ODYSSEY 15.143–82: A NARRATIVE INCONSISTENCY?

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Catching Homer in an inconsistency has long been a favorite area of critical endeavor, even if the implications have changed over the centuries. For Horace—*quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus* (*ArsP.* 359) —a nod proved merely the fallibility of an undeniably great poet. The Analysts found in each such instance clear evidence of multiple authorship. And since the advent of oral poetic theory, it has become possible to reassert unity of authorship while laying apparent narrative mistakes to the exigencies of oral composition.

Recently, two oral theorists, D. M. Gunn and A. Hoekstra, have uncovered independently what they regard as an inconsistency in the scene of Telemachus' departure from Menelaus' palace in Sparta.[1] If they are correct, their analysis may have consequences for our knowledge of Homeric composition. But in the belief that they are mistaken, I hope to demonstrate that the passage forms, instead, the climax of a significant thread of drama and characterization.

Gunn, who treats the problem at length, accurately describes the scene as follows:

> "After they [Telemachus and Peisistratus, Nestor's son] have eaten and drunk their fill they yoke the horses, mount the chariot and drive forth from the gateway in such a manner as to suggest that they have set out for good and all (145–6):
>
> *ἵππους τε ζεύγνυντ' ἀνά θ' ἅρματα ποικίλ' ἔβαινον,*
> *ἐκ δ' ἔλασαν προθύροιο καὶ αἰθούσης ἐριδούπου.*

[1] D. M. Gunn, "Narrative Inconsistency and the Oral Dictated Text in the Homeric Epic," *AJP* 91 (1970) 194–97; A. Hoekstra, *Homeric Modifications of Formulaic Prototypes* (Amsterdam 1965) 117 and n. 3.

But then we read (147–9):

> τοὺς δὲ μετ' Ἀτρεΐδης ἔκιε ξανθὸς Μενέλαος,
> οἶνον ἔχων ἐν χειρὶ μελίφρονα δεξιτερῇφι,
> ἐν δέπαϊ χρυσέῳ, ὄφρα λείψαντε κιοίτην.

. . . And, indeed, there follows quite a long scene before the departure is finally made good".

That is, while Telemachus and Peisistratus sit on their horses already outside the palace grounds, there occurs a conversation with Menelaus, an eagle omen, Helen's interpretation of it, and a reply by Telemachus (all of which occupies 32 lines). By comparing Priam's departure scene at *Iliad* 24.281–329, Gunn reveals the normal order of events to be yoking of horses, conversation, libation (note Menelaus' intention to perform a libation, 149, which, however, never takes place), omen, *mounting*, departure. Gunn continues:

> In the Spartan scene the poet, by beginning with the formula, ἵππους τε ζεύγνυντ' ἀνά θ' ἅρματα ποικίλ' ἔβαινον . . ., has almost immediately gone past the point where any ornamentation, including conversation, libations, and omen, should have occurred, namely straight after the yoking of the horses and before the mounting of the chariot. . . . He has continued with ἐκ δ' ἔλασαν προθύροιο καὶ αἰθούσης ἐριδούπου in what appears to be a familiar pattern . . ., before abruptly changing direction and beginning, rather too late, to elaborate after the manner of *Il.*, 24, 281 ff.

The compelling question at this point is not what inferences can be drawn concerning the nature of Homeric composition, but rather whether this passage contains an error at all. Did the poet have a purpose in altering the traditional and logical order of events that constitute a departure scene? The answer is that the interrupted departure puts the final, convincing touch on an amusing tension that has developed between Telemachus' impetuous eagerness to return home and Menelaus' persistent failure to incorporate this in his mind. Telemachus' desire is unmistakable but Menelaus' reaction requires documentation, as well as an explanation of its cause.

In Book 4 after relating all that he knows about Odysseus, Menelaus hospitably urges his guest to prolong his stay another eleven or twelve days and promises him guest-gifts (587–92). Since his journey was not for pleasure, but for business—the business of discovering news of

Odysseus in order to know how to proceed in his revenge upon the suitors—Telemachus says no, politely but firmly. Very much in his father's style he flatters his host, alleging that he could easily enjoy remaining for a year, and pleads not his own desire to leave but a concern for his shipmates (597–99):

> αἰνῶς γὰρ μύθοισιν ἔπεσσί τε σοῖσιν ἀκούων
> τέρπομαι. ἀλλ' ἤδη μοι ἀνιάζουσιν ἑταῖροι
> ἐν Πύλῳ ἠγαθέῃ· σὺ δέ με χρόνον ἐνθάδ' ἐρύκεις.[2]

When next we see Telemachus, his perhaps uncertain intention to depart becomes a nearly uncontrollable drive. Book 15 opens with a visitation in the night from Athena, who excites in Telemachus images of dire consequences in Ithaca if he fails to return as soon as possible. The scene can be viewed naturalistically as a reverie, the divine intervention being Homer's way of representing a sudden, strong impulse. In any case, the experience is so vivid that Telemachus cannot even wait for daybreak, wakes Peisistratus with a kick, and demands that they depart immediately. Peisistratus, ever more perceptive than his friend, tells him to wait until day in order to allow Menelaus the opportunity to present gifts and thus to satisfy his sense of obligation as the host.[3]

When morning does arrive Telemachus, seeing Menelaus, puts his request this time as bluntly and forcefully as possible (65–66):

> ἤδη νῦν μ' ἀπόπεμπε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν·
> ἤδη γάρ μοι θυμὸς ἐέλδεται οἴκαδ' ἱκέσθαι.

[2] Aristarchus and others felt a problem about ἐρύκεις, presumably because it seems inelegantly blunt to say "you are holding me back." It would, indeed, be premature for Telemachus to say this. But M. H. A. L. H. van der Valk, *Textual Criticism of the Odyssey* (Leiden 1949) 150, correctly interprets the present tense as conative. A. Shewan, *Homeric Essays* (Oxford 1935), arguing persuasively that Telemachus does in fact prolong his stay "a considerable time" (p. 394), feels that by mentioning his crew he "is simply making a polite excuse for not accepting his host's invitation offhand" (p. 397) Shewan may be right that at this point anyway Telemachus has mixed feelings about leaving.

[3] W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer*, 2nd ed. (London 1965) 2.241, comments on Peisistratus' answer as follows: "It should be remembered that there were probably few, if any, good roads in Greece in the Heroic Age, or indeed till very recent times. Even where beaten tracks existed they would be impossible to follow on a dark . . . night." This is irrelevant; Stanford appears not to have noticed the humor of the entire situation. Peisistratus could simply have said, "It is ridiculous to run off in the middle of the night;" instead, he spares Telemachus' feelings.

But how does Menelaus greet this plea? He first delivers a seven-line disquisition on a host's obligation to speed his guest's departure, when he wishes to leave.[4] The long, redundant pontification contrasts ironically with his stated intention—*οὔ τί σ' ἐγώ γε πολὺν χρόνον ἐνθάδ' ἐρύξω* (68)—reminding us of no one so much as Telemachus' other host, Nestor. But the proof of Menelaus' utter inability to grasp Telemachus' inner need is his offer to conduct him personally on a leisurely tour *ἀν' Ἑλλάδα καὶ μέσον Ἄργος* (80).[5] He justifies such an extravagant expenditure of time by explaining that Telemachus would accumulate many gifts from his various hosts. Telemachus can only reply with a reassertion of his one desire—*βούλομαι ἤδη νεῖσθαι ἐφ' ἡμέτερ'* (88)[6]—adding pointedly that, far from wishing more gifts, he may by his continued absence lose whatever goods he still owns in Ithaca.

What makes Menelaus so obtuse is his otherwise laudable urge to be a grand host, heightened no doubt by a special regard for his guest's father (see 4.104–10, 169–82); he cannot see that Telemachus' precarious fortunes demand a relaxation and curtailment of the rites. This is why he first in Book 4 encouraged Telemachus to remain for several more days. It also explains why both there and in Book 15 his attempts to delay Telemachus are coupled with a stated wish to regale him with gifts. And, finally, it explains why, even as Telemachus is effecting his escape, Menelaus suddenly lurches in pursuit, impelled by the desire to pour a last libation and say a few parting

[4] The scholiast records the fact that some ancient manuscripts lacked the excessively gnomic line 74. Van der Valk (above, note 2) 202 defends its genuineness but fails to realize its function in the gently deflating characterization of Menelaus; he calls the whole passage "a lengthy and, to our mind, superfluous tirade on the duties of a host." Stanford (above, note 3) 2.242, also misses this element: "Menelaus, the soul of courtly generosity and discretion in all his intercourse with the rather temperamental Telemachus, restrains the impetuous youth."

[5] D. B. Monro, *Homer's Odyssey*, Books 13–24 (Oxford 1901) 48, noting some dispute about whether Menelaus means the entirety of Greece or merely the Peloponnesus, rightly observes that, either way, the difficulty (if such it is) remains that he is proposing a delay and a detour, in spite of Telemachus' (to us) obvious eagerness to proceed directly to Ithaca. Monro's own suggestion, however, is no stronger: "it may be that ancient manners required some such speech from the host."

[6] K. F. Ameis and C. Hentze, *Homers Odyssee*, 7th ed. (Leipzig 1879–1884) 2.67, annotate line 88 as follows: "*βούλομαι* mit Nachdruck vorangestellt: 'ich will doch lieber.' —*ἤδη* 'sofort, gleich jetzt.'" They might have added that already in Telemachus' former speech two successive lines began with *ἤδη* (65, 66).

words. Gunn may be right in his visualization of the scene: "There springs to mind, perhaps a little unfairly, a picture of the chariot speeding through the gate with Menelaus desperately bringing up the rear, wine slopping on his tunic, waving frantically for them to stop."[7]

It would be useless to argue that Homer suddenly realized that he had forgotten to include a final conversation, a libation, and an omen, and that he decided to include them anyway, even if a little too late. Homer was always free to use as many or as few traditional elements of a typical scene as he wished. If there is an inconsistency in the narrative, it would be the poet's neglecting to show Menelaus' libation, which is undoubtedly due to a shift of interest to the far more important omen. Indeed, in the aftermath of the omen, the poet shows another side to Menelaus' obtuseness: Peisistratus asks him for an interpretation, but it is Helen who supplies one; Menelaus just μερμήριξε (169).[8]

Telemachus' eagerness to return home and his difficulties in breaking away from Menelaus' overly hospitable clutches make his concern to avoid a second visit with Nestor even more understandable (15.195–201). It is not only Nestor's interminable verbosity that makes him reluctant, but the old man's desire to be hospitable (200–201):

> μή μ' ὁ γέρων ἀέκοντα κατάσχῃ ᾧ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ
> ἱέμενος φιλέειν· ἐμὲ δὲ χρεὼ θᾶσσον ἱκέσθαι.[9]

Odysseus has an experience strikingly similar to Telemachus'. After he has narrated his adventures to the Phaeacians and everything is ready for his departure, he finds himself sitting, eating, and waiting impatiently to leave, while Alcinous continues to entertain him (13.24–30). The poet even shows him watching the sun's progress across the sky and finally has him exclaim, πέμπετέ με (39). Telemachus and Odysseus are each at the last stop before arriving home; each is quite ready to leave; yet each is detained by an eager but imperceptive host.

[7] Gunn (above, note 1) 195.

[8] Quite similar is Helen's recognition of Telemachus, 4.138–46.

[9] "*Philein* was the word by which hospitable treatment was expressed," notes M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, rev. ed. (London 1964) 136. Compare 15.55, 70, 74, 158—all used by or concerning Menelaus. H. W. Clarke, *The Art of the Odyssey* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1967) 39, speaks of "Nestor's oppressive hospitality" that Telemachus seeks to avoid.

The tension between Telemachus and Menelaus, rather like that between Odysseus and Alcinous, significantly reflects the basic difference in their respective functions within the *Odyssey*. Once he has been inspired by Athena in Book 1, Telemachus begins to emerge as the credible son of Odysseus; he becomes an initiator of events, a planner and a doer. Telemachus is a character who must create his own future. His eagerness to depart for Ithaca, however youthfully impetuous, accords perfectly with that role. For Menelaus, on the other hand, as for Nestor, life is in some sense static, his important experiences are in the past. The reader easily imagines him continuing like this until he dies—fulfilling to perfection the role of a gracious host and reminiscing entertainingly for his guests. If this is what gives meaning to his present life, there is little wonder that he clings so to Telemachus, even at the risk of looking a bit ridiculous. And yet, living as he does, remembering all the suffering his friends endured for his sake (4.97–103), remembering, too, his brother's death, and facing daily the woman who began it all, Menelaus is really more pathetic than ridiculous.[10]

[10] Yet, Clarke (above, note 9) 37, states that "Menelaus is also proof... that even after the weariest of journeys one can return home safely and enjoy a happy and prosperous future." Menelaus may be outwardly prosperous but, as he himself says, because of Agamemnon's horrible end "I do not rule this wealth with joy" (4.93); "I wish that I were living with but a third of these things in my house, and that those men were safe who died in Troy" (97–99).