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Heroism, Suffering, and Change

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Heroism, Suffering, and Change

Today I will address the issue of identity in the Odyssey. To do so I need to make a few general observations about the structure and content of the poem. It is immediately apparent that the Odyssey is organized by three narrative sequences: the story of Telemachus in Books 1-4, including his journey to Pylus and Sparta, the journey of Odysseus from Ogygia to Scheria in Books 5-12, and the return of Odysseus and his revenge on the suitors in Books 13-24. It is well recognized that Books 1-4 recount Telemachus' coming of age, and that his journey plays a vital role in this process. I would like to suggest that all three narratives involve personal transition. Such transitions are what cultural anthropologists since the pioneering work of Arnold van Gennep call 'rites of passage'. Whereas Telemachus acquires his adult identity, Odysseus is reintegrated into human society on Scheria, and reclaims the heroic identity that has been denied him for over eight years on Ithaca.

Rites of passage typically involve three phases: separation, liminality, and reintegration. Liminality is marked by inversions, including gender and other types of role reversal, and situations of trickery. The initiate regularly experiences a symbolic death in initiation ritual, which is often acted out in initiation myth. Rites of passage marking the transition to adulthood exhibit a spatial pattern of ABA, in which the adolescent is removed from the home, spends some time in a 'liminal zone', and then returns home in his or her adult role as warrior or as wife. In mythology, the liminal zone can itself invert normalcy, being imagined variously as a Golden Age paradise, or as a place of danger such as the underworld or a cave.

Pylus

I suggest that we examine the three scenes of arrival at a beach in Books 3, 6, and 13 in order to assess how they launch the integration of the hero. In all three cases arrival is conditioned somehow by what one has left. Let us begin with the story of Telemachus: for over two years he has been feasting with a band of 118 bachelors who are paying suit to his mother Penelope. These “Suitors” are consuming the resources of his household in order to force Penelope to remarry. When Telemachus reaches Pylus, however, he discovers on the beach a still greater example of conspicuous consumption: 4500 men, regimented into 9 messes of 500, are engaged in ritual killing to honor Poseidon. It is significant that Telemachus is welcomed into this religious brotherhood by Nestor and Peisistratus, the grandson and greatgrandson of his father’s mortal enemy Poseidon.

This religious scene stands in pointed contrast to what Telemachus has just left, the improper feasting of the suitors. Their excessive slaughter, condemned because the cattle are taken from another and consumed for their own pleasure, is opposed by the noble excess of the Pylians who squander their own cattle in honor of Poseidon. And the Pylian sacrifice is truly excessive: archaeological evidence suggests that ancient Greek bulls were somewhat larger, if slightly less meaty, than their modern counterparts. We can thus estimate the yield of a full grown bull at about 250 kg. The 81 bulls sacrificed by the Pylians thus yield about 20,250 kg, and the men on the beach would each receive roughly 4.5kg of meat, not counting the internal organs. The amount of blood is no less impressive. If we estimate the blood yield of domestic cattle at 60 ml/kg, then the 9 altars

were bathed in over 1200 liters of blood. In this sense it can be said that Telemachus journeys to Pylus, and later to Sparta, just to get a proper meal.

The Pylians do not simply provide a counterexample to the suitors as improper feasters, but as a military cohort. The ancient commentators already recognized that the number present at Nestor's sacrifice equals the force that served under him at Troy: 90 ships with 50 men and 9 messes of 500. Telemachus is thus welcomed into a group comprising the adult force of fighting men under Nestor's control, and he is given the seat of Nestor's son Thrasymedes, an Iliadic war veteran (note that the *Odyssey* often achieves its affect by alluding to the *Iliad*). Telemachus thus learns about his father while seated in the inner circle of a military and religious brotherhood. This image of Nestor and Telemachus talking together on the beach before a host of thousands reenacts a common scene at Troy, with Telemachus filling his father's role as an Iliadic warrior and counselor. That he can do so establishes his inherited right to inclusion in heroic society. Telemachus thus does find his father at Pylus, and what he finds he also becomes.

Nestor's knowledge of Odysseus is, however, circumscribed by the world of Troy, and he interprets Odysseus' destiny in relation to the fates of the other heroes at Troy. The father that Telemachus finds is thus limited to that world. Odysseus, however, is something more than that, and as a consequence Telemachus himself must journey onward. It seems that Odysseus the Iliadic warrior only represents half the identity that Telemachus must acquire if he is to become an adult. Sparta is the literal and figurative end of Telemachus' journey, a journey overtly in search of his father, and at the same time a journey into manhood. It follows that what Telemachus encounters and becomes in the palace of Menelaus is somehow central to the *Odyssey's* construction of male

adulthood, and that Telemachus finds there an essential component of his father's identity unavailable to him at Pylus.

Sparta

The next episode unfolds in the court of Menelaus at Sparta. Together, his experiences at Pylus and Sparta will provide Telemachus with complementary images of intact or restored aristocratic households. Through them he comes to know what a properly functioning household looks like, and what he has a right to expect his own household will look like after Odysseus returns and sets it to rights. Pylus and Sparta also model the most important institutions by which elite households manage relationships with individuals outside the community. Most obviously, Telemachus reaffirms his family's ties of xenia or "guest-friendship" to the families of Nestor and Menelaus. Such ties were taken very seriously in ancient Greece, and could extend beyond hospitality or the offer of sanctuary to include other forms of assistance, even military. The opening image at Pylus also shows Nestor managing relationships with the gods through sacrifice, in contrast with the suitors of Penelope who are never shown sacrificing to the gods. The scene at Sparta opens with marriage, another institution that creates a formal relationship between households, often with a view towards forging alliances capable of strengthening one or both parties.

The contrast between Ithaca and Sparta, and hence its educational role for Telemachus, extends far beyond the institutions of marriage and guest-friendship, however. Most important, perhaps, it is first here at Sparta that Telemachus finds himself surrounded in the ambiguities of character and narrative that characterize his father's own

experiences. Such ambiguity is obviously a constitutive element of Telemachus' adulthood as the son of Odysseus, if not of Greek adulthood generally. In Book 4, these ambiguities center on the persons of Menelaus and Helen, who cannot help but suggest to Telemachus the image of a reunited Odysseus and Penelope.

Upon their arrival at Sparta, Telemachus and his traveling companion Peisistratus are bathed by serving girls, and then ushered into the dining hall. As it happens Menelaus is celebrating the marriage of his daughter Hermione, and a son, Megapenthes. While they eat, Telemachus leans over to Peisistratus and in a whisper compares their surroundings to Zeus' own house on Olympus. Menelaus, however, overhears them and in order to avoid divine envy openly declines to compete with the gods, though he is willing to be compared to mortals. This leads to a lengthy lament in which Menelaus declares that he takes no pleasure in such riches: to his own sufferings in his years of travel in the Near East, must be added the loss of a brother, murdered by his treacherous wife. Then there are the troubles he suffered at Troy, and all the friends he lost there, above all Odysseus: "for none of all those comrades, pained as I am, do I grieve as much for one ... that man who makes sleep hateful, even food, as I pore over his memory. No one, no Achaean, labored hard as Odysseus labored or achieved so much." (116-20). When Telemachus begins to cry, Menelaus recognizes that his guest must be the son of Odysseus.

This scene well illustrates Homer's ability to create a simple and comprehensible surface, but nevertheless allows us to read the narrative at a deeper level without disturbing that surface. Scholars have tended to view Menelaus' apparently spontaneous lament for Odysseus as a sort of Dickensian coincidence that serves to facilitate the

identification; though they sometimes elevate its status as a plot device by pronouncing it ironic. An element of irony may be present, but Homer's handling of the scene rises above the mechanics of composition. Sitting before Menelaus, as he remembers his sufferings at Troy, is the son of his comrade Odysseus, who so closely resembles his father that Helen will be able to identify him without a moment's hesitation. Surely we are meant to see the appearance of Telemachus exercising an unconscious influence on Menelaus' memory, awakening his feelings for a comrade whose own sufferings and years of wandering so closely resemble his own. Because his lament goes beyond the "like mindedness" that bound Nestor to Odysseus, it allows Telemachus to see his father as someone able to inspire intense loyalty in his friends as well as his family, and to see the obvious benefits of being able to do so.

As Menelaus agonizes over whether he should allow Telemachus to identify himself or seek to draw him out with questions, Helen arrives in the banquet hall and openly names their guest. Telemachus is now able to meet a woman who is very much like his own mother in certain respects: Helen was the object of improper courtship and has been reunited to her husband after many years of separation. Her past thus evokes the present, and her present a possible future for Penelope. Helen is introduced in such a way as to promise that she and her marriage to Menelaus will serve as a positive model of comparison:

Helen emerged from her scented, lofty chamber—
striking as Artemis with her golden shafts—
and a train of women followed . . .

Adreste drew up her carved reclining-chair,
Alcippe brought a carpet of soft-piled fleece,
Phylo carried her silver basket given by Alcandre,
King Polybus' wife, who made his home in Egyptian Thebes
.... presented Helen her own precious gifts:
a golden spindle, a basket that ran on casters,
solid silver polished off with rims of gold.
Now Phylo her servant rolled it in beside her,
heaped to the brim with yarn prepared for weaving;
the spindle swathed in violet wool lay tipped across it.

(4.135-150)

The imagery that surrounds Helen that identifies her as a paragon of domestic virtue, and not the unchaste mistress of the Trojan Paris. She is compared, strikingly, to the virgin goddess Artemis rather than to Aphrodite. She arrives with an entourage of female attendants, another symbol of chastity and they busy themselves with implements of feminine domesticity. Homer apparently finds the programmatic significance of her yarn, spindle and other implements so important that he allows the wedding feast to be forgotten. The Egyptian origin of the silver basket may allude to traditions that Helen never even went to Troy but remained in Egypt during the war. Helen's spinning is an obvious symbol of feminine virtue from Homer practically to the modern day, and it portrays Helen as laboring on behalf of the household as opposed to idly consuming its wealth. It also corresponds to the story of Penelope's weaving of a funeral shroud in book

1. Penelope justifies her weaving in terms of her domestic duty, and uses it literally to preserve her chastity by postponing her remarriage.

Homer thus seems to introduce Helen in a way that suppresses her adulterous past by presenting her as a model of wifely virtue engaged in activities that help link her to Penelope. Yet weaving is a potentially ambivalent activity: deception and stratagems of all kinds can be said to be woven in Homer. Penelope's weaving, as it happens of a funeral shroud, is a form of deception that serves to entrap the suitors. As such, it can be related to a fishing net, another woven textile, and is consequently able to foreshadow the simile comparing the suitors' corpses to fish pulled to the shore in a net and left to die in the sun. More directly, the scene from Book 4 should be compared with Helen's own activities in the Iliad, in which she is busily weaving the Trojan war, and the battles the Trojans and Achaeans had fought for her sake (Iliad 3.125-28). Thus, by a further extension, Helen and Penelope can both be compared to the fates, who weave mortal destiny.

Such images place Helen in an ambiguous and potentially disturbing light. Even her comparison to Artemis can be understood in this way, and in particular by Telemachus, since the goddess is well known in Greek myth as a huntress who kills young men. Helen's distaff thus becomes an arrow. Homer would seem to call attention to the parallel by referring to Artemis' arrows as "distaffs" in the simile (4.136). Most obviously, however, Helen arrives in the dining hall as Menelaus recounts the pains he suffered at Troy, pains caused by none other than Helen herself. It is appropriate to her character that whereas Nestor verifies Telemachus' identity in terms of public performance, and Menelaus identifies him by a display of grief, Helen's identification is

physical (it is more than that of course, for she identifies Telemachus in terms of an essential as opposed to a constructed self). Once Helen identifies Telemachus, Menelaus begins a new lament which brings them all to tears, Menelaus for the loss of comrades, Telemachus for his father, Peisistratus for a brother he had never known. Even Helen cries, but for whom or what?

At the prompting of Peisistratus, they attempt to regain their composure and begin the feast anew. The willingness to seize control of the situation that Helen demonstrated when she usurped the identification of Telemachus from her husband now recurs as she uses the opportunity to slip drugs in the wine. Homer calls these drugs “noble” and although the Greek could mean nothing more than that they are efficacious, he clearly means to contrast them with poisons such as those used by Odysseus to tip his arrows. Nevertheless, they are described in potentially unsettling terms:

No one who drank it deeply, mulled in wine,
could let a tear roll down his cheeks that day,
not even if his mother should die, his father die,
not even if right before his eyes some enemy brought down
a brother or darling son with a sharp bronze blade.

(4.2470-51)

Female control over men is usually achieved by mental cunning and sexual allure in Homer; yet the obvious analogy between sexual pleasure and intoxication is frequently exploited in ancient Greek literature, above all in the Odyssey itself: in Book 10, Circe

will use drugs to make the crew forget to return to Ithaca, and when that fails on Odysseus she successfully resorts to sex, with the result that after a year on Aeaea Odysseus' own crew must remind him to return. In keeping with her reputation as poluanor Helen, or "Helen of the many partners" (Aeschylus, Agamemnon, verse 62), her control at this moment amounts to a mini-orgy that includes the young Telemachus and Peisistratus, and her older husband Menelaus. Appropriately, at this very moment she herself launches into a story of Odysseus in which her powers of recognition place her in control of the situation. Odysseus, she declares, had once insinuated himself into Troy disguised as a beggar. She alone saw through his disguise, but did not betray him since she now longed to return to Sparta. Consequently, she welcomed him into her home, and swore not to betray him to the Trojans, whereupon Odysseus revealed to her the Greek strategy for taking Troy. Helen's control of the situation is based explicitly on her powers of recognition, and implicitly on the seductiveness alluded to by her bathing Odysseus and rubbing him down with olive oil. Helen presents Odysseus as trusting in her benevolence to such an extent after such treatment that he was willing to reveal to her information that could imperil the Greek cause.

The strategy to which Helen refers is obviously the famous Trojan Horse, and Menelaus replies with a vignette taken from that story which contradicts Helen at almost every point. 'Yes,' he says in effect, 'that was shortly before the Greek generals entered Troy in the belly of the Horse. You came out with your husband Deiphobus and mimicked the voices of the wives of all the men inside. Diomedes and I were about to call out, but Odysseus stopped us, and he even had to use physical restraint on Anticlus.' Menelaus credits Helen with the superhuman ability to convince the Greek generals that

their wives were outside the horse. Such ability corresponds to her use of drugs in this very scene and once again relates her to the divine sorceress Circe. But note that Menelaus also describes her as treacherous, indeed as using the information Odysseus provided her to imperil the Greek cause. At the very least Menelaus presents Helen's loyalties as unstable, and hence her ability to control men as potentially dangerous. Menelaus describes an Odysseus who is, however, able to resist her charms, and thereby maintain his disguise. Instead of revealing all, he concealed all. The Telemachus that returns to Ithaca will understand and obey his father's command that Penelope be kept in the dark about his disguised entry into the household and their plans to kill the suitors.

The end and goal of Telemachus' journey into adulthood is thus an encounter with a woman whose life story illustrates the social consequences of improper courtship and female infidelity even if she herself, like Circe, escapes punishment. It is true that Helen is introduced in such a way that she and Menelaus can foreshadow a reunited Odysseus and Penelope on Ithaca. Yet it is also true that Helen's loyalty to her husband is questionable and her influence over him is highly ambivalent as a consequence. It would seem that the final lesson that Telemachus learns in the process of becoming his father is that women are inherently unstable, that female dominance is potentially dangerous, that the support of powerful women is invaluable, and above all that one mustn't tell them everything (such lessons would validate the necessity of transferring loyalty from the female to the male as part of the process of becoming an adult in a patriarchal culture.). Next morning, moreover, Telemachus discovers that Odysseus is himself being held on the island of Ogygia by a powerful woman, Calypso, who, like Helen is at the same time salvific, seductive, and entrapping. Nevertheless, despite such lessons or because of them,

Telemachus is fated to relive this part of his father's experiences as well. Telemachus remains at Sparta under Helen's spell for a full month, and it requires divine intervention by Athena herself to send him on his way. In the space of a month, Telemachus completes the blueprint of his father's life: incorporation into martial society followed by an extended stay in and delayed return from an exotic land in which he falls under the spell of an alluring and powerful woman.

Scheria and Change

Let us now turn to the story of Odysseus' voyage to Scheria, beginning with his shipwreck in Book 5. Odysseus, you will remember, is on board a raft of his own making, and has been sailing for twenty days alone on the sea. But just as Odysseus catches sight of Scheria, Poseidon catches sight of him:

[Poseidon] ... rammed the clouds together—both hands
clutching his trident—churned the waves into chaos, whipping
all the gales from every quarter, shrouding over in thunderheads
the earth and sea at once—and night swept down from the sky—

...

At that a massive wave came crashing down on [Odysseus'] head,
a terrific onslaught spinning his craft round and round—
he was thrown clear of the decks—

the steering-oar wrenched

from his grasp—

and in one lightning attack the brawling
galewinds struck full-force, snapping the mast mid-shaft
and hurling the sail and sailyard far across the sea.
He went under a good long while, no fast way out,
no struggling up from under the giant wave's assault,
his clothing dragged him down—divine Calypso's gifts—
but at last he fought his way to the surface spewing
bitter brine, streams of it pouring down his head.
But half-drowned as he was, he'd not forget his craft—
he lunged after her through the breakers, laying hold
and huddling amidships, fled the stroke of death.

.....

But someone saw him—Cadmus' daughter with lovely ankles,
Ino, a mortal woman once with human voice and called
Leucothea now she lives in the sea's salt depths,
esteemed by all the gods as she deserves.
She pitied Odysseus, tossed, tormented so—
she broke from the waves like a shearwater on the wing,
lit on the wreck and asked him kindly, "Ah poor man,
why is the god of earthquakes so dead set against you?"

...

Just do as I say. You seem no fool to me.
Strip off those clothes and leave your craft

...

Here, take this scarf,
tie it around your waist—it is immortal.

.....

With that the goddess handed him the scarf
and slipped back in the heavy breaking seas
like a shearwater once again—
and a dark heaving billow closed above her.
But battle-wary Odysseus weighed two courses,
deeply torn, probing his fighting spirit: “Oh no—
I fear another immortal weaves a snare to trap me,
urging me to abandon ship! I won’t. Not yet.”

.....

But just as great Odysseus thrashed things out,
Poseidon god of the earthquake launched a colossal wave,
terrible, murderous, arching over him, pounding down on him,
hard as a windstorm blasting piles of dry parched chaff,
scattering flying husks—so the long planks of his boat
were scattered far and wide. But Odysseus leapt aboard
on timber and riding it like a plunging racehorse
stripped away his clothes, divine Calypso’s gifts,
and quickly tying the scarf around his waist
he dove headfirst in the sea.... (5. 321-411)

The goal of Odysseus' journey is, of course, to 'return' to Ithaca after seven years with a cave dwelling goddess. 'Return' to the past thus entails a change from the present, from isolation and divinity, to the society of mortals. Yet Odysseus' isolation at this moment is absolute; and he finds himself object of opposed divine forces. The price of change is a physical and mental ordeal. Nothing in ancient Greek experience could have been more disorienting than being alone on a raft in a hurricane: forward, backward, left, right, even up and down, are completely meaningless terms. The raft itself, with its vertical mast, provide the spatial coordinates of a microcosm spinning in chaos until finally the mast breaks and even that is lost. This same wave sweeps Odysseus into the sea, where the clothes that Calypso provided threaten to drag him down into oblivion. And then he sees a talking bird on his prow who transforms herself into a woman and instructs him to take off his clothes, wrap her veil around his waist and dive into the sea . . . for safety! He takes the veil, his only evidence that Ino is not a hallucination, but attempts to remain on board. To no avail. A wave destroys his craft, whereupon he sheds his clothes, belts on the goddess's veil, and spends three sleepless days and nights swimming for an island that requires an act of god to set foot on.

I know of no more powerful description of the trauma of change in literature. Change is a shock, it hurts, and it is disorienting. By definition it means that we are subject to forces more powerful than ourselves, forces capable of killing us, forces that do in fact kill us, and must if a new self is to emerge. Whereas Telemachus the child becomes a man, Odysseus, the man becomes a child who must be reborn. He must leave his ship, shed his divine clothes, the last trappings of his life with an immortal goddess,

and arrive naked and alone on the shores of Scheria. To make his landfall he must pass from saltwater to fresh, he must swim upstream, through the mouth of a river. He emerges practically helpless, so exhausted he can hardly move. Still crusted with brine, his flesh swollen and red from the constant exposure, he makes his bed on the banks of the river in a pile of leaves beneath an olive tree. With the transition from salt water to fresh he changes domains and leaves his past behind; next morning Odysseus will emerge from the bush to wash the last vestiges of that world from his body. He will be reborn, but as what, and into what?

As when Telemachus journeys to Pylus, the place at which Odysseus arrives is defined in terms of what he has left. Odysseus arrives on the beach from an island paradise inhabited by the nymph Calypso after sailing for twenty days on a raft of his own making. Scheria itself resembles in certain respects the island paradise from which he left, and he is welcomed by a nubile princess who is an obvious human counterpart to Calypso. That these features remain constant casts into high relief what is different: after seven years spent in the company of a solitary divinity, Odysseus is reintegrated into human society. When Odysseus first emerges from the bush, however, he is compared to a ravening lion, driven by hunger to approach a farmstead and attack its flocks:

... Great Odysseus crept out of the bushes,
stripping off with his massive hand a leafy branch
from the tangled olive growth to shield his body,
hide his private parts. And out he stalked
as a mountain lion exultant in his power

strides through wind and rain and his eyes blaze
and he charges sheep or oxen or chases wild deer
but his hunger drives him on to go for flocks,
even to raid the best-defended homestead.

So Odysseus moved out . . .

about to mingle with all those lovely girls,
naked now as he was, for the need drove him on,
a terrible sight, all crusted, caked with brine . . .

(6.139-151)

The comparison well captures the impact of Odysseus' appearance on the maidservants. In another respect, it is also wildly inappropriate: lion similes are a ubiquitous feature of Iliadic battle narrative, where they describe marauding Greek warriors. Odysseus is, of course, physically stronger than Nausicaa, and thus in a position to do her violence, but circumstances demand that he act in a matter precisely opposite to that of a hungry lion or an Iliadic warrior. The effect of such a comparison in this context is undeniably humorous, and the humor continues in the next scene when Odysseus deliberates supplicating Nausicaa or addressing her from a distance as he covers his genitals with an olive branch: supplication, of course, requires both hands. Even his choice of branches displays characteristic wit, for Odysseus demonstrates his social propriety by literally covering himself with a cultural symbol and the tree of a virgin goddess, Athena. Comparing Odysseus to a wild predator helps expose a further incongruity, since it prepares for a rape which we know will not occur. On the other hand, if Odysseus

foregoes the violence, Nausicaa poses no less a threat to him: despite his savage appearance, if Odysseus gives offense or even fails to win her over, his return and his life are in jeopardy. As it happens, Nausicaa is, like Nestor and Peisistratus, the grandchild and great grandchild of his mortal enemy Poseidon.

The danger that Odysseus faces in this scene informs the narrator's own comparison of Nausicaa to the goddess Artemis hunting goats or deer in the verses immediately preceding:

White-armed Nausicaa led their singing, dancing beat . . .
as lithe as Artemis with her arrows striding down
from a high peak—Taygetus' towering ridge or Erymanthus—
thrilled to race with the wild boar or bounding deer,
and nymphs of the hills race with her

(6.112-16)

Both in her capacity as a huntress, and more generally as a mistress of animals, the life of this warrior-lion is in Nausicaa's hands, and Odysseus has just made the potentially fatal mistake of disturbing this princess-goddess at her bath. The narrative thus threatens to assimilate the hero into the paradigm of the hapless Actaeon, or of Teiresias. Yet Odysseus himself furthers the comparison:

Here I am at your mercy, princess—
are you a goddess or a mortal? If one of the gods

who rule the skies up there, you're Artemis to the life,
the daughter of mighty Zeus—I see her now—just look
at your build, your bearing, your lithe flowing grace . . .

(6.163-67)

He draws the comparison because he sees it as the secret to his salvation: as we have seen, Nausicaa poses the additional threat of being nubile. Odysseus thus faces the double challenge of winning Nausicaa's favor, but of keeping her at arm's length. As it happens, lion similes, and arguably this lion simile, resurface in erotic poetry, where as here the lion captures his prey but shows restraint. If, as I consider likely, the image has already been appropriated by erotic poetry by the time the *Odyssey* came to be written down, then the narrative effect is quite complex. In that the *Odyssey* belongs to the epic genre, and its protagonist is an Iliadic warrior, it would be reductive to argue that the poem simply echoes an erotic trope. Rather it simultaneously locates Odysseus in two narrative environments, that of epic warrior, and of erotic seductor. Fulfilling either role would prevent Odysseus' home coming. That Odysseus correctly 'reads' the ambiguous story in which he finds himself can be seen from his initial decision not to 'lay down his olive branch', but to maintain his literal and figurative distance. He then seeks to define their relationship as that of a mortal and a virgin goddess by comparing her directly to Artemis, and then to the date palm at which the goddess was born (6.177-84). In so doing, Odysseus acknowledges that Nausicaa has the power of life and death over him, and he wins her favor in a manner that separates them by an insurmountable sexual barrier.

The lion-simile thus belongs to a larger narrative strategy that locates Odysseus in a variety of possible scenarios, each of which threaten his return. Odysseus is described with language appropriate to a warrior in the midst of battle precisely in order to point to the incongruity of an Iliadic persona in this setting, and Odysseus himself is seen to abet a narrative strategy that establishes only to alienate him from his identity as an Iliadic warrior. The relationship is understood and respected by Nausicaa who indicates that Odysseus should follow her cart at a distance and wait in a grove before entering the city: the image of Odysseus and Nausicaa riding into the city together in a wagon filled with wedding clothing and followed by maidens would have invited comparison with the procession that formed part of wedding ritual, complete with the public jeering that Nausicaa imagines receiving from the men of Scheria.

Odysseus' Revenge: The Lion in the House

I will close by briefly examining the scene of his arrival on Ithaca, and another lion simile that follows the slaughter of the suitors. Yet again the place from which Odysseus comes helps define the place to which he goes, and the similarities between these places helps expose a fundamental difference. For our purposes, it is only important to note that Scheria is described as a well ordered and developed Greek polis, while Ithaca is just the opposite of this. As a consequence, Odysseus is reintegrated into human society and reborn as a social being on Scheria. We have also seen how Odysseus' social reintegration is achieved in explicit contrast to his warrior identity. It is precisely this identity which the situation on Ithaca allows him to reassert, and which he does reassert: Odysseus punishes the suitors as an Iliadic warrior.

Odysseus reaches Ithaca, however, with goods acquired during the wanderings rather than at Troy, and which represent his status as a guest of the Phaeacian polis rather than as a combat veteran. He thus 'returns' a guest-friend and a wanderer. He is welcomed on the beach by Athena, who disguises herself as a royal shepherd. Once again, Odysseus finds himself in a potentially life threatening situation, and attempts to supplicate the stranger. In the course of explaining how he came by such treasure, Odysseus transforms the gifts of the Phaeacians into Trojan plunder, plunder over which he had, moreover, killed a son of Idomeneus in ambush. Athena furthers Odysseus' strategy of concealment by disguising him as a beggar, an identity opposed to that of aristocrat or warrior. Odysseus, however, concocts a fictional autobiography which affirms that he was once an Iliadic warrior, but had recently fallen on hard times.

As the narrative progresses, a series of images relate Odysseus to various predatory animals which the Iliad uses to describe a warrior's battle-rage. Assimilation into the natural order thus verifies Odysseus' identity as an Iliadic warrior. The most example occurs in a simile following the slaughter of the suitors which echoes the lion to which he is compared when he first meets Nausicaa:

[Eurycleia] found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses,
splattered with bloody filth like a lion that's devoured
some ox of the field and lopes home, covered with blood,
his chest streaked, both jaws glistening, dripping red—
a sight to strike terror. So Odysseus looked now,
splattered with gore, his thighs his fighting hands....

(22.426-31).

The hungry lion that greeted Nausicaa in Book 6 has now made its kill. Already in Book 4, Menelaus compares Odysseus in his role as avenger to a lion who eats a doe and her fawns (4.374-79=17.135-40). In the latter case, both animals belong to the natural order and the lion is not driven by hunger; rather he eats the doe because of her own foolishness when she leaves her young in the lion's lair as she herself goes out to eat. After the suitors are killed, it is significantly the lion who is the transgressor and who has in fact done precisely what the suitors have just been punished for doing! The simile, moreover, follows a scene of unrestrained vengeance in which Odysseus kills Leiodes, "the only suitor to whom reckless deeds were hateful" (21.168; my translation). This scene is balanced by two others in which Odysseus spares Phemius and restrains Eurycleia from exalting over the massacre, yet the poem itself concludes with Odysseus beginning a further slaughter, of the parents of the suitors, to which Zeus himself must call a halt. It is true, and often observed, that heroism has been reformulated in the Odyssey. Yet the hero is himself not 'reformed': even as moral agent, the Odysseus that returns from the enchanted world remains ambiguous, at once necessary and dangerous to his people.