

ODYSSEUS' SMILES: ODYSSEY 20.301, 22.371, 23.111

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Milman Parry's studies on oral poetry continue to have a profound and lasting effect on Homeric studies, with the result that it is all but impossible to discuss epithets, formulas, repetition or meter in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* without reference to his works.¹ Parry's insistence on economy as a basic principle of composition rankled in those who saw his theories as detracting from Homeric artistry.² Many subsequent Homeric scholars, therefore, have concentrated on discovering intentional and specific meanings in the poems' formulaic language in order to demonstrate Homer's relative freedom from the shackles of a traditional system.³ The recent works of Nagler and Austin are two outstanding examples of the successful search for artistry within a highly regulated verse form, and the bibliography continues to grow.⁴ The present paper joins this trend in Homeric studies, using as it does context and characterization to help determine one among a series of different meanings which could be attached to traditional language. In particular, it shows that there are

¹ A. Parry (ed.), *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry* (Oxford 1971).

² F. Combellack, "Milman Parry and Homeric Artistry," *CompLit* 11 (1959) 193-208.

³ See T. Rosenmeyer's discussion of "hard Parryists" and "soft Parryists" in "The Formula in Early Greek Poetry," *Arion* 4 (1965) 295-311.

⁴ M. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition: A Study in the Oral Art of Homer* (Berkeley 1974); N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's Odyssey* (Berkeley 1975), especially chapters I and II. Some other studies of Homer's careful use of inherited themes and formulas include S. Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer*, Sather Classical Lectures 15 (Berkeley 1938); A. Parry, "Have We Homer's Iliad?," *YCS* 20 (1966) 177-216; id., Introduction to *Making of Homeric Verse* (above, note 1) ix-lxii; J. Russo, "Homer Against His Tradition," *Arion* 7 (1968) 275-95; A. Hoekstra, *Homeric Modifications of Formulaic Prototypes* (Amsterdam 1965); J. Hainsworth, *The Flexibility of the Homeric Formula* (Oxford 1968); Anne Parry, *Blameless Aegisthus: A Study of AMYMON and Other Homeric Epithets* (Amsterdam 1973); P. Vivante, *The Epithets in Homer: A Study in Poetic Values* (New Haven 1982); S. Lowenstam, *The Death of Patroclus: A Study in Typology* (Hain 1981); R. Shannon, *The Arms of Achilles and Homeric Compositional Technique* (Leiden 1975); B. Fenik, *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad: Studies in the Narrative Techniques of Homeric Battle Descriptions*, Hermes Einzelschriften 21 (Wiesbaden 1968).

structural points in *Odyssey* 20–23 which are marked by Odysseus' smiling.

Odysseus is not the only one in the epic who smiles. Elsewhere I have pointed out that the smiles of Menelaos (4.609), Calypso (5.180), and Athena (13.287)—accompanied by the formula *χειρί τε μιν κατέρεξε*—both express affection and are involved with the general movement returning Odysseus to his home.⁵ To these fond expressions may be added Telemachos' secret smile at Odysseus in Eumaios' hut when the news of the suitors' failed ambush reaches them (16.476). This confident smile helps set the tone for Odysseus' significant use of the expression in the epic's final books.

Odysseus' smiles express his confident superiority: while being abused by Ktesippos (20.301), at the close of the annihilation of the suitors (22.371), and when Penelope mentions their secret signs (23.111). The smiles are carefully worked into the tale to produce contrasts and turning points in the narrative.

In terms of the large-scale narrative development, the suitors' laughter and Odysseus' smiles emphasize the latter's transformation from beggar to king. Thought by the suitors and maids to be of no account, he is to them an object of derision who makes them laugh (18.40, 111, 320, 350). Odysseus' smiles, on the other hand, mark the stages through which he passes on his way back to the throne: the seemingly helpless beggar in rags despised by the haughty nobles (20.301), the armed epic hero covered with the gore of his enemies (22.371), and the returned king about to be reunited with his queen (23.111). The descriptions of his physical appearance as beggar, warrior and sovereign are underlined by his smiles which express his true character and confidence of success.

The smiles all occur on the day when the suitors die and the king and queen reunite. This single day (books 20–23) sees the final climactic abuse of Odysseus by the suitors (20.284–394), the contest of the bow (21), slaughter of all the king's enemies and purification of the hall (22), and final *anagnorisis* and reunion of husband and wife (23). Before that day dawned, Odysseus had tossed and turned in his courtyard bed (20.1) while Penelope cried in her room (20.57). At day's end, the two lie together in the marriage bed and review the events of the past years (23.295ff.). While the space of a single day might seem a logical single narrative unit, it is not possible to *prove* that Homer has designed these four books as a limited narrative section or that books 20–23 would have been sung in one performance. However, since the concentration of the abuse, revenge and reunion themes reach their final forms in this single day, and since Odysseus' smiles correspond to each of these themes—Ktesippos (abuse),

⁵ "Homeric Laughter and the Unsmiling Suitors," *CJ* 78 (1982–83) 97–104. The present article expands on arguments made there.

Medon (revenge), Penelope (reunion)—I shall treat books 20–23 as a single unit for the purpose of discussing these three scenes.

I. Ktesippos

ὁ δ' ἀλεύατ' Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἦκα παρακλίνας κεφαλὴν, μείδῃσεν δὲ θυμῷ
σαρδάνιον μάλα τοῖον· ὁ δ' εὐδμητον βάλε τοῖχον. (20.300–302)

The suitors reappear in book 20 after the quiet interlude of the *homilia*. Their entrance is prefaced by signs of the growing strength of their enemies: Athena assures Odysseus of victory against any odds (20.45–53), Zeus sends him two favorable omens (20.98–121), Philoitios professes his hatred of the suitors (20.199–237), and Amphinomos interprets a bird-omen as unfavorable for the suitors (20.240–46). When the hall is filled, Telemachos warns them not to cause another disturbance (20.266f.), and they are taken aback by his courageous language (20.268f.).

It is against this background that Ktesippos' cast at the beggar should be interpreted. It will be seen that Odysseus' smile in response to his abuse plays an important part in the developing narrative.

Fenik⁶ has shown that the three throwing scenes of which this is a part (17.462–65, 18.394–98, 20.299–302) contain an intensification of Telemachos' reaction as well as a decrease in the effectiveness of the cast itself: Odysseus is hit by Antinoos, Eurymachos misses the hero but strikes a servant, and Ktesippos' cow-foot bounces harmlessly from the wall. Death and triads are elsewhere associated in Homer, especially in the *Iliad*. The three casts, as Focke points out, mean death,⁷ and Odysseus' sardonic smile at this point takes on its real significance. The tables have been turned on the suitors, and it is now the royal family which takes the initiative.⁸ The suitors' laughter had introduced the earlier throwing scene (18.350) when Odysseus' fear caused him to fall at Amphinomos' knees (18.394–96). Two books later, he avoids Ktesippos' cast with a simple movement of his head and reacts with silence and an ominous smile, his first in the *Odyssey*: a sign that victory will soon be his.⁹ As if in confirmation of this fact, the smile is followed by Telemachos' rebuke (20.304–19), the silence of the suitors (20.320), a conciliatory speech by Agelaos answered politely by

⁶ B. Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey*, Hermes Einzelschriften 30 (Wiesbaden 1974) 185f.

⁷ F. Focke, *Die Odyssee* (Stuttgart 1943) 346. Cf. *Iliad* 16.784ff., 18.228ff., 22.165, 250ff., 23.13, 24.16.

⁸ Fenik (above, note 6) 184, 186.

⁹ On Odysseus' smile of anticipated vengeance, cf. K. Ameis and C. Hentze, *Homers Odyssee* (Berlin 1901) ad loc.; J. Faesi, *Homers Odyssee* (Berlin 1885) ad loc.; Focke (above, note 7) 347; A. Dekker, *Ironie in de Odyssee* (Leiden 1965) 251; W. Büchner, "Die Penelopeszenen in der *Odyssee*," *Hermes* 75 (1940) 142; E. Basabe "Canto XX de la Odisea: Antecedentes de la matanza de los pretendientes," *Helmantica* 8 (1957) 368; D. Levine (above, note 5) 102.

Telemachos (20.322–44), and the inhuman laughter and hysteria brought upon the suitors by Athena (20.345–49).¹⁰ Henceforth, no other suitor will throw anything at him; instead Penelope, leaving them laughing in the hall, will go to fetch the bow. The suitors, over the objections of Eurymachos and Antinoos, will allow Odysseus to string the weapon and thus take his vengeance. His smile and their laughter combine to underline both their infatuation and his determination; the expressions summarize their respective positions and point to future events.

Ktesippos' relation to Odysseus is roughly paralleled by that of the Cyclops to the hero earlier in the poem. Both make sarcastic jests at Odysseus' expense concerning a guest-gift (9.369f., 517; cf. 20.296–300), both throw objects at Odysseus which he successfully avoids (9.481–86, 537–42; cf. 20.300f.), both flagrantly disobey all norms of hospitality and are reviled for it when they are defeated (9.474–79; cf. 22.35–42, 287–91). In both cases Odysseus is *οὔτις*—the nameless stranger. The most striking parallel is the expression used to show Odysseus' feeling of superiority in both cases when he knows that he will triumph. His heart laughs at the success of his trick of fooling the Cyclops with the false name (9.413), for he is now confident that he can continue to outwit the blinded monster. His sardonic smile at Ktesippos expresses his knowledge of the impending defeat of that villain also. Polyphemos is blinded by Odysseus, but Ktesippos has his own brand of sightlessness—he can neither see the consequence of his action nor the meaning of the beggar's grin. In book 9 Odysseus' heart laughs because he realizes that his crew will escape: in 20 he smiles because he knows that Ktesippos will not. Such parallels suggest that Odysseus' adventures have been designed to prepare for his later struggles on Ithaka.¹¹

Odysseus' reaction to Ktesippos is the earliest "sardonic" smile in western literature,¹² and interpretations of its basic meaning have been

¹⁰ On the suitors' hysterical laughter in book 20, see D. Levine "Theoklymenos and the Apocalypse," *CJ* 79 (1983) 1–7.

¹¹ C. Beye has pointed out that the same things that characterized Odysseus during his travels—temptation, curiosity and bold escape—are also sources for his actions at home. The wanderings "are in some way mere rehearsal for Odysseus' adventures in Ithaka" (*The Iliad, the Odyssey and the Epic Tradition* [Gloucester, Mass. 1972] 202f.). See also Austin (above, note 4) 162: "The societies Odysseus passes through on his way home . . . are paradigms for the restitution of order there [viz. on Ithaka]." See also J. Finley, *Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass. 1978) 129: "The king who will right Ithaca will have seen the world both spatially and mentally." See also pages 161, 186f.

¹² A scholiast to *Iliad* 15.101 calls Hera's forced laugh "sardonic" and it may well be so interpreted, but the word *σαρδάνιον* appears in the epics only at *Odyssey* 20.302. It is variously spelled *σαρδάνιον* and *σαρδόνιον*, the former being favored by modern editors because it appears in other ancient authors, while the latter appears in many early commentaries. Cf. W. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer* (London 1957²) ad 20.302, also the apparatus criticus to A. Ludwich's *Homeri Carmina* (Leipzig 1889–1907) ad loc., and

rather more entertaining than illuminating. The word is generally thought to be related to a root *σαρ-* whence come *σαίρω*, *σεσηρώς*, and *σαρκάζω*, the image being that of a threatening dog baring his teeth.¹³ Such an image would suit Odysseus well: temporarily at bay but not intimidated as he waits for his chance to attack.¹⁴

II. Medon

τὸν δ' ἐπιμειδῆσας προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς (22.371)

Odysseus next smiles at the end of the *μνηστροφονία* when the terrified herald Medon begs for his life. The beggar has shed his disguise and battled the suitors like an epic hero. Whereas the sardonic smile had earlier anticipated this vengeance, the present one comes when he has seen his plans brought almost to completion. The climax has occurred and its aftermath begins. The smile at Medon is an important part of this process, marking as it does a turn from the general slaughter to the re-establishment of an ordered household. Stanford's comments on the twenty-second book in general are apposite here: "Modern technique tends to place the dénouement of a dramatic story at the very end. The ancients preferred a gradual diminishing of intensity in the final scenes, a cadence, a falling close."¹⁵ The main battle is past and the purification of the house must be undertaken. This transition is effected through the three suppliant scenes, the last of which is capped by Odysseus' smile.

Basabe has recognized this movement and comments on the poetic technique:¹⁶

LSJ s.v. for references. D. Monro claims that *σαρδάνιον* has "the better claim to antiquity": *Homer's Odyssey Books XIII–XXIV* (Oxford 1901) 193.

¹³ Stanford (above, note 12) ad loc.; J. Van Leeuwen, *Odyssea* (Leiden 1917) ad loc.; cf. Ps.-Hesiod *Scutum* 268, Aristophanes *Wasps* 901, *Peace* 482, A. Pierron, *L'Odyssee d'Homère* (Paris 1875) ad loc.

¹⁴ A number of scholia connect the word with Sardinia (*Σαρδῶ*): "Some people say that on the island Sardinia there is a certain kind of parsley which makes the foreigners who eat it die smiling in their spasms" (Cf. Vergil *Eclogue* 7.41: *Sardonitis amarior herbis*). Other stories told by scholiasts give the word a strong sadistic interpretation: Talos, ordered by Zeus to guard Europa on Crete, was said to burn the chests of all he caught and smile as he watched. Why this is "sardonic" is not explained. Sardinians were said by Timaios to laugh as they threw their aged parents into a pit as though their deaths were blessed. Damon reports that along with handsome prisoners of war, Sardinians over the age of seventy were sacrificed to Kronos. It was considered a disgrace for them to cry during the ceremony, but if they were glad and laughed, they were thought to display the highest degree of manhood and goodness. There is no way to be certain, but it seems that such fanciful notions of the word's origin came later than Homer, at a time when its original meaning had already been lost. The so-called "Sardinian" smile is best seen simply as a threatening grimace: mirthless and foreboding. This, and the scholiasts' association with murder, match Odysseus' mood exactly.

¹⁵ Stanford (above, note 12) 2, p. 371.

¹⁶ E. Basabe, "La mantanza de los pretendientes (*Odisea* XXII): ¿Cine o literatura?" *Helmantica* 4 (1953) 200 (my translation).

As is his custom, the poet is going to take us slowly away from this river of blood and death. For this reason, he will present three supplications, one of a seer, another of a bard, another of a herald. The first will be unheeded, the second will be heeded, and the third heeded also. The first will be dramatic, the second lyrical, and the third humorous. Thus the poet takes us away from the previous tragic events: poetic crescendo.

Basabe points out the negative aspects of Leodes' supplication which associate it with the previous killings, the noble elegance of Phemios, the comic situation of Medon's plea and the fact that Odysseus' smile helps to create a proper atmosphere for granting pardon and sending the two faithful servants out of the hall.¹⁷ This scene, with its obvious parallels to the comical Proteos episode (4.351–570, esp. 440–59),¹⁸ is thus more than simply "a piece of humorous relief";¹⁹ it has a definite poetic purpose.

Occurring where it does, Odysseus' smile marks the peak of his active role and a turn from the present slaughter to thoughts of other things which he must do (22.377). When he sees the suitors all dead, he has Telemachos call Eurykleia (22.390–92), and plans are made for cleaning and ritually purifying the palace, as well as taking care of other "loose ends" such as Melanthios and the faithless maids (22.465–77). After the turbulent disorder of the battle, events proceed in an orderly fashion at Odysseus' command. He is once again lord of his household, and his smile at Medon suits his new role: it contains his affection for a loyal servant who in his absence had cared for his wife (4.677) and son (22.356–60); it expresses his security and confidence in his superior position (compare *Iliad* 10.400), his amusement at the ridiculous circumstances under which the herald gives himself up, and his desire to calm the suppliant's fears of death.²⁰

The quiet confidence and superiority which accompany Odysseus' amused and conciliatory smile at the herald stand in contrast to the behavior of the other faithful servants. During the battle Eumaios vaunts over the helpless Melanthios (22.195–99), as does Philoitios over the dead Ktesippos as he reminds him of his words to the master (22.287–91). After the battle, when Eurykleia sees the slaughtered suitors and Odysseus standing among them like a lion, she cries out for joy and is silenced by her master (22.407–18). She cannot keep her glee within herself, however, and continues to laugh aloud until rebuked again—this time by

¹⁷ Basabe (above, note 16) 200–203.

¹⁸ Eustathius 1930.50ff. In both scenes men hide under freshly-flayed animal skins in awkward circumstances and then emerge from hiding to obtain what they seek.

¹⁹ Stanford (above, note 12) 2, p. 386.

²⁰ For other uses of the smiles of superiority, affection and conciliation, see Levine (above, note 5). On supplication scenes elsewhere in Homer, see V. Pedrick, "Supplication in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*," *TAPA* 112 (1982) 125–40.

Penelope (23.1–24, 58–68). Arrogant assertions against one's enemies which would be out of place afterwards are only acceptable during the battle. Odysseus' silent smile at the end of hostilities is framed by and contrasts with the two pairs of vaunts by his servants.

The poet has used the normal formula for a reassuring smile (τὸν δ' ἐπιμειδήσας προσέφη 22.371) in a way not seen elsewhere.²¹ Its appearance in the *Iliad* (4.356, 10.400, 8.38), Hesiod (*Theogony* 547), and the Homeric Hymn to Apollo (531) seem to be based solely on the conciliatory implications of these words, while the only Odyssean example demonstrates a greater sensitivity to plot movement and sophisticated composition: the smile at Medon is carefully knit into the surrounding story.

III. Penelope

Ὡς φάτο· μείδῃσεν δὲ πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς . . . (23.111)

Odysseus' first smile was directed in bitterness at Ktesippos, his second at the faithful herald who cared for Telemachos like a father, and his last (23.111) at the cleverness of his wife. Each smile brings him closer to his final goal; each expresses confidence in his eventual triumph and his understanding of his situation. The last smile is the final anticipation of the reunion with Penelope.

The king's smile at 23.111 introduces the speech to Telemachos which leads the plot away from the interview with Penelope to a discussion of how to deal with the suitors' relatives. This interruption, condemned by various scholars since Kirchoff, has been shown by Fenik to be consonant with Homeric narrative technique.²² Odysseus' smile immediately preceding this development is both an answer to Penelope's speech and a signal of his intention to speak about the suitors.

At first glance the smile is simply a response to Penelope's reference to the *σῆματα* which will be used to test the stranger. Odysseus' facial expression shows his confidence in his ultimate acceptance and his appreciation of his wife's prudence.²³ Perhaps it is also a sign that he is undisturbed by his wife's stubbornness, a signal meant to still Telemachos' criticism (23.97–103) and to express approval of Penelope's self-defense (23.105–10). Like Telemachos' smile in Eumaios' hut (16.476), it expresses satisfaction at what has just been said and anticipates success in future trials.

²¹ This formula is identified and discussed in Levine (above, note 5) 101.

²² Fenik (above, note 6) 64ff. Cf. A. Kirchhoff, *Die homerische Odyssee* (Berlin 1879) 547.

²³ Van Leeuwen (above, note 13) ad loc., Ameis-Hentze (above, note 9) ad loc., Faesi (above, note 9) ad loc., J. Hewitt, "Homeric Laughter," *CJ* 23 (1928) 444, Stanford (above, note 12) ad loc.

Structurally the smile has another purpose, that being to introduce the making of plans to escape the revenge of the suitors' relations. Odysseus' first smile anticipated the killing of the suitors (20.301); his second ushered in the purification of the palace from their blood (23.371); his last smile looks to the final step towards security: avoidance of the nobles' fathers and brothers (23.111). Each one looks ahead to deal with a problem involving the suitors as well as being a logical response to a previous event.

Thus Odysseus' smile at Penelope's speech is emotionally appropriate as well as architecturally functional: it expresses his feelings and also helps tie together the developing themes of revenge and reunion. The movement which began to draw together queen and beggar in book 17 is almost at an end, and the killing of his rivals which he had planned since his first arrival on Ithaka has been accomplished. It now remains only to be recognized by his consort and to avoid falling victim to those who would avenge the suitors' blood. The smile at 23.111 is placed firmly in the context of the accomplishment of these two final tasks: Odysseus smiles at the prospect of his imminent reunion with Penelope but is simultaneously thinking of the aftermath of his own revenge. Such an interpretation is further support for Fenik's contention that the "interruption" (23.117–52) does no violence to the narrative flow.²⁴

While the smile at 22.371 was framed by two pairs of vaunts over the suitors, that in 23.111 is surrounded by rebukes of Penelope. Her caution is interpreted as callousness by Eurykleia (23.70–79) and Telemachos (23.97–103), while the townspeople, fooled by Odysseus' ruse, upbraid her for remarrying (23.149–51) and Odysseus chides her for her incredible reserve (23.166–72). In the center stands his smile, expressing ultimate confidence in his wife, in contrast to the condemnations (including his own) of her character. Like his smile in 20, it also functions as a counterpoint to Eurykleia's loud laugh of victory (23.1, 59) and proves the truth of the scholiast's comment that smiling is more noble and austere than laughter (on *Iliad* 7.212).²⁵

Odysseus' smile is also the final contrast to the unknowing blind laughter of the suitors. Their laughs showed their delusion and provided material for irony,²⁶ while the king's smiles are used to display knowledge, confidence, and growing power. Their careful placement in the narrative helps to reveal the poetic skill with which the *Odyssey* is constructed.

Since the psychology behind Odysseus' smiles changes in accordance with the development of the narrative, we see how Homeric formulaic

²⁴ Fenik (above, note 6) 64ff.

²⁵ See Lord Chesterfield, *Letters* 19 October O.S. 1748 (1598 Dobrée), "A man of parts and fashion is therefore only seen to smile, but never heard to laugh."

²⁶ D. Levine, "Odyssey 18: Iros as Paradigm for the Suitors," *CJ* 77 (1982) 200–204.

language can be charged with thematic meaning. Individual passages of the Homeric epics must be examined in terms of large-scale narrative movement, character development, and their immediate and wider contexts.²⁷

²⁷ I am grateful to the editor and referees of *TAPA* who ably criticized and improved this paper.