

A REPEATED EPISODE AT ODYSSEY 1.125-48

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For John V. A. Fine

Early in Book I of the *Odyssey* Telemachus meets and has an important conversation with Athena, who is disguised as the stranger, Mentès. From this conversation the first of the two major strands of the *Odyssey* finds its origin, the search of Telemachus for his father. Although Athena's speech is diverse, indeed confusing, in content, Telemachus is swift to recognize his mission.¹ The conversation takes place after dinner while the singer Phemius entertains the feasters by singing of the painful return of the Achaeans from Troy. Before the song Athena-Mentès is served dinner under the watchful eye of Telemachus, and the suitors are generously fed from the dwindling storehouses of the victimized palace. In effect, both groups are eating at one and the same moment, yet the serving of these two dinners is presented as two consecutive events. The strangeness of this procedure in the Homeric poems is noted by Arend: "a 136 ff. muss ein zweites Mahl unmittelbar nach dem ersten geschildert werden, Telemach speist mit seinem Gaste abseits von dem Freiern. In solchen Fällen wird eine Wiederholung des Schemas oft vermieden und die typische Handlung an der zweiten Stelle in einem Vers zusammengefasst. Diesmal wird ein ungewöhnlicher Weg eingeschlagen."²

But the problem is more intriguing than this. Even where Homer does choose to repeat a consecutive series of similar incidents he attempts

¹ For a fiery analysis of Athena's instructions see A. Kirchhoff, *Die Homerische Odyssee*² (Berlin 1879) 238-74. For a recent treatment of his basic argument and a convenient summary of subsequent works on this problem, see D. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955) 53 ff. and especially note 1.

² W. Arend, *Die Typischen Szenen bei Homer* (Berlin 1933) 71 ff.

to vary the events so that the sameness disappears amid the diversity of individual details. Undoubtedly the most common occurrence in the *Iliad* is the slaying of one warrior by another. At the beginning of Book 5 Homer catalogues six slayings by Greeks. The section begins with the phrase: "Each of the leaders slew his man" (37 f.), and ends with the summary line: "Thus these men toiled in the furious battle" (84). The space of some forty lines is occupied solely by six consecutive episodes in each of which a Greek leader slays a Trojan. Yet there is such variation in actions, reactions, and incidental facts that the scenes do not seem repetitive; for example, the first three killings:

... And first the lord of men Agamemnon
hurled tall Odios, lord of the Halizones, from his chariot.
For in his back even as he was turning the spear fixed
between the shoulders and was driven on through the chest beyond it.
He fell, thunderously, and his armour clattered upon him.

Idomeneus killed Phaistos the son of Maionian Boros,
who had come out of Tarne with the deep soil. Idomeneus
the spear-renowned stabbed this man just as he was mounting
behind his horses, with the long spear driven in the right shoulder.
He dropped from the chariot, and the hateful darkness took hold of him.

The henchmen of Idomeneus stripped the armour from Phaistos,
while Menelaos son of Atreus killed with the sharp spear
Strophios' son, a man of wisdom in the chase, Skamandrios,
the fine huntsman of beasts. Artemis herself had taught him
to strike down every wild thing that grows in the mountain forest.
Yet Artemis of the showering arrows could not now help him,
no, nor the long spearcasts in which he had been pre-eminent.
but Menelaos the spear-famed, son of Atreus, stabbed him,
as he fled away before him, in the back with a spear thrust
between the shoulders and driven through to the chest beyond it.
He dropped forward on his face and his armour clattered upon him . . .

Book 5.38-58 (Lattimore translation)

In these episodes variation is found in the type of slaying, in the ordering of events, in the position of the men, in the detail by which each man is identified and, with the exception of the last half of line 42-58, in the lines which record the death.³ This type of variation is so common in

³ W.-H. Friedrich in *Verwundung und Tod in der Ilias* (Göttingen 1956) 75 ff. discusses in detail the variation in each of the episodes which form this long scene.

the Homeric poems that its avoidance in the double serving scene in *Odyssey* I is surprising.

The parallel in actions is quite precise. The serving of each group is a distinct episode: Scene A (125-43) in which Telemachus and Athena are served, and Scene B (144-48) in which the suitors are fed. In each part the same actions are told in the same order:

<i>Scene A</i>		<i>Scene B</i>	
125-29	and	144	Entrance into palace
130-35	and	145	Sitting for dinner
136-38	and	146	Washing before meal
138-41	and	147	Serving of food
142-43	and	148	Serving of wine

Two problems are raised by this duplicated series of events. First, why is there such a repetitive report of two different meals? Secondly, why is the more elaborate Scene A with its profusion of details placed first? Generally, as is seen in the list of woundings, the sparer scene precedes and the more detailed descriptions follow in order to provide relief from the basic scene. In answer to these two questions I will suggest that what appears on the surface to be a very bald repetition of fact is as varied as the wounding scenes from *Iliad* 5. Yet to appreciate the type of variation which is introduced into these scenes a man must have grown up in a society which was accustomed to oral epic.

The most basic difference between the two episodes lies in the elaboration of Scene A. First, descriptions which allow the poet to call attention to the individual actions and motives are stressed. For example, in Scene B the suitors enter; in contrast, Telemachus leads Athena into the hall and then Telemachus takes her spear and sets it in the spear rack. The suitors sit for dinner; Telemachus spreads a linen cloth over the chair, seats his guest, and provides a footstool. The second type of elaboration reminds Homer's audience of the narrative situation by alluding to the extended absence of Odysseus. The spear rack is the one where the spears of Odysseus are still standing. Telemachus pulls his chair close to Athena-Mentes so that he can ask information of this traveller about his missing father. These details expressing the niceties of Athena-Mentes' reception characterize

Telemachus as a responsible host, the surrogate master of the house, and the concerned son.⁴

In the second half of Scene A the manner of composition still stresses detail but draws on a type scene of welcoming. The passage from 136–43 is a traditional unit in itself. It is repeated with no alteration six times within the *Odyssey*: 4.52 ff., 7.172 ff., 10.368 ff., 15.135 ff., and 17.91 ff. The use of such a formulaic scene does not imply creativity to the most independent degree, but in terms of oral composition even a very common repetition can be tellingly employed by a skillful poet. Compare any feature of the unadorned description of the serving of dinner to the suitors with the elaborate—but repeated—description of the same action for Athena and Telemachus; i.e.:

A servant bore forth water and poured it out of
a pitcher, a beautiful golden pitcher, into a
silver basin so that they could wash . . .

The heralds poured water over their hands . . .

136–38 vs. 146

In composing Scene A the poet has picked the fuller and more colorful description for Telemachus' reception of Athena. Because the poet has so elaborated individual details and because he has placed the extended serving lines in Scene A, it is reasonable to assume that he wanted his audience to notice especially the attention which Telemachus lavishes upon his guest.⁵ This kindness leads to the next section of the poem where Athena-Mentes repays Telemachus' attentiveness by offering him advice. Thus, in terms of motivation the elaboration of Scene A seems fully justified, yet this explanation does not account for the avoidance of a summary line to describe the serving

⁴ Cf. B. Fenik's discussion of the duel between Sarpedon and Patroclus at *Il.* 16.462–507: "The technique shows that when the poet, who constructed all his battle scenes out of typical details, wished to narrate an especially long, difficult, or important fight, he did so not by inventing a new action or new details, but by the larger than average accumulation of familiar details. An especially significant combat is given the weight and length that it deserves by the simple process of addition and lengthening" (*Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad* [Wiesbaden 1968] 203 f.).

⁵ The scholiast (to line 130) comments on the gentlemanly qualities shown by Telemachus in this scene, citing particularly the taking of the spear and the offering of the chair. Cf. also the comments of Eustathius (on line 146) concerning the difference in Homer's treatment of Telemachus' meal and that of the suitors.

of dinner to the suitors, the exact repetition of events, or the placing of the elaborated scene first.

In addition to a difference in elaboration between the two scenes, there is also a marked variation in the use of repeated lines. In Scene B line 144 is composed of common words in positions which can be paralleled in the text elsewhere, but the line itself is not repeated in either the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*. There is a sufficiently close version at *Od.* 20.160 to demonstrate that the line is basically formulaic and that its phrasing required no special poetic effort from the poet:

'Ες δ' ἦλθον δρηστήρες ἀγήνορες· οἳ μὲν ἔπειτα

Line 145, in which the suitors take their places for dinner, is repeated at *Od.* 3.389 and *Od.* 24.385; again, there is no extension. Lines 146 and 148 (washing of hands and pouring of wine) are repeated twice without the intervening line about the placement of food (*Od.* 3.338-39 and *Od.* 21.270-71). In both of these cases people are interested in drinking rather than eating; indeed, this is probably the only difference in the three passages. Although there is no exact parallel for line 147, the latter half is repeated at *Od.* 16.51:

σῆτον δ' ἐσσυμένως παρενήνεεν ἐν κανέοισιν,

If there is a departure from a standard unit in this group of three lines, it is not great. Deviation is found only in the second line which adapts this particular set of lines to a scene of eating.⁶ Thus, the serving of the suitors is composed of almost totally formulaic lines with little explicit elaboration to adapt the individual lines to the particular characters or to the situation.

The serving of Telemachus and Athena-Mentes juxtaposes two quite diverse types of composition—composition by phrases and by repeated blocks of lines. Their entrance into the palace requires four lines (125-29). There is no parallel for any one of these lines in the Homeric poems even though the constituent elements of the individual lines do, of course, have their parallels in the half-lines and phrases of the oral tradition. The portion of this passage which extends beyond

⁶ Twice in the *Iliad* there are versions of *Od.* 1.148. At *Il.* 9.174 f. there is a close parallel to the two lines in the *Odyssey*, but at *Il.* 1.470 the second line (= *Od.* 1.148) stands without the first. This observation will be important later; see below, pp. 547-48.

a simple statement of fact concerns the spear which Athena brought with her from Olympus. The spear not only helps in joining this section of the narrative to the previous sections, but it also provides an opportunity for Telemachus to show extra attention to his guest and to honor him by placing his spear with the spears of Odysseus.⁷

The next two lines (130-31) describe Telemachus guiding Athena-Mentes to a chair. The second line is, in fact, repeated with minor alteration in case-ending three times:

καλοῦ δαιδαλέου· ὑπὸ δὲ θρῆνυς ποσὶν ἦεν·

Od. 10.315 = *Od.* 10.367 = *Il.* 18.390

In each case the first line has mentioned the chair on which the guest is being seated. While describing an especially ornate chair, line 131 has definitely not been created specifically to adapt these lines to this particular narrative situation.

The next four lines (132-35) describe Telemachus drawing up a chair near the stranger so that the two of them can converse without interruption. These lines express Telemachus' concern at this moment that his guest not be upset by the unattractive behavior of the suitors and that he might freely inquire about his father. The extending lines are not part of a repeated or formulaic passage; rather, they are purposely included by the poet to individualize this small scene.

At this point the method of composition alters. As noted before, lines 136-40 occur as a unit five other times in the *Odyssey*: 4.52 ff., 7.172 ff., 10.368 ff., 15.135 ff., and 17.91 ff. This block of lines seems to be a perfectly standard expression of hospitality and offers at least that much characterization of Telemachus' attitude toward a guest of his father's house.

The same is probably true of the next two lines which describe the serving of the meat and the placement of the wine goblets (141 and 142). The scene in Book 4 (4.52 ff.) also continues with these two lines. They should probably be regarded as an optional formulaic continuation which can be easily attached to the basic type scene.

⁷ Cf. the importance of Achilles casting to the ground the scepter which the Greeks hold in their hands when they pass judgment; Odysseus later beats Thersites into submission with this scepter. See also the remarks of K. Rüter on the spear, *Odyssee-interpretationen* (Göttingen 1969) 115-20.

Line 143 has no parallel in its phrasing, but is a factual conclusion; the wine goblets presented in the previous line are filled.

There are, then, two quite diverse types of composition which are joined in the composition of Scene A. In the first part Homer has employed a series of phrases, many of which are familiar from other parts of the poems, in order to form lines which are without parallel in the rest of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. This section is followed immediately by a block of lines which appears six times as a unit in the *Odyssey*. In addition, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* only one of these lines ever appears outside this unit, *Od.* 17.259.⁸ When the poet began to sing the first line of this block, most of his hearers knew what the next four lines would be.⁹ With the extension at 4.57-8 being the same as 1.141-42, there may even be a standard extension of the basic lines, or—to put this another way—a longer basic unit which could easily be shortened.¹⁰ Opposed to this type of composition is Scene B in which the poet has drawn his description from lines which appear elsewhere in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but nowhere else as a block of lines which constitutes a unit. Probably the individual lines had been quite commonly employed in oral verse and could be freely joined in several permutations with no sense of the basic scene from which they all arose. The evidence from the Homeric poems supports this supposition. For example, lines 146 and 148 do appear together at *Od.* 3.338 f. and *Od.* 21.270 f. With one minor alteration the two are also repeated at *Il.* 9.174 f.; yet the second line appears

⁸ *Od.* 1.136-41 is analyzed in this section as a unit. There are places in the Homeric poems where the poet repeats formulaic phrases which are found in these lines; e.g., *Od.* 1.136 and *Il.* 24.304; *Od.* 1.137 and *Il.* 14.351; *Il.* 18.562, *Od.* 5.232, *Od.* 10.545, *Od.* 24.3; *Od.* 1.139, and *Od.* 4.133. Perhaps these particular phrases were taken from this serving scene unit; perhaps the unit was built from these phrases. There is no way to determine which came first. Once the phrases are joined into a unit, it is clear there is a value to the poet which attaches to the whole unit and is not carried by the individual parts. We should interpret this passage in terms of the five-line unit and not concentrate on the smaller formulae.

⁹ G. M. Calhoun, *Homeric Repetitions in University of California Publications in Classical Philology* 12 (1933) 1-25, especially 11.

¹⁰ See the discussion of such type scenes in modern Yugoslavian verse by A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York 1965) 58 ff.: "... these clusters of formulas or of lines, which are frequently associated together and are recurrent, also mark one of the characteristic signs of oral style. They are useful to the singer; for they emerge like trained reflexes" (p. 58).

alone at *Il.* 1.470. Such evidence does not allow a clear conclusion but may testify to an original unit of lines which became so common that the constituent lines were used freely wherever they were appropriate. With the passage of time poets may have forgotten the original unit but still used the individual lines. The places where there are two or three lines repeated together are perhaps vestigial remains of an original scene.¹¹

The primary contrast between Scenes A and B which would be apparent to the Homeric audience depends upon their ingrained sense of normalcy. They would have to listen carefully to the first part of Scene A where the attention to detail and the description of the situation are carefully interwoven. Then Athena-Mentes is served a gracious, but totally expected and familiar meal. The suitors, on the other hand, receive an adequate meal which is recognizable to those brought up hearing oral songs but not a familiar meal. The audience would have to concentrate on every line of Scene B because these lines, while formulaic, occur in no scene which allows a listener to predict the next step. The first part of Scene A rewards careful listening because so much is said which bears directly on the characters and situation; in contrast, Scene B requires attention but presents nothing new. Even though the audience listens, they find that the suitors are treated very mechanically. The audience finds itself concentrating on the lack of personal attention and graciousness, on the perfunctory and unadorned description of serving dinner.

It is even more significant to explore the type of context which usually surrounds the repeated lines in Scene A. Lines 4.52 ff. describe the reception of Telemachus and Peisistratus at the palace of Menelaus. In a way they are initially snubbed in Sparta. The servant Eteoneus sees them, ignores them, and asks Menelaus if he should take them in. Menelaus becomes irate and bluntly informs his servant that they owe such hospitality to strangers. Preceding the scene at 7.172 ff. Odysseus begs the queen Arete for aid on his journey home and then sinks into the ashes next to the hearth. Since he receives no response, an

¹¹ Rüter (see above, note 7) 127-32 discusses the whole scene from 125-155. He feels that Scene B is largely a reworking of a typical libation scene. I feel that his evidence for defining this scene is not particularly strong; even he must admit that the basic scene in *Odyssey* 1 has been so fully modified that it has almost been dissolved.

elder, Echeneus, chides Alcinous for not receiving this stranger in better fashion. Alcinous immediately takes Odysseus by the hand and orders that dinner be served to him. In Book 10 Circe receives Odysseus and gives him a potion to drink. She then tries to turn him into a swine, but Odysseus is protected by a magic herb and forces Circe to swear that she will not plot any more tricks. The goddess shows overwhelming hospitality as recompense for her initial treachery; when she serves Odysseus a meal, Homer includes the familiar lines of serving from Scene A (10.368 ff.). At 17.91 the meal being served is a particularly significant meal: the meal at which Penelope welcomes Telemachus home and hopes to learn the results of his travels. In each of these four scenes there is cause for exceptional hospitality; either the occasion itself demands that the host be especially kind to the guest or someone actually mentions that there is need for exceptional hospitality in order to cover up some breach of etiquette or potential insult. The scene at *Od.* 15.135 is no different; it is a scene of farewell rather than reception. Menelaus and Helen are saying a lavish farewell to Telemachus and Peisistratus. Only the most elegant of the formulaic dinners available would fit with the other elements of the scene: the rich gifts, the effusive rhetoric, and the divine omen of the eagle and the goose.

These repeated lines occur in scenes which call not only for a very special supper but also for the most gracious hospitality. Since none of these lines appears alone in any other scene, the unit seems to contain solely its own elements which are intimately related to each other and are used only as a unit when the occasion demands.¹² These lines, consequently, have not only a literal meaning but are also endowed with a broader metaphorical significance which accompanies the whole scene and is not present in the mere mention of any one of the constituent physical objects or actions. When the poet chose to use this particular formulaic unit, he was saying that the host involved was showing the utmost warmth and courtesy to his guest and wanted this

¹² I have mentioned the one exception at *Od.* 17.259; absolute statements about oral verse based on total consistency are usually impossible to make. Poets who are continually improvising on the basis of tradition are not as neat as statisticians would like. Statements must always be stated in terms of percentages; in dealing with *Od.* 1.136-40 the percentage of evidence in favor of this scene being regarded by the poet as a unit is very high.

guest to feel very welcome. When the suitors are served in Book 1 (Scene B), Homer chooses lines which are not used elsewhere as a unit and which, consequently, seem to lack such significance. Through the juxtaposition of the two types of oral composition, the poet expresses strong connotations: Telemachus escorted his guest to the table and saw to it that his servants gave him every luxury which the house could bestow—and the suitors had dinner in the same room. This is an exaggerated and highly unpoetic paraphrase, but it reveals the connotation conveyed by a block of lines which has been endowed with a traditional value by consistent usage.

Proper interpretation of this passage is dependent upon our understanding of the nature of oral composition. Homer's audience was a great asset. A contemporary author must often tell his readers in various ways—disguised or undisguised—what values they are to assign to the elements of his story. Quite commonly a writer enters into the thinking of his characters in order to reveal the impact of the physical objects and the individual incidents of the narrative. A poet trained in the oral tradition, however, can draw on his audience's preconditioning to the usual tone or connotation of familiar scenes and, thereby, maintain an objective posture before his narrative. Such a poet can tell a subtle story in language which is simple and uncomplicated because he can depend on his audience's knowledge of the tradition to provide fuller implications. To a *reader* untrained in the oral tradition, a contrast is clear as he reads over the two passages, but to an *audience versed in oral style*, the difference is all the more pronounced because they perceive immediately the narrative values inherent in each scene.

The difference between the two narrative descriptions becomes all the clearer at the end of Scene B. The poet tags the lines of scattered and toneless source with two utterly common, formulaic lines 149–50 (cf. *Il.* 9.91–92; 9.221–22; 24.627–28; *Od.* 4.67–68; 8.71–72; and others). At this point the audience would feel that they have returned to familiar ground, and the poet, having summed up the serving and eating of dinner, but also having completed his initial characterization of key figures, can introduce the next scene: the conversation of Telemachus and Athena.

Homer has composed this scene in which he introduces major

characters with intentional stress on the difference between the serving of a guest by the host of the house and the serving of the hated suitors. The mere mention of the serving of the suitors in a summary line would not have achieved this effect; he had to list the series of typical actions in a serving scene one by one in order to make the contrast effective. It is the exact repetition of the events that makes the presence or absence of detail all the more striking. In addition, the more elaborate scene should come first in this case because the poet is not seeking to vary a typical scene. Rather, he is calling on the audience's memory of serving scenes and the contexts in which they usually occur in order to provide variety in tone to these two similar episodes.

In a broader sense this interpretation depends on the critical principle that in oral verse the poem does not exist merely for the poet; rather, the poem is a shared experience. Without cooperation and continual interpretation from an experienced audience, successful communication cannot occur. Oral verse by its nature is a product of poet *and* audience, not poet for audience. The repeated serving scene in *Odyssey* I becomes poetry rather than type scene when understood as communication between a poet and his audience, both of whom were fully acquainted with oral verse-making.