

XIX.—The Oresteia-Story in the *Odyssey*

EDWARD F. D'ARMS AND KARL K. HULLEY

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

Ingeniously intertwined in certain instances with a *Leitmotiv* serving in its turn for other significant purposes, there recurs repeatedly throughout the *Odyssey* an idea which is maintained with marked consistency. The first statement of this idea occurs in the scene on Mt. Olympus with which the action of the *Odyssey* begins, when Zeus, who has been thinking of Aegisthus and his death at the hands of Orestes, addresses the initial speech of the poem to the assembled gods. This situation in itself is enough to convince most moderns who are reading the *Odyssey* for the first time that the gods will control all the actions of the epic.¹ But let us see. The speech of Zeus reads as follows:

"Lo, how men blame the gods! From us, they say, comes evil. But through their own perversity, and more than is their due, they meet with sorrow; even as now Aegisthus, pressing beyond his due, married the lawful wife of the son of Atreus and slew her husband on his coming home. Yet he well knew his own impending ruin; for we ourselves forewarned him, dispatching Hermes, our clear-sighted Speedy-comer, and told him not to slay the man nor woo the wife. 'For vengeance follows from Orestes, son of Atreus, when he comes of age and longs for his own land.' This Hermes said, but though he sought Aegisthus' good, he did not change his purpose. And now Aegisthus makes atonement for it all."²

Here, at the very beginning of the *Odyssey*, linked to the *Leitmotiv* which will be discussed later, appears an idea which is corroborated many, many times in the course of the epic: Men bring their own sorrows upon themselves. Along with this idea is the negative form of it: Men blame the gods for their troubles.³ Although no attempt will be made to present documentary evidence

¹ On the rôle of the gods in Homer, see George M. Calhoun, "Homer's Gods: Prolegomena," *TAPhA* 68 (1937) 11-25.

² *Od.* 1.32 ff. All translations are quoted from the rendering of George Herbert Palmer, revised edition (Cambridge, 1920).

³ It is interesting to compare the attitude of Priam, who, though courteously absolving Helen from all blame for the Trojan war, places none of it on any of the Trojans (*Il.* 3.164 f.).

for every appearance of this idea in the *Odyssey*, a few of the most striking examples may be mentioned.

I

Athene, immediately after the conference of the gods, visits Telemachus, assuming the form of Mentès for the purpose. She persuades him to tell the story of his situation. In the course of his recital, Telemachus states that once his house was fortunate, "but the hard-purposed gods then changed their minds" (1.234) and kept Odysseus away from home. He continues (1.243 f.), "Yet now I do not grieve and mourn for him alone. The gods have brought me other sore distress," by which he means the suitors. Athene does not reply directly but indicates clearly that Telemachus might do something about the situation if he tried. In fact, most of the first four books of the *Odyssey* might be called "The Education of Telemachus," for throughout it is Athene's avowed purpose to inspire Telemachus to assume the responsibility for acting.⁴ For example, in Book III Telemachus has reached the home of Nestor. The story of Orestes is told in some detail, and Nestor exhorts Telemachus (3.199 f.) that he too should be brave and win fame for the future. Telemachus replies:

"O Nestor, son of Neleus, great glory of the Achaeans, stoutly that son took vengeance, and the Achaeans shall spread his fame afar, that future times may know. Oh, that to me, as well, the gods would give the power to pay the suitors for their grievous wrongs, for they with insult work me outrage! But no such boon the gods bestowed on me and my father. Now, therefore, all must simply be endured."⁵

Nestor, like Athene previously, prods Telemachus by asking (3.214 f.), "Do you willingly submit, or are the people of your land averse to you, led by some voice of God?" The development of Telemachus' manhood can be traced in detail, as he gradually gathers confidence, assumes control of many matters in his own home, joins with Odysseus in planning the destruction of the suitors, takes a worthy part in their slaughter when the time comes, and finally stands with Laertes and Odysseus against the numerous relatives of the slain suitors in Book xxiv. In brief, we may say that he learns

⁴ See the discussion of W. J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 1930) 208 ff.

⁵ *Od.* 3.202 ff.

that the gods are not averse, but that if he will act himself he can improve his situation.⁶

In the story of Odysseus and his comrades, there are many examples of mortals causing their destruction by their own perversity, even though they frequently blame the gods. After the successful raid on the Ciconians, Odysseus ordered his men to withdraw; but they foolishly disobeyed, and as a result one hundred and twenty of them were slain. Yet Odysseus himself says (9.52 f.), "And now an evil fate from Zeus beset our luckless men, causing us many sorrows." Six of Odysseus' men perished in the cave of the Cyclops, not as the result of Fate or the will of the gods, but rather, as Eurylochus says (10.437), "by his <Odysseus> folly." After leaving the island of Aeolus with all the winds shut up in a leather bag except the one that would bring them home, Odysseus' men, without any intervention of the gods, opened the bag while he slept. The adverse winds rushed out; the men, already in sight of Ithaca, were driven back to Aeolus' island and thence wandered on their fatal journey from which none of them returned. Yet, when they arrived at Aeolus' home a second time, he refused to help them, on the grounds that Odysseus and his men were hated and accursed by the gods. Actually, as Odysseus himself says (10.27), "By our folly we were lost."

The most important episode in deciding the fate of Odysseus' companions is that which involves the cattle of the Sun. Three times a prophecy referring to the loss of his companions appears: when the Cyclops, Polyphemus, invokes a curse on Odysseus and his men, which Poseidon grants (9.530 ff.);⁷ when Teiresias warns Odysseus in the lower world (11.104 ff.); and when Circe again tells Odysseus after his return from Hades (12.127 ff.). In the last two instances the prophecy is essentially the same; in both it is stated that *if* Odysseus' comrades kill the cattle of the Sun then dire consequences will follow. In no place is it stated or implied that his comrades must kill the cattle. Furthermore, when the actual slaughter takes place, Eurylochus knows full well the consequences of his act, but deliberately chooses to run the risk of death by shipwreck rather than die of starvation (12.340 ff.). Hence the statement of the introduction of the *Odyssey* (1.6 ff.) is true, "Yet even so, despite his zeal, he did not save his men; for through their own perversity they

⁶ Cf. Calhoun, *op. cit.* (see note 1) 16.

⁷ Polyphemus, of course, makes no reference to the cattle of the Sun.

perished, having recklessly devoured the kine of the exalted Sun, who therefore took away the day of their return."

After Odysseus and his assistants have slain the suitors, Eurycleia, the old nurse, appears and is about to exult over the deliverance of Penelope and the household from the unwelcome guests. Odysseus, however, says to her:

"Woman, be glad within; but hush, and make no cry. It is not right to glory in the slain. The gods' doom and their reckless deeds destroyed them; for they respected nobody on earth, bad man or good, who came among them. So through their own perversity they met a dismal doom."⁸

And finally, lest this appear an *ex parte* statement, there is the pronouncement of the seer Halitherses, made to the relatives of the dead suitors when they are debating vengeance:

"Hearken now, men of Ithaca, to what I say. By your own fault, my friends, these deeds are done; because you paid no heed to me nor yet to Mentor, the shepherd of the people, in hindering your sons from foolish crime. They wrought a monstrous deed in wanton willfulness, when they destroyed the goods and wronged the wife of one who was their prince, saying that he would come no more. Let then the past be ended, and listen to what I say: do not set forth, or some may find a self-sought ill."⁹

Other examples may be found in the *Odyssey*, but this part of our exposition will be concluded with the brief mention of Elpenor, Odysseus' companion who fell from the roof of Circe's house, where he was sleeping off the effects of drink. When Odysseus met Elpenor's unburied shade in Hades, Elpenor stated the cause of his death thus (11.61): "Heaven's cruel doom destroyed me, and excess of wine." Even after death, it would appear, man is unwilling to accept the responsibility for his acts, but prefers to blame the gods.

II

The Oresteia-motif appears about a dozen times in the *Odyssey* in more or less complete form. Its most important occurrences are as follows: It is the subject of Zeus's reflections at the opening of the *Odyssey*, as we have already seen. It occurs twice, at some length, in Book III (193 ff.; 253 ff.), when Telemachus is visiting Nestor. It appears again in great detail in Book IV (512 ff.) in the

⁸ *Od.* 22.411 ff.

⁹ *Od.* 24.454 ff.

course of Menelaus' account of events to Telemachus. In Book xi (382 ff.), almost one hundred lines are used to recount Odysseus' conversation with Agamemnon in Hades, and most of this conversation deals with Agamemnon's murder at the hands of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. There is a brief reference to the story in Book xiii (383 ff.), shortly after Odysseus has reached Ithaca, and finally, in the *νέκυνια δευτέρα* with which Book xxiv opens, Agamemnon appears again in the lower world, discusses with Achilles their respective fates, and meets the souls of the dead suitors as they arrive. To this last-mentioned scene in particular, objection has been made since the time of Aristarchus, who athetized the passage, as he did apparently everything else subsequent to line 296 of Book xxiii.¹⁰ What, then, is the reason for the repetition of the motif, what purpose does it serve, what is the significance of its final appearance?

As already suggested above, the first use of the motif is to state the theme of man's responsibility for his own troubles, and we have seen how this theme is repeated, with crescendo effects, throughout the *Odyssey*. Secondly, it serves for purposes of comparison.¹¹ This function is obvious in several instances, less obvious in others. For example, as mentioned above, the first four books of the *Odyssey* are largely occupied with the education of Telemachus. Here Telemachus is frequently compared, directly or indirectly, with Orestes. Each appears, at that stage of the poem, to have a parent to avenge and a patrimony to win. Orestes has comported himself gallantly and has won not only his kingdom but undying fame as well. Telemachus is urged by Athene,¹² by Nestor, and by Menelaus to do the same.

Again, in the final use of the motif in Book xxiv, Agamemnon concludes his lengthy conversations with Achilles and Amphimedon

¹⁰ Modern scholars differ in their views; e.g., Rose (*A Handbook of Greek Literature* [New York, 1934]) omits the scene completely in his outline of the plot of the *Odyssey*, but is obviously hesitant in including it among the passages he would regard as interpolations (see his page 46, note 77); moreover, about the conclusion as a whole, he argues (page 30, note 30) that "A modern would have ended at Book xxiii; Homer could not leave his hero with an unsettled blood-feud hanging over him." Cf. Woodhouse, *op. cit.* (see note 4) 116, 205 f., 232 f., 246 f.; Walter Allen, Jr., "The Theme of the Suitors in the *Odyssey*," *TAPhA* 70 (1939) 104-124 (esp. 121 ff.). Mackail ("The Epilogue of the *Odyssey*": *Greek Poetry and Life* [Oxford, 1936]) agrees with those who definitely regard it as an addition.

¹¹ Cf. Woodhouse, *op. cit.* 140 f., 246 f.

¹² Cf. Woodhouse, *op. cit.* 246 f.; F. W. Jones, "The Formulation of the Revenge Motif in the *Odyssey*," *TAPhA* 72 (1941) 195-202.

with a glorious tribute to Penelope, whose fame as the constant wife shall be everlasting, and also with an equally fervent curse on Clytemnestra, the treacherous wife, whose name shall be a disgrace to womankind forever. And the comparison of the two is direct and pointed, as Agamemnon deliberately emphasizes the utter difference in their character.¹³

A less elaborate, but no less significant, comparison is introduced between Agamemnon and Odysseus. When Athene appears to Odysseus after his arrival in Ithaca, she informs him of the suitors, their plot against Telemachus, and their general insolence. Odysseus replies (13.383 ff.), "Certainly here at home I too had met the evil fate of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, had not you, goddess, duly told me all." Here, obviously, the comparison has nothing to do with Penelope and Clytemnestra or with Telemachus and Orestes, for Odysseus is simply voicing the similarity of what might have been his fate to that of Agamemnon.¹⁴

Yet this last example brings out a point which might be inferred from other passages, but which seems not to be explicitly recognized as part of the structure of the plot. Briefly, it is this: Just as Penelope is the "opposite number" of Clytemnestra, and Telemachus of Orestes, and Odysseus of Agamemnon, so the suitors must correspond to Aegisthus. And, just as Aegisthus was warned what would happen to him, so the suitors have been warned by Telemachus (1.372 ff.; 2.138 ff.), by Halitherses (2.161 ff.), by Theoclymenus (20.350 ff.), and by the omens themselves (2.146 ff.). But just as Aegisthus persisted in his course, despite the warning from Hermes, so the suitors have persisted in their impious conduct. Consequently, since we have seen that men bring their own troubles upon themselves by their own perversity, the suitors deserve their fate at the hands of Odysseus. We have already noticed the pronouncements of Odysseus and of Halitherses that the suitors have brought their fate upon themselves. Thus it can be seen that the introduction of the Oresteia-motif is an important part of the justification of the plot.

¹³ Mackail, who in his discussion of the scene says (*op. cit.* 4) that "Its 'purpose' is to sum up . . . the 'moral' of the whole story . . . and it winds up on the key-motif of the whole *Odyssey* . . . the contrast of Penelope and Clytemnestra," holds (*op. cit.* 7) that "a 'moralization' is no more required at the conclusion of the *Odyssey* than it is required at the conclusion of the *Iliad*." Cf., however, Woodhouse, *op. cit.* 205 f., 232 f., 246 f.

¹⁴ Cf. Woodhouse, *op. cit.* 140 f., 246 f.

A third possible reason for the introduction of this recurring motif is that it has the effect of ennobling Penelope and Telemachus, and even to some extent the suitors. That is to say, all four of the characters in the Agamemnon story were well known. Not only was Agamemnon the commander-in-chief of the Greek forces at Troy; as Thucydides points out (1.9.1), he was also the mightiest king of his day in the Greek world. Furthermore, he was a descendant of the house of Pelops, so famous in Greek legend and literature. Aegisthus was famous for the same reason, since he represented the other branch of the family. Clytemnestra, as the sister of Helen, was famous in her own right, as well as for being the wife of Agamemnon and the mother of Iphigenia, Orestes, and Electra. And throughout the *Odyssey*, Orestes is represented as being a worthy son of a great house, the ruling family in Argos and Mycenae, the richest and most powerful of Greek cities in that age. Compared with Argos, Ithaca was insignificant, "the provinces" as opposed to the capital of the Greek world. Odysseus himself was well known, but only because of his adventures at Troy with the other great heroes of Greece. It is interesting to observe that there are no extant works of the classical period of Greek literature or earlier which have Penelope or Telemachus as their subject. In other words, Homer has dared to take a comparatively obscure family and setting, and to make them of epic proportions. One way in which he succeeded is by the constant use of the comparison of Odysseus and his family with Agamemnon and his family.

In conclusion, one other possible use of this *Leitmotiv* may be noted briefly. According to the account of Menelaus and later of Agamemnon himself, Aegisthus accomplished the murder of Agamemnon and his followers by inviting them to a feast and slaughtering them there as "at some rich, powerful man's wedding, or banquet, or gay festival" (11.414 f.; cf. 4.534 ff.). Since this was exactly the way in which Odysseus slew the suitors, at a feast on the festival of Apollo, it may be that Homer intentionally used the similarity of setting to heighten the contrast in the outcome of the action.