

## VI. The Marriage Song—*Odyssey* 23

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The idea of telos in a literary sense implies not only that the end has been reached but that the end completes what was begun. I have never been able to accept the dictum of Aristarchus and Aristophanes that the *Odyssey* ends at 23.296,<sup>1</sup> for it has seemed to me that this telos does not satisfy the requirements of the narrative either in action or in art.

It may well be futile to adduce new arguments to support the view that the end of the *Odyssey* (23.296–24.548) is an integral and organic part of the story of the “man of many moves.” Perhaps this will always be simply a matter of *alogos phora*, i.e. subjective response dictated by personal inclination, by emotion or, less charitably, by vested interest. Such a counsel of despair, however, does not yet seem to me necessary. If we cannot establish for the criticism of Homer purely “objective” standards such as linguistic evidence,<sup>2</sup> we can still turn to the elements of style,

<sup>1</sup> See Scholia, Eustathius, *ad loc.*

<sup>2</sup> See J. B. Bury, “The End of the *Odyssey*,” *JHS* 42 (1922) 1–15, where he asserts that language and meter do not furnish good evidence for suspecting the end of the *Odyssey*; it is the literary which must decide. This opinion is based in some measure upon and supported by A. Shewan’s “The ‘Continuation’ of the *Odyssey*,” *CP* 8 (1913) 284–300, *CP* 9 (1914) 35 f., 160 f., where Shewan observes that, so far as language goes, the continuation is not separated in age from the rest of the poems. D. Page (*The Homeric Odyssey*, Oxford 1955) disagrees violently with Shewan and Bury. In a burst of certainty he says, “I suppress the names of those who have written such falsehoods as the following: ‘The evidence is, as regards both language and metre, so slight as to be negligible’; ‘Language and metre, then, furnish no good evidence even for suspecting that 23.297 to the end of 24 could not have come directly from Homer’s hand.’ It needs hardly to be said that the writers had not taken the trouble to find out what the evidence is.” This is a harsh judgment, for although Page’s book is immensely valuable in many ways, his argument from the Greek language is far less certain than his reader is led to believe. For example, a fundamental proposition in Page’s linguistic analysis is his assertion that a word in the continuation is historically late, therefore unknown to the composer of the rest of the *Odyssey*, therefore evidence that the continuation is itself late. In his *The Homeric Odyssey* 109, Page says *peraiōthentes* “belongs to the vocabulary of fifth-century prose.” This means, of course, that we have no evidence of its existence prior to the 5th century, but is hardly an impressive proposition when one considers the limitations which beset any such assertion. If Page had found the word *gerousia*

structure and organization in literature as concrete evidence for a basis of interpretation. I do not propose to set forth a theory of criticism, but I do insist that legitimate interpretative criticism finds its strength and validity in the work of art itself. There must be a reasonable correspondence between the evidence of the work of art and the critical interpretation. Of course, there is danger of subjectivism, but this risk must be taken; the alternative is an iron curtain of silence. Literary criteria, cautiously and carefully presented, still seem to me to offer a sound mode of critical procedure. In the case of the end of the *Odyssey* it seems to me the only method now available.

According to my interpretation, then, Aristarchus and Aristophanes are either mistaken or misunderstood.<sup>3</sup> It is contrary to all reason and sentiment that either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* should close with a “so they went to bed” finale. Bury, Bassett, Rothe,<sup>4</sup> and others have adduced literary grounds for their conviction that the *Odyssey* is artistically complete only after the Second Nekuia, the meeting of Laertes and Odysseus and the Spondai. It is not my intention to review this work but rather to examine one further piece of literary evidence which seems to me both relevant and compelling.

Let us look at the critical lines (Book 23):

295 ἐς θάλαμον δ' ἀγαγοῦσσα πάλιν κίεν. οἱ μὲν ἔπειτα  
 ἀσπάσιοι λέκτροι παλαιοῦ θεσμὸν ἵκοντο.  
 αὐτὰρ Τηλέμαχος καὶ βουκόλος ἤδε συβάτης  
 παῦσαν ἄρ' ὄρχηθμοιο πόδας, παῦσαν δὲ γυναικας,  
 αὐτοὶ δ' εὐνάζοντο κατὰ μέγαρα σκιόεντα.

in Homer, he would have noted that the passage was late since its first appearance in classical literature occurs in Euripides. He would have been quite wrong, for *gerousia* appears in Mycenaean Greek (M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* [Cambridge 1956] 172). I do not believe the linguistic argument is by any means conclusive.

<sup>3</sup> The basis for judging the end of the *Odyssey* as post-Homeric is not given by the scholia. Modern opinions differ (see Page [above, note 2] 130, note 2). It does seem strange, though perhaps not incredible, that Aristarchus should athetize passages (23.310–43, 24.1–204) within the “continuation” which as a whole he has already observed to be beyond the telos of the *Odyssey*. See W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer*, 2 (London 1948) 404 and *contra* Page ([above, note 2] 131, note 10) who considers athetesis always to mean not that lines are un-Homeric but that they are later additions to a basic text.

<sup>4</sup> C. Rothe, *Die Odyssee als Dichtung* (Paderborn 1914) 177–94. See Stanford's fine note (above, note 3) 430 on Homer's final portrayal of Odysseus.

It has been observed that *hoi men epeita* is a curious, if not inappropriate, locution to express the last thought in the poem. It may, indeed, be curious but would hardly afford convincing evidence that something must necessarily follow, were it not for the relevance and artistic importance of the three lines (297-9) which immediately follow the alleged telos. If it can be shown, as I shall seek to do, that what follows line 296 is in fact very much in the manner of Homer as a narrative poet, we may conclude that *hoi men epeita* is precisely the right construction and that indeed the *Odyssey* does not end at line 296.

Recall the context. Book 23 is devoted primarily to the penultimate but most exciting anagnorisis of the *Odyssey*.<sup>5</sup> Penelope in all her discreetness and loyalty delays the recognition by demanding incontrovertible evidence of the identity of Odysseus. Telemachus is exasperated, but Odysseus continues in control both of himself and the situation; understanding his wife's misgivings, he calms his son (23.113-14). He is filthy and in rags; this is why his wife does not honor and recognize him. When all who are present can think only of recognition and reunion, Odysseus, the alert man of many devices (23.129), sees beyond the immediate crisis to the security of his family, himself and his kingdom—now and in the future. The ruinous danger of retributive revenge threatens at any moment to destroy his victory. Odysseus has reckoned with this danger before the slaying of the suitors<sup>6</sup>; now he faces the fact (23.117-21). His response reveals the brilliance of Homeric narrative technique, so simple and yet so dramatically and aesthetically effective.<sup>7</sup>

Odysseus bids Telemachus and all the servants wash, put on fresh clothes. There is to be a celebration with marriage song, and the bard is to be summoned to accompany with music the

<sup>5</sup> There is a diminution in tension, a slowing of pace, as both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* draw to the end.

<sup>6</sup> *Odyssey* 20.43. Odysseus asks Athena where he might flee or escape if he should kill the suitors. Subsequently events assure Odysseus that he need not "escape" from Ithaca, but it is interesting to note that this is precisely what Eupeithes, father of Antinous, expects Odysseus to do (cf. 24.430-31 and 437). Convention calls for flight (cf. Theoclymenus) in the one case, for revenge in the other. Cf. G. M. Calhoun, "Télémaque et le plan de l'*Odyssée*," *REG* 47 (1934) 153-63.

<sup>7</sup> Page (above, note 2) 114-15 severely censures this scene as a "ruinous interpolation." It must, of course, be eliminated if Page's thesis is to be secured. He concludes, "It is perfectly obvious that it was inserted in order to prepare the mind of the listener for the events of the last scene in the Twenty-fourth Book," which is of course a later addition in Page's view.

dancing and merriment (23.130-4). Passers-by will think there is a wedding within, and news of the suitors' death will not spread before Odysseus can devise a plan from a better base of operation, the farm of Laertes. The events of the scene arise naturally from the elements of the story and from the character of Odysseus. We are not to be disappointed in this final crisis before recognition. This is the ultimate in self-control<sup>8</sup> and endurance. His ruse to suppress the *kleos phonou* and his foresight in planning are so entirely characteristic of Odysseus. But more than this, Homer succeeds with such apparent ease in clearing the stage for the reunion of husband and wife.<sup>9</sup> After twenty years of separation Penelope and Odysseus are together and alone.<sup>10</sup> No prying eyes are present to see Odysseus emerge from his bath like unto the immortals in stature. His wife, however, does not immediately respond to his wondrous alteration, and Odysseus, puzzled or perhaps irritated by this, addresses Penelope as *daimoniē* (strange woman), repeats the very words of the impatient, impetuous Telemachus, and calls for a bed, thereby opening the way for a last demonstration of the wit of Penelope.<sup>11</sup> She too, in her own way, is astonished at the transformation in Odysseus. "Daimonie," says Penelope, repeating the salutation of Odysseus and indicating in turn her sense of the uncertainty and strangeness which still persists. Thus the motivation for Penelope's trial of Odysseus which at last both taxes Odysseus to the breaking point and reveals fully his identity to his wife arises naturally from the context and from the characters themselves.

<sup>8</sup> See Athena's famous characterization of Odysseus at Book 13.331-2. Shortly hereafter, humanly and redeemingly, Odysseus speaks for once without reflection when Penelope's last test stirs him to the breaking point.

<sup>9</sup> J. Scott (*CJ* 12 (1917) 397-404) summarizes his article on the close of the *Odyssey* by listing five reasons why the recognition scene between Penelope and Odysseus is not the conclusion of the poem. His second reason reads: "Homer loves to move in the throng and often violates other principles so as to keep his scenes crowded with people; hence, he would hardly close his poem with a scene in which there were but two actors and no spectators." I think Homer does love to move in the throng and ends his poem with a crowded scene. Certainly Odysseus stands frequently alone upon a high outlook searching the horizon for smoke, upon a raft, or tearfully on the beach looking out to sea, and even in the crowd Penelope can be very much alone in her loneliness.

<sup>10</sup> The listener is aware only briefly of the presence of Eurycleia (23.171) and principally in retrospect of the presence of Eurycleia and the old nurse (23.289-95).

<sup>11</sup> 23.164-72 (166-8 = 100-2). See Stanford (above, note 3) 397-8 where he suggests this interpretation of *daimoniē* and *daimonie*.

Yet beyond the characters of Odysseus and Penelope and the appropriateness of removing the crowd from the stage, Homer has created in lines 130-4 an atmosphere of rejoicing and merriment as background for the reunion. This is the command of Odysseus; his command is obeyed; and as is the manner of Homeric oral locution, there is repetition of Odysseus' words in formulaic lines, repetition with variation of the substance of his commands.<sup>12</sup> All this reinforces and emphasizes the festal atmosphere of rejoicing both as a deception and as a celebration of joyful reunion.

Consider then the importance of the lines under discussion

Then Odysseus and Penelope *for their part* gladly came to the place where their bed was set of old, *but* Telemachus with the oxherd and swineherd stopped the dancing feet, stopped the dancing of the women, and retired to bed in the shadowy hall. (23.297-9)

Here indeed is the point. Homer has enclosed the recognition and reunion in the music of the bard. Music opens the scene; it is a marriage song with dance, heard within and without the megaron hall of Odysseus. It recedes into the background as the two central figures absorb the listeners' attention and at the end swells once more before dying away as all retire to the peace and rest of sleep. With the opening of the scene the music begins; with the closing it must end. If this follows from the narrative structure of the story, we may conclude that the *Odyssey* as a whole does not end at line 296 where Aristophanes and Aristarchus suggest. Rather Homer keeps the continuity of narrative by widening the focus once again to the people who surround and rejoice in the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope.

The correctness of this interpretation, it seems to me, is all the more likely inasmuch as those who are convinced that the "continuation" is a later addition have warmly admired this narrative technique of rounding out or bracketing scenes. It is thought to be a characteristic of the "original" parts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Page in particular praises the first Book of the

<sup>12</sup> (1) Wash and put on fresh clothes (131=142); (2) Lead the divine bard here with his lyre for the dance (133-4, cf. 143-5); (3) Do this in order that people outside the house will think there is a marriage feast in progress (135-6, cf. 148-9). P. H. Harsh in his article "Penelope and Odysseus in 'Odyssey' 19," *AJP* 71 (1950) 2-3 notes the "marriage" dance which surrounds the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus in Book 23.

*Odyssey* thus: “The first Book, taken as a whole, is much more than merely a coherent story and a suitable preface to the *Odyssey*: it is also a work of great dramatic power, picturesque and most carefully planned.”<sup>13</sup> A high point among the observations Page makes in support of his judgment is what he calls “the most artistic touch of all. The conversation of Athena and Telemachus begins and ends with references to a song by the poet Phemius (154 f., 325 ff.), a song which continues throughout the scene, forming an accompaniment to all they say; even the Suitors are listening to it in silence (325). The most apt and ominous that could be imagined—δ' Ἀχαιῶν νόστον ἀειδε—the *Homecoming of the men who went to Troy*.”<sup>14</sup> This is an illuminating insight and is cited at length, for it involves essentially an awareness of the same technique which is employed in the recognition scene between Penelope and Odysseus. In the latter case it is equally effective, but now joyous rather than ominous. The music of Phemius combines with the dancing of ἀνδρῶν παιζόντων καλλιζώνων τε γυναικῶν—symbolic not of Penelope’s capitulation and Odysseus’ death but of return, reward, reunion and “remarriage” of husband and wife.

<sup>13</sup> Page (above, note 2) 59.

<sup>14</sup> Page (above, note 2) 60.