foreshadows Telemachus' parting hint (2.314-316) that the manhood-fostering gods are on his side. Beyond these specific heightenings, the second triad manifests a gradual enrichment in general significance. Beginning on the personal, individual plane with Athene's announcement of plan ("You shall kill them in *your* house"), it passes to the social implications of the act ("They shall be *νήπιοι*"), and thence to its meaning as an expression of divine Nemesis.<sup>9</sup>

After this extension of the Revenge theme, the total context calls for some corresponding development in those of Nostos and Hybris; for the central figure of the poem is still the absent Odysseus, and his son's part in the vengeance will plainly bring on some further conflicts with the disrespectful suitors as long as he stays in Ithaca. Accordingly, the third triad, after an initial expansion of the Nostos and Hybris themes, culminates that of Revenge by showing its explosion as active conflict between the characters, in such a way that the theme of Hybris becomes indelibly tinged with implications of vengeance—a presage of the distant final outcome. This is achieved

<sup>8</sup> An implication driven home by the suitors' comments on Telemachus' announcement of intended departure: some of them sarcastically suppose he is going to Ephyra for poison to put into their wine (2.325ff.). These points were, I think, first noted by Stürmer (*op. cit.* 3.47f.).

<sup>9</sup> Thus approaching the level on which the poem begins: cf. Zeus's remarks on the moral order, 1.32ff.

not only by masterly narration, but by a concentration and intensification of phrasing which may be said to raise the Revenge theme to its third power. First, the themes of Nostos, Hybris and Revenge are chanted in unison, as it were, in the speech of Halitherses interpreting the omen. Not only is the avenger alive, he cries, but the twenty years' wanderings are nearly ended, and doom from the hero is so close that the suitors had best desist from their offences at once. Both the Nostos and Hybris themes are here carried a point beyond their previous stages. To the place-details of the return in the first triad are added those of time (the twentieth year) and circumstance (the hero will not be recognized); and the Hybris is further dramatized by the seer's suggestion that it is not too late to mend, that doom may yet be averted. But his words begin and end with the warning note sounded in the phrase *φόνον καὶ κῆρα φυτεύει*. The suitors, of course, deride the prophecy, incredulous that one man could overcome so many foes (2.246ff.); and Athene comments on this foolish ignorance: they are *ἀφραδέες* (282), their hybris has blinded them to what is coming: *θάνατον καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν*, a phrase still stronger than Halitherses' *φόνον καὶ κῆρα*. So the goddess and the suitors themselves expose the fatal nature of their error: their very hybris makes revenge more sure. As in the first and second triads, so in the key-phrases of the first two passages in the final triad, the emphasis falls first on the doer, then on the sufferer of the doom (*φόνος*—*θάνατος*, active—passive). In the third passage, Telemachus' cry, *κακὰς ἐπὶ κῆρας ἰήλω*, is the triumph of the active element: it proclaims the fulfillment of the *κῆρ* which is taking shape in his father (*φυτεύει*). This effect is attained simply by isolating the essential word, *κῆρ*, and reinforcing it with the adjective *κακὰς*, with its implications of a ghastly death for the suitors.<sup>10</sup> It is notable, too, that Telemachus' last words bring the thought of vengeance back to the frame of reference in which the second triad began. After Halitherses has seen in the omen of Zeus the revenge to come, and Athene has stressed its relation to the suitors, Telemachus stands forth as its personal, individual agent. This reversal of the foregoing order of meanings narrows the connotation of the theme to the very razor-edge of drama.

It is now possible to appreciate the role of Homer's use and

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the expansion, at the moment of vengeance, of the phrase *θάνατον καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν* into *θάνατόν τε κακόν καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν* (22.14), as if to do justice to the peculiar horror and suddenness of the slaying of Antinous.

choice of words in this great crescendo of action, character, and mood. His phrasing distills the special essence of each triad into single, climactic lines: "punch-lines," to borrow a useful term from Broadway. The first triad, imagining the physical clash between hero and villains, is typified in the line: πάντες κ' ὠκύμοροι τε γενοῖατο πικρόγαμοί τε (1.266). The second, developing the moral that the vengeance is the suitors' deserved punishment, is summarized in the twice-spoken threat: νήποινοί κεν ἔπειτα δόμων ἔντοσθεν ὀλοισθε (1.380, 2.145); and the third, infusing the Revenge theme with utmost dramatic force, makes its point in the three closely related lines: ἐγγὺς ἔων τοῖσδεσσι φόνον καὶ κῆρα φυτεῖει (2.165), οὐδέ τι ἴσασιν θάνατον καὶ κῆρα μέλαιναν (283), πειρήσω ὥς κ' ὕμμι κακὰς ἐπὶ κῆρας ἰήλω (316). The proportion 1 : 2 : 3, then, represents not only the qualitative increase in power throughout the texture of the exposition, but the numerical increase in summary or formulaic lines concentrating that power into a few words. This procedure shapes the Revenge theme into what may well be called a motif, on the analogy of the *Leitmotiv* in Wagnerian opera;<sup>11</sup> and the whole gradual, symmetrically heightened formulation<sup>12</sup> of this Revenge motif burns it once for all into the hearer's mind, so that henceforth any occurrence of it or associated motifs will set up in him the sound, vibration, rhythm of those ominous phrases expressing the *idées-fixes* τῖσις, φόνος, θάνατος, κῆρ.

The passages I have analyzed exemplify an important aspect of Homeric formula-technique, exhaustive study of which is only beginning.<sup>13</sup> It is plain throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that the

<sup>11</sup> The analogy of musical with Homeric composition is generally treated by G. M. Calhoun in "Homeric Repetitions," *Univ. Cal. Pub. Class. Phil.* 12.1 (1938) 5ff., 10, 21ff. Specifically, the *Leitmotiv* of Wagner (or the *idée-fixe* of Berlioz) is analogous to Homeric formula because it is also employed as a simple mnemonic device to further the unity-in-multiplicity of a complex work of art. The parallel of Wagner is particularly striking in that *Der Ring des Nibelungen* takes about as long to perform as the *Odyssey* probably did to recite (cf. Drerup, *op. cit.* 1.428ff.). Wagner, incidentally, was a lifelong devotee of Homer: in his schooldays he even made a verse translation of the first twelve books of the *Odyssey*, and it has been suggested that he used a line from this in *Tannhäuser* (*Wagner-Jahrbuch* 1913.332).

<sup>12</sup> The symmetry is manifest even in so small a point as the number of lines used to pursue the theme. In each triad it is given at least one terse utterance of exactly three lines or eighteen feet (1.115-117, 163-165, 378-380; 2.143-145, 164-167).

<sup>13</sup> See e.g., M. Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making," *HSPH* 41 (1930) 73ff.; 43 (1932) 1ff.; G. M. Calhoun, *op. cit.*, and "The Art of Formula in Homer—ΕΠΕΑ ΠΙΤΕΡΟΕΝΤΑ," *CPh* 30 (1935) 215ff., and Parry's reply, "About Winged Words," *CPh* 32 (1937) 59ff.; J. T. Sheppard, "Zeus-Loved Achilles," *JHS* 55 (1935) 113ff., and "Great-Hearted Odysseus," *JHS* 56 (1936) 36ff. Parry recognized

poet or poets worked with "ready-made" epithets and phrases, often metrically equivalent (e.g., *φόνον καὶ κῆρα φυτεύει* and *κακὰς ἐπὶ κῆρας ἰήλω*). But the artistic function of such phrases can be discerned only by relating their occurrences to the context. In this case it is abundantly clear that the choice and variation of formulaic phrases was guided by a superb sense of structure, not by mathematical formalism, or a *simplisme* of superfluous repetition,<sup>14</sup> or merely the exigencies of metre. The phrases *φόνον καὶ κῆρα φυτεύει* and *κακὰς ἐπὶ κῆρας ἰήλω*—metrically interchangeable, *mutatis mutandis*—occur where they do because the second speaker is Telemachus hurling threats at his foes, not Halitherses intoning a prophecy: *κακὰς* fortifies *κήρ*, *ιάλλω* is a mightier verb than *φυτεύω*. Nor is it simply the epic Rule of Three which decrees that there shall be one "punch line" in the first triad, a repeated one in the second, and three in the third. These six lines suit the word to the action in the six leading scenes of the exposition: Telemachus and Mentès, Telemachus confronting the suitors in the palace, then in the assembly, the Omen, Telemachus and Mentor, Telemachus' farewell. This, given the prime poetic gift which can create such evocative "formulas," is the patterning and organizing procedure which makes of narrated matter a shapely poem. No amount of structural analysis can reach the central creative secret; but it is good to discern, even partially, the articulation of the wonderful organism which it brings to life.

the presence of variation in the use of formula: "Perhaps the change of an old formula, or the making of a new one on the pattern of the old, or the fusing of old formulas, or a new way of putting them together" (*HSPh* 43 [1932] 9); but he was little inclined to credit such variation to high creative effort. As against this, cf. Sheppard, "Zeus-Loved Achilles," 114. I agree with Calhoun that the poet or poets of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* "composed in lines or groups of lines as freely as does the modern poet in words."

<sup>14</sup> If the third passage of the second triad (2.139–145) is an "interpolation" (three texts bracket it for omission), then, like some other recent commentators (cf. Cauer, *Grundfragen der Homerkritik* [1912] 616; Calhoun, "The Art of Formula in Homer," 223, note 3) I can only admire the talent of the interpolator.