

The Odyssean Suitors and the Host-Guest Relationship

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The basic theme of the *Odyssey*, that of the warrior and wanderer, battle-scarred and tempest-tossed, who finally gains the quietude of a safe return to the loving arms of a faithful wife, is, as we all know, complicated by an ultimate act of violence at the very threshold of that quietude: Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors who had encamped upon his domain for years, vying for the hand of his presumptive widow, and wasting his substance in the process.¹

The extreme bitterness of this denouement, and its disharmony with the tone of the rest of the epic, has troubled a recent critic. He writes:²

. . . The evil of the suitors is a house of cards, carefully piled up to be knocked down, with the appearance of justice, at the appointed time. In the case of Amphinomus and Leiodes, the poet seems to struggle with the story a little. . . . Clearly the slaughter of the suitors takes place on a level very far from that which views sin as lying primarily in motive and attitude. Its basis is a creed, the creed of the primitive clan, and if Homer has managed the character of Antinous so that one feels that his death is justified, the scene as a whole remains a massacre, an indiscriminating application of the univocal law of possession. It is very far from the psychological profundity of the *Iliad*, with its questioning of forms, and its insistence on the inner state of the individual. Here one feels that a primitive story—and the slaughter of the suitors corresponds to the ending of many an old folk tale . . . —has resisted the efforts of the poet to moralize and universalize it. It is meant to be a reestablishment of right order, but an orgy of blood vengeance peers through the moral scheme, the less sympathetic for being committed, unlike the orgy and

¹ This paper had the benefit of informal discussion among the members of the Mediterranean Sociological Conference held in Athens on 15–20 July, 1963, under the aegis of the Social Sciences Centre, Athens.

² Cedric H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1958) 305–8.

self-destroying vengeance of Achilles, in the dispassionate conviction of moral rightness. . . . [The] original suitors of the tradition have been conceived by the poet somehow in terms of the oppressive oligarchies which supplanted the Mycenaean monarchies. To conceive them so was brilliant, in that their actions thus achieve a pointed vigor, especially to the poet's contemporaries. Yet, when it comes to their annihilation, they must all, after Antinous and Eurymachus, fall back into the shadows of the old tale, mere wrong men doomed from the first, yet now a little too real to be taken as such. The conflict between the material and the conception is not quite resolved. . . .

Such inconcinnity, little as one may feel it in actually reading the *Odyssey*, seems, like so much else in the poem's artistic conceiving, the token of slightly altered tastes, of new concerns entering and beginning to disintegrate older forms, even as one sees it in proto-Attic art. The form cannot as yet be called disintegrated, but one feels that, given a little more of this interest in the homely and the contemporary, a little more realism, a little more opening of the door to new impressions, and a new form must replace the epic, at least in its primacy. And indeed, the new forms came very soon, oral poetry yielded place to literature, and epic became a scholar's exercise.

Another classical scholar finds the whole pattern of the suitor story so out of harmony with the courtship customs of the Greeks that he looks outside Greek culture for the provenience of the tale, and finds it in the Hindu tradition of the *svayamvara*, the princess' independent choice of a spouse from among her many wooers:³

De même, dans un pays de *svayamvara*, la venue des prétendants à la cour et l'accueil somptueux qui leur est fait n'ont rien que de normal. Dans l'*Odyssee* au contraire, leur conduite paraît presque dépourvue de sens. Ces seigneurs, qui espèrent gagner Pénélope et son royaume, n'ont trouvé d'autre moyen de succès que de venir s'établir chez elle, d'y banqueter tous les jours à ses dépens, de rudoyer ses plus fidèles serviteurs, de traiter son fils avec hauteur en attendant de comploter son assassinat. Quelle curieuse façon d'attendrir la mère! Et quels soins ils prennent des biens qu'ils convoitent! Arrivent-ils du moins de quelque royaume dont l'éloignement rendrait leur séjour compréhensible? En aucune façon. Ce sont voisins immédiats. Leur conduite ne s'explique pas plus qu'elle ne s'excuse.

³ Gabriel Germain, *Genèse de l'Odyssee* (Paris 1954) 32-33.

There is no doubt that this scholar is right in pointing up the anomaly: in fact, Homer himself has Penelope complain explicitly about the suitors' unusual behavior (*Od.* 18.275–80). But I believe that within the framework of Hellenic culture we may arrive at an interpretation of the story which will both explain the suitors' anomalous conduct and will also account for the "orgy of blood vengeance" which Whitman finds so troublesome. My interpretation will fall, I believe, quite within the framework which Whitman establishes, for it attempts to evoke from the shadows the old tale to which he refers.

It is my hypothesis that the suitor story as we have it in the *Odyssey* is the result of the reworking into the epic framework of quite another tale. Admittedly without any direct evidence, I posit the early existence of a motif which I shall call "The Unjust Guests Outstay Their Welcome and Impoverish Their Host."⁴ This motif I attribute to what Redfield calls the "little tradition," the culture of the country folk, as contrasted with the "great tradition," that of the noble class, which ultimately becomes the culture of the literate and scholarly echelons of the society.⁵ When transposed to the epic, this theme from the *milieu* of hard-working, frugal farmers came into conflict, I suggest, with the courtly tradition of the warrior princes, for whom lavish and open-handed hospitality was a dominant cultural mode. The wasters could thus no longer be presented as mere guests, but had to be assigned a different role. Given the presence of a queen with an absent spouse, the poet, as I reconstruct the process, transmuted the figures of wasteful guests into those of importunate suitors. But the emotion-laden denouement which I shall try to show was appropriate to the early form of the tale was too deeply embedded in the story to be discarded. Conflated with the theme of a returning hero's identification by a test of strength,⁶ it resulted in the story of the massacre as we have it. Let us examine this hypothesis in detail.

Evidence for the survival of elements of the "little tradition" alongside of the courtly code of the Homeric warrior has long been

⁴ Cf. Stith Thompson, *Motif-index of Folk-literature* (Bloomington [Indiana] 1955) 5.491, W151.2.2.

⁵ Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago 1956) 70.

⁶ Cf. Thompson (above, note 4) 3.513, H1562.

recognized. I have elsewhere⁷ called attention to the clash in the account of the gifts exchanged by Diomedes and Glaucus (*Iliad* 6.119–23) between the courtly tradition reflected in the exchange itself and the severely practical remark of the poet upon it: “Zeus must have taken Glaucus’ brains away, for he gave Diomedes his golden armor in exchange for armor of bronze, a hundred oxen’s worth for the value of nine.” In my former discussion I mistakenly, I now believe, attributed the anomaly to the different social classes of the poet and his audience; I now prefer to see the crass materialism of the remark as the persistence of the little tradition in the face of the great. Two other examples may be adduced: in the second *Iliad* (2.183–84) Odysseus, in his haste to accomplish a military mission, tosses his rich cloak to the ground—here we see the great tradition of *sans souci*⁸—but the voice of the little tradition thriftily remarks, “His herald, the Ithacan Eurybates, picked it up.” A similar practical concern for a cloak thrown aside in similar lordly abandon is seen also in the *Odyssey* (14.500–2). The second example, an evidence of peasant-like suspiciousness quite at variance with the grand tradition of Penelope’s high-minded fidelity, is found in a single line of the fifteenth *Odyssey* (15.19). Here Telemachus is warned to beware lest his mother filch some of his father’s household goods should she leave Odysseus’ home to marry the generous suitor Eurymachus. This ignoble suggestion so outraged a later exponent of aristocratic scholarship, Aristophanes, that he rejected the verse as spurious.

If we may thus discern an opposition between the two traditions in the representation of attitudes towards articles of armor, apparel, and household ware, by what right do we extend this to reach the area of the host-guest relationship?

I believe that the contrast under discussion may be perceived in the two modes of handling the theme of the gods’ concern for the stranger who comes to a house needing shelter and food. One mode is represented by the concept that the stranger himself may be a god in disguise, and that it is prudent to treat him well lest he punish the reluctant host for his lack of hospitality. The theme occurs in the Philemon-Baucis myth, the tale of the rustic

⁷ Harry L. Levy, “The Study of Language as a Social Science,” *Assoc. of Amer. Coll. Bulletin* 40 (1954) 404–5.

⁸ Cf. Whitman (above, note 2) 215.

couple who entertained in their simple home Zeus and Hermes, who, disguised as travelers, had been rejected by all others to whose doors they had come. This particular form of the story is attested only from the Augustan period.⁹ The theme, however, is quite explicitly set forth in the *Odyssey* itself. When Antinous strikes Odysseus, who is disguised as a wandering beggar, a member of the company remonstrates: "Antinous, you did not do well in striking the wretched wanderer. You are doomed if by chance he is some god from heaven! And indeed gods in the likeness of strangers, assuming all sorts of shapes, visit the cities of men, beholding their outrageousness and their righteousness" (*Od.* 17.483–87). Contrast with this peasant-like plea for enlightened self-interest the abstract concept of divine concern for host-guest relationships as it appears elsewhere in the *Odyssey*: "Reverence the gods," says Odysseus to the Cyclops; "for we are your suppliants. Zeus is the imparter of honor (*epitimêtor*)¹⁰ to suppliants and strangers, Zeus, the strangers' god, who is always at the side of strangers, who are to be revered" (*Od.* 9.269–71); "Stranger, it would not be in accord with divine law (*themis*) to refuse honor to (*atimêsai*) a stranger, even if he were lowlier than you: for all strangers and beggars are from Zeus" (*Od.* 14.56–58; cf. 7.162–65, 181).

It appears reasonable to class the first of these modes ("Be kind to a stranger; he may be a god!") as a folk-motif belonging to the little, and the second ("Be kind to a stranger: such is the will of Zeus!") as a courtly trait belonging to the great tradition. If we may thus identify a folk-motif defining the obligation of the host to the guest, and imposing possible divine punishment as a sanction for the neglect of the obligation, what of a corresponding motif defining the obligation of the guest to the host, with a similar sanction? Here the obligation would be (for I do not mean the return of hospitality, the reciprocal host-guest relationship) not to overstay one's welcome, and to have due regard for the substance of the host, who on his part must offer it freely and without restriction. The Germanic proverb, "After three days guests, like fish, begin to smell" has, as far as I have been able to

⁹ Cf. Ludolf Malten, "Motivgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Sagenforschung," *Hermes* 74 (1939) 179.

¹⁰ Cf. Arthur W. H. Adkins, "'Honour' and 'Punishment' in the Homeric Poems," *Univ. of London Inst. of Classical Studies Bulletin* 7 (1960) 25.

discover, no counterpart in the Hellenic tradition unless, as I suggest, we find it in the tale which I would here reconstruct. There is in the *Odyssey* a definite indication of a concern lest the *host* overstep the limits of generosity in such a way as to encumber the *guest*: "Telemachus, I really shall not hold you here a long time, eager as you are to return home. I should even blame another man who, as host, loves too much or hates too much: everything is better in moderation. It is just as evil to push out a guest who is unwilling to leave as it is to retain one who longs to depart. One should entertain the guest who is present, and send on the one who wishes to go" (*Od.* 15.68-74; it may be observed that the last sentence, apparently offending the taste of the Greeks of a later age, was omitted in many ancient editions); and again, "Hurry on board, before I reach home and give the news of your arrival to my old father. For I am sure he will not let you go, but will himself come here and invite you to his house, and I tell you he will not go back without you!" (*Od.* 15.209-14, cf. 195-201). So much, then, for a limitation on the host's generosity in the courtly tradition; nothing is said of a reciprocal obligation on the part of the guest. There is perhaps a mild implication that a time should arrive when he *will* leave of his own accord.

To return to the little tradition: I posit, as I have said, a folk-tale in which the generous host is beset by guests who abuse his hospitality to such an extent that they threaten his livelihood. By destroying his substance, they are in fact destroying *him*: the man is identified, as so often, with his goods. The gods intervene, and punish this symbolic homicide with death. My hypothesis is that the tale was an oft-repeated one, filling as it would a need for a counterpoise to the god-in-disguise tale, one which would set a limit to the host's obligation by imposing sanctions on an unreasonable guest. We may imagine an audience of small farmers, shepherds, neatherds, and fisherfolk, listening with indignation to the recital of how the guests ate up the very essence of the host; each would hear in the tale an echo of his own inner conflict as, in his own home, he followed the dictates of hospitality on the one hand, but saw on the other his meager stores, the fruit of his hard labor, his very self, in fact, consumed. The hearers would wait with grim anticipation and rising emotion for the denouement, in which the wasters were destroyed

by the gods, and thus put beyond the pale of human vengeance. The utter destruction of the unjust guests would then be an ineradicable part of the story, expected by the hearers with considerable emotional affect, and not to be omitted no matter how the tale was otherwise modified.

What shreds of evidence do I have for the influence of such a tale upon the *Odyssey* as we have it? For one thing, there is the alternative which Telemachus puts before the suitors if they refuse his earnest plea to leave. It is that he will pray to Zeus, and that Zeus may be expected to visit destruction upon them: this destruction, god-ordained, will *not* be the subject of further retaliation. And Zeus in fact sends down two of his eagles from heaven, with death in their glance, who tear at each other's cheeks and necks before flying off (*Od.* 2.142-54). Now the word here used to mean "without retaliation" is *nêpoinoi*, "without *poinë*," and *poinë* in turn (*Etymologicon Magnum* 679.1) has as its primary meaning "requit for murder." Thus the theme of supernatural retribution for the capital crime of wasting a man's substance, for his symbolic murder, that is, appears by implication in the *Odyssey* as we have it.

Further, in attempting to persuade the suitors to leave, Telemachus suggests that they arrange a round of feasts at one another's houses in rotation (*Od.* 1.374-75, 2.139-40). This is surely more appropriate to a group of mere guests than to a group of suitors. In their capacity of suitors they are rivals, held together physically by a common interest in the queen. To suggest that they continue this bond away from the queen's halls is surely ridiculous. If, in the original tale, they were simply guests quartering themselves upon a host for entertainment's sake, the suggestion that they continue their penchant for dining-out by visiting one another with due regard for reciprocity would be entirely in place.

There are other indications. The charge that the suitors are consuming, wearing out, impoverishing the house of Telemachus to such an extent that they are really destroying the prince himself is one which is often made in the *Odyssey* (e.g. 1.248-51, 2.48-49, 4.318-20). This in no way accords with the picture of rural abundance which the swineherd Eumaeus gives as still in existence after all the years of the suitors' misbehavior (*boskousi, boskonti, orontai*, *Od.* 14.102-4, all in the present tense; cf. also

20.211–16). And indeed Telemachus himself speaks at one point merely of repayment in kind (*Od.* 2.76–78), and of the dispersion rather than the punishment—much less the slaughter—of the suitors (*Od.* 1.116, 1.274; cf. 20.225).

The word which is the clue to the gravity of the roisterers' offense is one which occurs four times, with two repetitions, making six occurrences in all (*Od.* 1.160, 1.377, 2.142, 14.377, 14.417, 18.280): it is the adverb *nēpoionon*, "without suffering the penalty which is the proper requital for murder," an adverbial form of the word which we cited above apropos of Telemachus' prayer to Zeus for the suitors' punishment. The formula is repeated with variations:

ἀλλότριον βίοντον νήποινον ἔδουσιν, (*bis*)
 ἀνδρὸς ἐνὸς βίοντον νήποινον δλέσθαι, (*bis*)
 χαίρουσιν βίοντον νήποινον ἔδοντες,
 ἡμέτερον κάματον νήποινον ἔδουσιν.

In every case the word *nēpoionon* immediately precedes the trisyllable which ends the verse. It is this formula which I believe was inherited from the old unjust-guest tale, wherein it was taken for granted that the punishment for destroying another's substance was the same as that for his murder. And, by the time the tale was fully incorporated into the epic material, if my hypothesis is correct, this concept had become assimilated to the epic mode: for Telemachus' possible slaying of the suitors is equated by Athena with Orestes' vengeance upon Aegisthus for the slaying of his father Agamemnon (*Od.* 1.293–302). Later Odysseus himself, speaking to Athena, shows that he regards the suitors' actions toward him as comparable to that very same murder (*Od.* 13.383–85).

The final item which I shall bring to bear in an attempt to bolster my hypothesis is the difficulty which the poet seems to have had in bringing the suitor-tale to a conclusion. Whatever had been the fault of the suitors, their death had come about not through divine action, as Telemachus had once prayed it might. They had met their end at the hands of a human being, Odysseus, who was very much within the reach of human vengeance. Now the code of Homeric behavior required the kinsmen of the dead to revenge the slaughter, so that we are by no means at the end of the tale. Thus the poet of the suitors' story was faced with

an impasse which my old bard of the unjust guests' tale, if he ever existed, did not have to wrestle with. His scoundrelly guests were destroyed *nêpoinoi*—beyond the reach of vengeance, since the slaughter was the work of the gods. But Homer's suitors were killed by a man, and the burden of *poinë* lay heavily upon their kinsmen. These actually prepare for battle, and Odysseus girds himself and gathers his warriors to meet them. Another traditional battle-scene starts (*Od.* 24.413–530)—but what sort of peripety is this for the warrior and wanderer, battle-scarred and tempest-tossed, who has won his way back to the arms of a faithful wife? With the *sang-froid* of a Euripides contriving a *deus ex machina*, our poet brings peace through the sudden intervention of Athena, and the epic as we have it ends.

If my hypothesis is correct—and I submit that it accounts for the inconcinnities of the suitors' tale as we have it with perhaps more persuasiveness than any other thus far advanced—we have evoked from the shadows an otherwise unexampled ancient Greek folk-tale, a counterpart on the guest's side to the Philemon-Baucis myth on the host's. Admittedly, the original meaning of the tale was lost in its adaptation to the epic, just as was the original meaning of the human sacrifice motif in the story of Patroclus' funeral as it appears in the *Iliad*.¹¹ What remained and was even reinforced in the epic was a vivid sense of the identification of a man with his goods, of his life with his livelihood, of his *bios* with his *biotos*. This is nothing new or strange.

But to revert for a final mention to my reconstructed folk-tale: it would be most instructive to discover whether, among other peoples of the Mediterranean and the Near East, where the obligation of the householder as host to the passing stranger is so forceful a cultural trait, there exist traces, even as faint as those I have attempted to discern, of a countervailing obligation on the part of the guest, not to return the hospitality, but to use it in moderation.

¹¹ Martin P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion* (Oxford 1925) 140; cf. Harry L. Levy, "Echoes of Early Eschatology in the *Iliad*," *AJP* 69 (1948) 420–21.