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ODYSSEY 1–4: THE TELEMACHY

INTRODUCTION TO BOOKS 1–4

Since antiquity, the first four books of the poem have been informally known as the *Telemacheia* or "Story of Telemachus". It's one of the bolder features of the poem that its hero's entrance into the main narrative is delayed to the fifth book, so that the focus of these first four books is on the linking character of his son Telemachus. Telemachus' journey is part of the initial opening-out of the story, takes him and us from Ithaca into the wider heroic world, and culminating in encounters with the survivors of the *Iliad* itself. But there's also an inner journey for Telemachus himself, as the passive, despondent youth of the opening scenes is prompted by Athene and others to accept his responsibilities as Odysseus' now-adult heir, and to assume his own place in the wider heroic community as his father's son.

Odysseus' initial impact on the poem is as an absence. We see the consequences of his absence for his son, wife, and kingdom; the place he occupies in the memory of those who knew him, both in Ithaca and latterly in Pylos and Sparta; and the attitude of the gods to the situation thus created. One effect of this is to paint us a detailed picture of the world to which Odysseus is trying to return, and why that world needs him as badly as he needs it. We won't be returning to Ithaca till Odysseus himself does, more than halfway through the poem, so these first four books prepare important ground.

Highlights of these books include:

- the introductions of Zeus and Athene, Penelope and Telemachus, and the suitors' ringleaders Antinous and Eurymachus
- four tellings of the story of Agamemnon, which operates throughout the poem as a counter-plot to the story of Odysseus
- the tales of Nestor and Menelaus, and the reminiscences of Odysseus at Troy by Menelaus and Helen.

BOOK 1. ATHENE VISITS TELEMACHUS

The book is dominated by the first of the book's ambitious conversation scenes: an intimate two-hander between Telemachus and the disguised Athene which showcases a number of the poem's distinctive techniques. It's a complex, extended two-hander of a kind never really seen in the *Iliad*: eight speeches between just two voices, each manoeuvring around the other, with hidden thoughts and one character whose entire identity is a fiction.

A. The proem

Like the proem of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*'s opening lines announce the subject of the song and give a capsule summary of the story, and invoke the Muse to help the bard and to choose where in the story to begin the narration.

The first word of each poem is a noun summarising the story the Muse is going to help the bard to sing. In the *Iliad*, you remember, it was *menin*, "wrath", but in the *Odyssey*, it's *andra*, "man". Where the *Iliad* is about a process, the *Odyssey* is about a hero, whose qualities and achievements are central to the poem's themes. Shewring tries to bring this out by translating it as "hero", and the defining epithet *polytropon* (literally, "of many twists", "versatile") becomes "of wide-ranging spirit". From the start, this is going to be a poem about a hero who (in notable contrast to Achilles) is *adaptable* – one of the essential survival skills he's going to need in the changed world through which he travels.

The miniature synopsis, like that which kicks off the *Iliad*, is interesting as much for what it doesn't say as for what it does. There's no mention yet of Penelope, the suitors, Telemachus, or anything that happens in the second half of the poem. The one specific episode mentioned is the climax of the first half, the loss of the last of his crew – which has

already taken place at the time the story opens, and is effectively part of the summary of the story so far.

Nevertheless, these lines say a lot about the way this poem is going to work. The loss of Odysseus' crew is not his fault, but theirs. This is a poem whose central narrative law is one of *moral cause and effect*: carelessness over breaking the gods' laws triggers destruction at their hands.

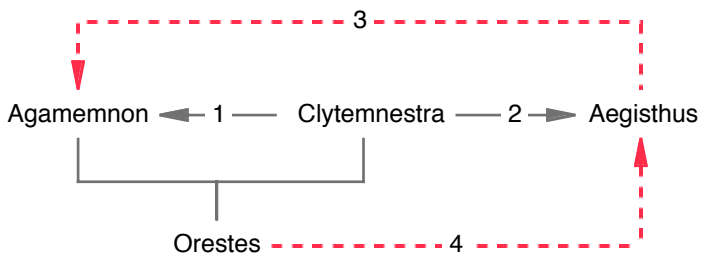
We'll hear more about this episode, and the chain of events of which it's the culmination, at the midpoint of the poem. For now, we're told the present state of the story: at the time the story opens, Odysseus is a prisoner of Calypso, and even if he can escape he'll have to run the gauntlet of Poseidon's anger to cross the sea to Ithaca. At the same time, it's made clear that Odysseus is only at risk from Poseidon when he's out on the open ocean; on land, Poseidon takes no interest in him, so that if he can make it to the coast of Ithaca he'll be safe.

B. The council of the gods

The summary leads into the first scene of the poem, the divine council on Olympus which sets the story in motion. The *Iliad* also began with a god's action (Apollo's plague on the Greeks to punish Agamemnon's slight to Apollo's priest Chryses), but the *Odyssey* is much more forthright about bringing the whole plot directly under Zeus's control. It's part of a larger strategy of clarifying the structure, function, and moral and theological coherence of the divine machinery, making Zeus's attitude to human virtue and vice a major propellant of the plot.

The council itself takes place against a background of two key developments. One is Poseidon's absence, on one of those African holidays on the edge of the known world that kept most of the Olympian family off the scene for most of the first book of the *Iliad*. But the trigger for the council is the recent events in Mycenae, where Agamemnon's son Orestes has just avenged his father's murder by killing the usurper Aegisthus.

This story is a major counter-plot in the Odyssey, told in various forms over the course of the first half of the poem and with close correspondences to the poem's main plot. Unknown to Agamemnon, his wife Clytemnestra was seduced during his absence at Troy by the usurper Aegisthus, who then murdered the king on his arrival home from Troy. (Red dotted lines in the diagram indicate who kills whom. I find I use this convention a lot when trying to explain the Roman emperor Nero's family tree.)

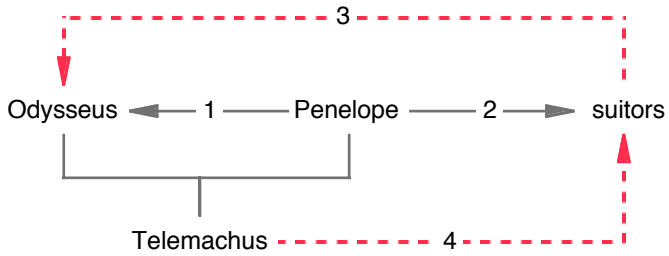


But the hot news in Olympus is that Agamemnon's son Orestes has taken vengeance into his own hands by killing Aegisthus in his turn, and as far as the gods are concerned justice has been served.

Homer's version differs somewhat from the version that later becomes standard in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and later tragedies; Aegisthus rather than Clytemnestra is the chief villain, and indeed Clytemnestra doesn't kill Agamemnon herself (though we learn in book 11 that she does kill Cassandra, whom Agamemnon has brought home from Troy with him). Nor do we hear much about what happens to Clytemnestra afterwards; nothing's said about Orestes killing her as well, as famously happens in the later versions of the story, and there's just a coy reference to Orestes burying her along with Aegisthus at 3.301ff.

The potential parallels with Odysseus' story are pretty insistent. The suitors aim to woo Penelope away from her marriage to the missing Odysseus, and apparently to usurp the throne of Ithaca in the process. If Odysseus does return, he risks meeting the same fate at their hands as Agamemnon did at Aegisthus', leaving only Telemachus to enforce his family's justice. As we'll soon see, the differences between the two stories will turn out to be

the real point: Clytemnestra is no Penelope, and Odysseus is not going to end up like Agamemnon. At the same time, the suitors have no intention of ending up like Aegisthus; aware of the potential danger to them from Telemachus, they'll plot to murder him preemptively.



1. Zeus's speech

Zeus uses this story to illustrate an important principle of the poem: that the moral folly Shewring again translates as "presumptuousness" is a trigger for divine punishment, and that this is one of the key factors in human suffering. As he goes on to explain, the gods always give such mortals a last chance and a warning, as Aegisthus was warned through Hermes; and only when they disregard this final warning is the divine vengeance triggered. We'll see this pattern repeatedly in the poem, as failure to spot the gods' warning signs brings down divine wrath on the perpetrator's own head. It's yet another of the plot devices in the *Odyssey* that will be heavily recycled in tragedy, and through it in popular storytelling ever since.

The lines are made a little difficult by the shifting sense of "outrunning one's allotted portion" – first as the share of sufferings rash mortals add to by their actions, and then as the mark Aegisthus oversteps in defying the gods' warning. The point, of course, is that the second triggers the first.

2. Athene's speech

Athene opportunistically drags the conversation round to the subject of her favourite Odysseus, who stands out as an example of the apparent failure of Zeus's law: a man who seems to have outrun his own portion of suffering through no fault of his own. She reminds Zeus of Odysseus' past piety in terms that recall his attitude to Hector and Priam in the *Iliad*, concluding with a surprising and rather untranslatable pun on Odysseus' name.

3. Zeus's reply

Zeus is sympathetic, but points out that the old divine vendettas so familiar from the *Iliad* continue to apply. If Poseidon doesn't want Odysseus to return home, it's not for Zeus to defy him. Poseidon's specific grievance is the blinding of his son the Cyclops, introduced here for the first time as the major episode in Odysseus' wanderings to date. As we'll see, Odysseus could have averted Poseidon's wrath but for a moment of recklessness of his own, so like Aegisthus he does in fact carry at least some responsibility for his present fate. Zeus, however, proposes a compromise: take advantage of Poseidon's absence to present him with a *fait accompli* on his return, and hope that by returning Odysseus to Ithaca now they'll put Poseidon in an impossible position if he tries to reverse that action in the face of all the other gods.

4. Athene's reply

Athene immediately proposes two strands of action: send Hermes to Ogygia to tell Calypso to release Odysseus, while Athene herself goes to Ithaca to encourage Telemachus to call the suitors to account. Homer's usual resistance to the narration of simultaneous events (Zielinski's first law) will mean that in fact the first strand doesn't get activated until the second is pretty much complete – with near-fatal consequences for Odysseus, as it happens, since it delays his departure from Ogygia long enough for him to be caught by Poseidon on his return. But for now the focus is on Athene and her mission to Ithaca.

Her plan for Telemachus as announced here has two parts. First, she'll stir Telemachus to challenge the suitors publicly in a full-blown Ithacan assembly. Though this will fail, it's an

essential part of the poem's moral plotting that the suitors and their kin should receive the kind of clear warning of transgression and consequences that Aegisthus received from the gods. The failure of the Ithacan aristocracy to do the right thing in book 2 is what triggers both the slaughter in 22 and the final showdown in 24.

But Athene's plans for Telemachus go further: he'll leave Ithaca altogether to travel to Pylos and Sparta, with an overt and a covert mission. Ostensibly, the purpose of his travel is to find out if Odysseus is still alive; but Athene freely admits that she has a hidden agenda as well, to enhance Telemachus' *kleos* ("good name", or reputation) by introducing him to the wider heroic community beyond the backwater of Ithaca, in the course of which he'll learn to see what a well-ordered Ithaca might look like and how he himself can contribute to making it happen.

C. Athene goes to Ithaca

Athene arms herself and descends, using the mortal disguise of an old friend of the family from a neighbouring island who hasn't visited Ithaca in years and is therefore unaware of the present situation. (Don't confuse this Mentes with the more prominent character of the Ithacan nobleman Mentor, whose guise Athene will take in subsequent books.)

Our first glimpse of Ithaca comes through her eyes, and it's not an encouraging one. The first thing we see is the crowd of suitors, idling outside the palace in preparation for another evening's banqueting at Odysseus' expense. None of them so much as notices the arrival of a visitor: a major breach of Homeric hospitality etiquette.

1. her reception

But Telemachus is there in the crowd, and despite being the most preoccupied of all he immediately springs into action at the sight of a guest. Our first glimpse of him is a telling one, and an interesting example of a kind of direct psychological comment by the narrator that's been largely avoided in the *Iliad*. He's brooding on his missing father, whose return is in his imagination inextricably linked to the removal of the suitors: not just an indication of Telemachus' state of mind, but the first hint of an actual confrontation to come.

Telemachus immediately activates the sequence we already recognise from the *Iliad* as a standard protocol for the reception of guests: greet them, show them in, give them a seat, let them wash, serve them food and drink, and only when their needs have been satisfied ask them questions. We'll see this sequence, and pointed variations on it, repeatedly in the course of the *Odyssey*, where its observance and perversion takes on powerful thematic significance as the poem unfolds. (A nice touch here is Athene leaving the divine spear she picked up earlier in a kind of umbrella-stand at the door with Odysseus' own. These are the same spears with which Odysseus and Telemachus will arm themselves for the slaughter of the suitors.)

The first such perversion begins right away, with the arrival of the suitors. They ignore both prince and guest entirely, and seat themselves uninvited in Odysseus' megaron to eat his food, drink his wine, and coerce his palace bard Phemius to perform as after-dinner cabaret entertainment.

2. Athene and Telemachus

Now comes the book's central scene: an exchange of four speeches each between Telemachus and the disguised Athene, in the first of the poem's great conversational mindgames. Telemachus and his guest are sitting apart from ther rest, and Telemachus takes the opportunity of the bard's song to speak privately to his mysterious visitor. His preoccupation with his missing father spills out in his opening speech, but in more forceful and vivid imagery than was possible in the neutral narrator's voice; and again he flirts in his imagination with the idea of a confrontation between Odysseus and the suitors, before succumbing to the pessimism which dominates his characterisation at the outset of the story.

(a) Telemachus' questions

But now is the proper time to question his guest, and you'll soon get used to some of these lines popping up as something of a refrain in later books. (This includes the local joke "No one journeys on foot to Ithaca!", which gets wheeled out on every possible pretext.)

A particularly telling touch is the way Telemachus seeks a connection with Odysseus. As we'll see, one of the dominant drives in his character is to discover more about the father he barely remembers, and encounters with those who knew Odysseus closely are particularly important to his quest.

(b) "Mentes" tells his story

Athene now treats Telemachus, and us, to the first of the *Odyssey*'s series of fictitious autobiographies. Most of these come from the lips of Odysseus himself, but the *Odyssey* is fascinated by false identities, and even this routine bit of divine disguise is an opportunity to explore the narrative opportunities in fabricating a cover story for Athene's assumed persona.

It's an artful performance, full of authentic-looking names and details. (We don't know where Homer's Taphian islands or Temese were, but Taphians appear elsewhere as maritime traders with a rather equivocal reputation.) Mentes' claim of a connection with Odysseus' father Laertes is boldly backed up with a bluff that the old man himself can confirm it: the first in a series of glimpses of Laertes and his estate, preparing us for the central role they'll play in the poem's closing scenes. To Telemachus' pessimistic assessment of the likelihood that Odysseus is still alive, Athene offers an alternative scenario (based closely on what she and we already know, but with the divine element rationalised out) to encourage the thought that one day he may yet return. Athene backs this up with a mischievous piece of pseudo-prophecy, prefaced with a warning that she has no particular track record as a prophet.

Finally, she questions her host: is he the son of Odysseus, whom he so much resembles? Notice how "Mentes" artfully lays claim to, and at the same time seems to authenticate, an acquaintance with Odysseus himself – while simultaneously encouraging Telemachus with the suggestion that he resembles his father more closely than he's perhaps aware.

[Incidentally, Shewring has "Antilochus" for "Anchialus" at the start of the speech. This is just a slip; the correct form turns up at the end of the book.]

(c) Telemachus' reply

The precise tone of Telemachus' uncomfortable reply is hard to read: gloomy? ironic? bantering? But it certainly meshes with Telemachus' pervasive preoccupation with the question of what, if anything, connects him to the father he lost as an infant, in his own eyes and those of the world.

(d) Athene's questions

Athene deflects Telemachus' deprecating reply with a compliment, and returns to the original topic. Telemachus has spoken cryptically of "suitors", but this makes no sense to a newcomer – who sees only an army of freeloaders invading Odysseus' palace, with Telemachus helpless to prevent them. Obviously Athene already knows about all this, but one of her purposes in framing her question this way (with strong condemnation of the spongers' conduct) is to present Telemachus with a clearly sympathetic listener to whom he can pour out his grievances.

(e) Telemachus on the suitors

Not for the first time, Telemachus answers only after a melancholy contrast of the present indignities with the palace's glories under Odysseus, and a glum reflection on his father's likely fate. But he does now explain for the first time clearly who these suitors are: young aristocrats from Ithaca and the major neighbouring islands who have installed themselves in the palace to pressurise Penelope into remarriage, exploiting the codes of heroic hospitality to their own advantage and the erosion of Odysseus' estate. As Telemachus acknowledges, this puts him in a uniquely vulnerable and humiliating position: powerless to prevent the daily consumption of his property by others, and all too aware that his own continued survival is the single biggest obstacle to the suitors' goal.

(f) Athene's advice

Athene's response is the longest and most complex speech in the book. She begins by feeding Telemachus' imagination with just the kind of scene we know it dwells on: a vivid picture of Odysseus' return, armed to the teeth for a decisive confrontation with the suitors. This then leads into a further piece of authentic-looking Mentes fiction, a specific and circumstantial

recollection of a supposed first meeting with Odysseus back in Mentes' youth. The intriguing detail of the poisoned arrows, which seem faintly unheroic and aren't mentioned elsewhere in Homer, is all part of Athene's purpose – hinting at the possibility that Odysseus may indeed be able to take on the entire rabble of suitors, and that the element of craft may be important in evening the balance of force. This leads into the clearest suggestion yet that the suitors' fate should and will be nothing short of death, and at Odysseus' own hands.

Athene now spells out the two phases of her plan as originally announced to Zeus.\

- First, Telemachus has to call an assembly in the morning in which the suitors will have to defend their conduct before the entire aristocracy of Ithaca. If Penelope is unwilling to remarry, they should give up their pursuit of her; if she isn't, they should approach her through her father rather than her son, as the most appropriate person to give her in marriage. (More on the implications of this in the Ithaca seminar.) Either way, they have no place in Odysseus' palace.
- Second, after the assembly Telemachus needs to leave Ithaca and search after news of his father himself: first from Nestor in Pylos, and then from Menelaus in Sparta. Even the news of Odysseus' death will at least clarify the situation and allow Telemachus to set in motion the proper procedure for his father's funeral and his mother's remarriage. If the suitors still give him trouble, that will be the time to think seriously about ways of killing them before they kill him. Now for the first time the story of Agamemnon is explicitly mapped on to Odysseus' own family, with the example of Orestes directly applied to Telemachus himself. Of course the suitors haven't actually murdered Odysseus, so the parallel is at best tendentious; but it neatly connects up Telemachus' two main preoccupations, his father's disappearance and the suitors' need to be taught a fatal lesson. Only at the end does she hint at the other. primary purpose to this mission: to enhance Telemachus' own status and confidence as a hero in his own right.

Why Nestor and Menelaus, rather than Odysseus' closest friend Diomedes, or other survivors of the war now safely back in their kingdoms? It's a matter of simple geography: from the western islands Pylos is the first major Mycenaean site within a day's sail, and Sparta is the next closest, whereas Diomedes' city of Argos requires a difficult and perilous sea journey right round the Peloponnese. It'd be even worse if Telemachus were to try and seek out Idomeneus (in Crete), or any of the handful of other heroes to have made it safely home.

(g) the parting speeches

Telemachus is disappointed at his guest's insistence on leaving just as they're starting to form such a bond, and asks him to stay long enough for the traditional rites of farewell: a bath, a final meal, and a gift from his host to keep as an heirloom and a concrete token of the bond established between their families. (We saw a number of examples of such guest-gift heirlooms among the treasures of the *Iliad*.) Obviously to accept such a treasure from a mortal would be awkward for Athene, and she extricates herself by promising to pick it up on her next visit, when Telemachus' generosity will be amply rewarded.

3. her departure

The true meaning of this final ambiguity is apparent when Athene sheds her disguise and vanishes – either in the actual form of a bird, or in a manner and direction that call one to mind. (Commentators have long been divided on exactly what is implied, though in comparable later scenes Athene does indeed metamorphose into bird form.) We've already seen this kind of divine departure with Poseidon at *Iliad* 13.62–4: it's a conventional, if slightly bizarre, way for a god to unmask at the end of a conversation to confirm the divine authority behind his words.

D. Telemachus asserts himself

Now come the first demonstrations of Telemachus' new assertiveness, in a pair of important scenes that introduce first his mother Penelope and then the two main ringleaders among the suitors.

1. with Penelope

We're reminded that the preceding conversation took place against a background of the bard Phemius reluctantly performing for the suitors. This now becomes the means not only to draw Penelope into the scene but to involve mother and son in a fascinating if enigmatic scene showcasing their own complex relationship and questions of the function of heroic song itself. It's famously the earliest display of literary criticism in the western tradition, and the first of several scenes involving bards (especially in book 8) which seem to reflect on the nature of epic and the relationship between poet and audience.

Phemius' song Phemius' song is certainly well-chosen to appeal to the suitors and to distress Odysseus' family. He's singing of a subject we'll here more of in subsequent books: the disasters that befell most of the Greek warlords on their way back from Troy. (According to later tradition, this was the result of Athene's anger at

Locrian Ajax for raping her priestess Cassandra in her temple.) It's left carefully unspecified whether this choice of subject has been forced on Phemius by the suitors or is merely an unfortunate (or even a self-serving) choice of his own. At any rate it's so distressing to Penelope that she's drawn from her upstairs chambers to come and complain, despite the fact that entering the megaron means facing down the suitors.

Penelope's reproof Penelope's plea to Phemius is straightforward: she finds this song, which has evidently been performed before, personally distressing, and asks him to change to another song.

Telemachus' challenge But to the surprise of everyone, Telemachus steps in to defend the choice, on two grounds. First, it's not for us to interfere with bards' choice of song, which is a matter of inspiration and creativity, and a good audience will judge by the quality of the song rather than its subject matter. More immediately, he reminds her that Odysseus' fate is far from unique, and orders her back to her room in terms that closely echo Hector's famous words to Andromache at *Iliad* 6.490–2.

Commentators disagree on precisely what's going on here. Most see a tension between mother and son, particularly on the part of a Telemachus keen to assert his independence, adulthood, and rightful place as master of the house. But is he being genuinely insensitive to Penelope's feelings, or expressing a newfound confidence in Odysseus' return that enables him to resist the implications of the song, or feigning resignation for the benefit of the suitors (as he certainly does at 1.412 below), or making a subtle point about how heroic song should be appreciated, or just trying to find a quick way to get her out of the midst of the unruly suitors? It's not at all easy to come to a conclusion on this: the first of many such moments of ambiguity in Odyssean characterisation, particularly in connection with Penelope.

2. with the suitors

Now comes Telemachus' first big test: to carry the momentum of his assertion of his authority in a direct confrontation with the suitors, while preserving the secret of Athene's visit and advice, and disarming suspicion and threat.

Telemachus' challenge The opportunity is made for him by the suitors, who greet Penelope's withdrawal with a chorus of leering calls. Telemachus openly rebukes them for this, but diplomatically uses Phemius' performance to plead for peace while the banquet goes on. Tomorrow morning, however, it'll be a different story: he give formal warning of the assembly, and of the challenge he'll issue them publicly, and of the dangerous game they'll be playing if they refuse to comply. It's a fairly startling performance, especially in its frank closing implication that persistence with their claim means a feud to the death.

Antinous' reply Antinous now speaks for the first time: the closest the suitors have to a leader and principal spokesman. As we'll soon see become a regular pattern, he's a clever but unscrupulous operator, whose facade of diplomacy and courtesy never quite manages to mask a brutal ruthlessness and constant underlying threat of violence, which the disguised Odysseus will finally tease out into the open. Here the very brevity of his reply is part of its menace – saying nothing in response to the substance of Telemachus' speech, but merely commenting darkly on the boldness of his words and openly voicing the wish that Telemachus never inherits his father's throne. As West comments on these lines, "Antinous is alert to political implications in Telemachus' attempt to assert himself."

Telemachus answers him But Telemachus is more than equal to play this game, and brushes the threat aside with the teasing rejoinder that being king of Ithaca would probably be quite an acceptable position. But he has no illusions about succeding automatically "now," as he puts it with devastating casualness, "that great Odysseus is dead." Antinous' hackles notwithstanding, he's only trying to assert his authority in his own home; Ithaca is another matter again.

Eurymachus' questions This doesn't satisfy the suitors' second ringleader Eurymachus, who is generally subtler and more devious than Antinous, though no less ruthless and calculating. This is a typical Eurymachus speech, offering himself as a "sinister peacemaker" (de Jong's nice formulation, in her discussion of these lines) and with serpentine smoothness turning the conversation to discussion of Telemachus' mystery guest, who it now turns out was anything but unobserved. Eurymachus suspects, and with feigned innocence drops into his questions, the possibility that the mystery guest had word of Odysseus.

Telemachus answers him But Telemachus again deprecates the very thought, reiterating that he's given up all hope of Odysseus' return and in any case wouldn't believe anyone who tried to persuade him otherwise. He simply passes on the cover story presented him by "Mentes", but suppressing all mention of the stranger's plan for Telemachus and his identification of the mystery visitor as a god. The narrator's closing line is a classic Odyssean moment of a kind rare in the *Iliad* but absolutely characteristic of this poem – giving the audience an explicit nudge that what a character says isn't necessarily what they're really thinking.

3. and so to bed.

The rest of the evening passes without incident, and the suitors depart the palace, leaving Telemachus to turn in for the night in a low-key, evocative scene of preparing for bed. It's just the kind of everyday, undramatic business that the *Odyssey* takes pleasure in making poetry from; but this is of course an ordinary moment made extraordinary by the divine visitation just past and the momentous day of confrontation about to dawn. The scene also offers a chance to introduce a character who'll play a large role in later books, Odysseus' old nurse Eurycleia – Telemachus' accomplice in his escape from Ithaca, and later the only female member of the conspiracy against the suitors.

BOOK 2. THE DEBATE IN ITHACA

The second book is similarly built around a single continuous scene dominated by speech. But whereas the first book was intimate and mostly two-handed, the second book presents a full-scale assembly comparable to the one in the first book of the *Iliad*, with seven different speakers taking formal turns with a speaker's staff.

As in *Iliad* 1, the assembly scene is followed by a scene between the hero and his patron goddess, followed by the first decisive action of the poem.

A. The assembly: the nine speeches

The opening of the book combines two "type-scene" patterns, getting up and summoning an assembly; each follows a standard sequence we'll see repeated in later books. Telemachus is purposeful and authoritative throughout this introduction, and the very swiftness with which we move to the assembly scene itself boosts the sense of energy and purpose in his actions.

1. Aegyptius

Though Telemachus calls the assembly, he doesn't open the proceedings. This is unique among Homeric assemblies, and presumably his youth is a factor; but it also neatly highlights the lack of recognised authority at the centre of Ithacan society.

Aegyptius, who appears only in this scene, seems to speak first simply on grounds of seniority. But the narrator's introduction makes him a peculiarly significant figure to represent the Ithacan aristocracy and its different stakes in the story. Of his four sons, one went to Troy with Odysseus, and survived only to be among those killed in the Cyclops' cave; while one has thrown in his lot with the suitors, and will be fleetingly glimpsed in the final slaughter in book 22. Neither Aegyptius nor the audience yet knows the story of the Cyclops, of course, so this is a second teasing forward reference to what is already emerging as the pivotal episode in Odysseus' wanderings.

Aegyptius' speech further reveals the extent of the power vacuum created by Odysseus' twenty-year absence. There's been no assembly called in twenty years – no attempt to involve the community in any kind of formal, collective decision-making. Nevertheless, Aegyptius commends the meeting's as yet unidentified convener, with another of the poem's ironically well-omened prayers.

2. Telemachus' complaint

As in *Iliad* 1, the current speaker is identified by a staff which passes from one speaker to the next, and Telemachus accepts it to lodge his public complaint against the suitors. It's a well-constructed speech, leading into the complaint itself by reminding the assembly of how much they owed to the father he's lost, and putting Penelope's feelings at the centre of his account of the suitors' offence. He contrasts the proper procedure – negotiating through her father – with the suitors' actual conduct, and frankly admits his own incapacity to deter them. But the climax of his speech stresses that *everyone* is implicated, not just the suitors: fathers, Aegyptius included, are responsible for their sons, and the whole community is shamed by its tolerance of the abuse.

As his closing lines explain, the situation is complicated by the fact that the majority of the suitors are from the neighbouring islands, with only twelve from Ithaca itself (as we learn from Telemachus' inventory at 16.240ff.). But the Ithacan twelve include the ringleaders Antinous and Eurymachus, and Telemachus wants the assembly to see it as primarily an Ithacan problem to solve. Note that at this stage in the assembly Telemachus doesn't make any actual threats, carefully speaking only in abstract terms of the risk of divine anger.

As he finishes, he makes the same melodramatic gesture as Achilles at the height of his frustration in *Iliad* 1.245–6: one of many moments where it's tempting to assume a deliberate echo.

3. Antinous' challenge

Responding for the suitors, Antinous seeks to deflect responsibility for the present situation back on to Penelope herself, who is presented as deliberately leading the suitors on while secretly plotting their frustration. We're also told for the first time something of the chronology of events in Ithaca, where the suitors have apparently been installed in Odysseus' palace for a little under four years.

The famous story of Penelope's weaving trick is an important first glimpse of the Odyssean streak to her character – combining ingenuity, deviousness, and forward planning with a deftness at improvising opportunities out of available materials. Throughout the story, Penelope has never once departed from her role as a model Greek aristocratic housewife: she hasn't even left the house in twenty years, and has to fend off the suitors using only the limited range of activity permitted to respectable married women, in this case the standard

domestic female activity of weaving. Penelope herself will later give her own version of this story; but it's less clear how far we should believe Antinous' unsubstantiated claims that she's been teasing individual suitors by leading them on and playing them against one another. Penelope, of course, has no presence or voice in the assembly; but Telemachus interestingly doesn't dispute the charge.

Antinous offers a counter-challenge to Telemachus: he should actively encourage his mother to remarry. (Note that Antinous completely evades Telemachus' point that the proper way to approach Penelope would be through her father.) His interesting trio of heroines of old, incidentally, anticipates the catalogue of Boeotian heroines Odysseus will view in the underworld in book 11, in which Tyro will feature prominently; he'll also meet Alcmene's son Heracles as the climactic scene of that book.

4. Telemachus responds

Telemachus plays back to Antinous in stark terms what he's just effectively asked him to do: to throw his own mother out of his house. To treat a parent this way is deeply offensive to Greek thought, as Telemachus is careful to underline. Having wrested back the moral advantage, he renews his demand for the suitors to leave, and only now makes his dramatic play of calling on Zeus for their deaths if they fail to comply.

5. Halitherses interprets the omen

Before anyone can respond, Zeus sends a bird-omen in confirmation that he's on the case. This is a key moment: it's the divine warning required by the model of supernatural justice outlined by Zeus in the poem's opening speech. Everyone in the assembly sees the omen, and even before Halitherses opens his mouth we're told they understand its implications; if they still fail to rein the suitors in, they're implicating themselves in their crime and in their punishment.

Halitherses' interpretation, however, goes beyond the mere confirmation of Telemachus' prayer. As well as the suitors' deaths, he predicts Odysseus' return, and dark consequences for the Ithacan aristocracy as a whole if they fail to rein the suitors in now. Most dramatically, with Halitherses' reference to his earlier prophecy we get the first version of the formulation of Odysseus' fate that will turn up again in the Cyclops' prayer to Poseidon: that Odysseus' return will come late (Halitherses actually specifies the twentieth year), alone, and incognito. This is all very like Odysseus' speech to the army in *Iliad* 2, where he reminded them all of the omens at the armada's setting out, and the closeness of their fulfilment now.

6. Eurymachus dismisses the omen, renews the challenge

Eurymachus, elsewhere an unctuous and calculating hypocrite, gives a glimpse of his real self in a flare of anger and insult. Both his dismissal of the omen and his contemptuous treatment of a respected elder are outrageously offensive, and he openly warns Halitherses against siding with Telemachus. Unlike Antinous, he does make an attempt to address Telemachus' point about Icarius, but renews the demand that Telemachus needs to be the one who shows Penelope the door.

7. Telemachus' announcement

Telemachus sees that the argument has gone as far as it can, and that all the issues are now on public record. Now it's time to drop his bombshell: he intends to travel to the Peloponnese in search of news of Odysseus, and asks the assembly to furnish him a ship. (Odysseus' ships, of course, all went to Troy.)

8. Mentor rebukes the elders

Nobody responds to this request, and it's left to another new character, Odysseus' trusted friend Mentor, to speak out against the assembly's acquiescence in the suitors' conduct. He washes his hands of the suitors, who are now inviting their own deaths; but the passivity of the other elders is a slight to Odysseus' memory and implicates them all in the potential consequences. Unlike Telemachus, they have the numbers and authority to check the suitors: that they fail to do so is on their heads.

9. Leocritus responds for the suitors.

Now a new voice is heard among the suitors, as Leocritus raises the stakes still further: if Odysseus should indeed return and try to evict them, the suitors will simply meet force with force. If Mentor and Halitherses are going to take Telemachus' side, they can jolly well supply him with a ship themselves. The rest of them are out of here.

B. Telemachus and Athene again

From Telemachus' perspective, the assembly has been a complete failure, and he needs to consult again with his mysterious divine visitor. Like Achilles at this point in *Iliad* 1, Telemachus goes down to the shore – with rather less reason, as he's not praying to a sea-goddess, but it seems to be a standard ritual action seen also in Chryses' original prayer to Apollo.

1. his prayer

Telemachus still doesn't know which god it was who appeared to him yesterday, so his prayer has to be anonymously addressed; but he's alarmed at the way both parts of the plan seem already to be going awry, and implicitly appeals for further support.

2. her response

Athene surprisingly makes her appearance not as Mentes but as old Mentor from the assembly, an identity she'll now adopt regularly in her Ithacan appearances. (The real Mentor is never seen again in the poem.) But there's a reason for adopting this particular disguise: she's planning to come along on Telemachus' expedition, and Mentor is the ideal character from Telemachus' life to impersonate. Telemachus doesn't see through the disguise, and Athene plays along with the role inadvertently scripted for her by Leocritus: she'll take care of organising a ship and crew, while Telemachus is charged with arranging provisions back at the palace. So far as is possible in her Mentor disguise (which this time it's important Telemachus doesn't see through), she reassures him that the gods' plans for the suitors are right on track, and that they've just sealed their own fates.

C. Telemachus' departure

The final phase of the book wraps up the Ithacan storyline with the arrangements for Telemachus' departure. As usual when the action splits into two parallel strands, we follow one at a time – here beginning with Telemachus, and only switching to Athene after his part of the instructions have been carried out.

1. Telemachus and the suitors

Telemachus now has to face the suitors on his return to the palace, having raised the stakes by his defiance of them both private and now public. His position is more vulnerable than ever, and he's shown his hand to the suitors in announcing his intention to go on an expedition. Meanwhile, the suitors themselves have lost no time in resuming their depredations; clearly they feel the assembly has given them an effective mandate to continue to do as they please.

Antinous' approach Antinous puts on an appearance of conciliatory bonhomie. As far as he's concerned, the assembly has gone entirely his way, and whether or not Telemachus goes on his expedition he poses no threat to the suitors. The offer of a ship may even be genuine, though in the light of Antinous' subsequent treachery Telemachus would have been very unwise to accept it.

Telemachus' response Telemachus is unimpressed, and frankly states that he intends to see them all dead. Though he reaffirms his intention of leaving, he ignores the offer of a ship – without, however, revealing that he already has one being organised, and that his departure will be sooner than any of them reckon. Already Telemachus is rivalling his parents in his adeptness at not showing his hand.

the suitors mock The suitors react to this with gleeful contempt, which suits Telemachus well. Their refusal to take his expedition seriously, let alone his death threats, is too useful to respond to, and like Odysseus Telemachus is learning that patience and postponement are often the most appropriate form of retaliation. Nevertheless, the suitors' final taunt hints darkly at the opportunities Telemachus' expedition might present them to be rid of him once and for all.

2. Telemachus and Eurycleia

Telemachus can't provision a ship on his own, so he needs to enlist an ally. He chooses carefully: we met the housekeeper Eurycleia at the end of the previous book, and both her loyalty to him and her authority over the household stores make her an ideal candidate, if only she can be prevented from telling Penelope. Eurycleia, of course, is horrified, but Telemachus reassures her that he has divine support, and makes her swear not to tell Penelope until he's already far away.

3. the departure

Now we return to Athene, who neatly uses her powers to play a double role – taking Mentor's form in her dealings with Telemachus, but Telemachus' in her dealings with everyone else. Noemon son of Phronius means something like "Sensible, son of Smart": a glimpse of the *Odyssey*'s fun with invented names we'll see especially in book 8.

As the suitors end their evening's festivities prematurely thanks to Athene's manipulation, it's time for the two strands of the plot to rejoin. Athene reverts to Mentor's form, and Telemachus gets the crew to fetch the provisions down from the palace. A vividly detailed account of the preparations for sail establishes a basic type-scene that will be repeated and varied in later books; and with a libation to the very goddess who's sitting there unrecognised among them, the ship takes off into the night.

BOOK 3. NESTOR

The book sets out a comprehensive model for how a well-ordered heroic kingdom ought to behave. It's a world in which visitors are treated with exemplary hospitality, the gods are respected, and the role of the king valued. It's a kingdom in which the memory and values of the heroes of Troy are still preserved, with a powerful sense of continuity.

A. The first sacrifice

Telemachus' ship reaches Pylos in the midst of a public sacrifice to Poseidon: a ceremony that brings the community together and cements its bond with the gods. All this is hard to imagine happening in what we've seen of Ithaca. The choice of Odysseus' enemy Poseidon as the sacrifice's recipient is an intriguing one, not least because we know he's away in Ethiopia and in no position to receive this sacrifice. That, as we'll see, is part of the point.

Athene encourages Telemachus Telemachus is about to meet his first real-life hero, and is understandably nervous at the prospect. He's never even travelled abroad before, and is especially ill at ease over the imbalance in age and experience. For an unknown youth to interrogate the elder statesman of the generation of Troy feels like unacceptable presumption, and it takes two speeches from Athene/Mentor to nerve him to face the challence. All this, of course, is in sharp contrast to the contempt for elders shown in the previous book by Eurymachus and Leocritus.

Nestor's welcome Telemachus gets an immediate lesson in the differences between disorderly Ithaca and orderly Pylos. At the first sight of strangers, the entire party hastens to welcome them, and immediately activates the hospitality type-scene to integrate them into the sacrificial feast without so much as a pause for introductions.

Athene's prayer A nice touch of wry divine comedy comes when Peisistratus asks "Mentor" (as the senior member of the party) to join them in prayer to Poseidon. Gods don't make a habit of praying to one another, and if Poseidon were actually in residence he might reasonably be a bit nonplussed to have his own niece pray to him on behalf of his detested enemy's family. Luckily, she can be confident he's well out of range, so that she can breezily intercept and fulfil her own prayer.

the feast begins As the feast gets under way, the protocols of hospitality at last permit questions and introductions. This is the start of the long conversation scene which will take up most of the book, and is dominated by Nestor's two long accounts of what happened to various of the Greek warlords on their troubled journey back from Troy. It's a theme we've already seen sung of in general terms by Phemius; now, we'll get the specifics.

Nestor questions his guest Nestor's questions are a standard speech of inquiry to strangers arrived by sea: who are you, where have you come from, and what is your business? The last of these is posed as a pair of standard alternatives: most ships are either merchants or pirates, and the latter seems to be a tolerated if not fully respectable profession.

B. Telemachus' question

Telemachus answers all Nestor's questions, the last of which helpfully leads into his own business, which he reinforces with the status of a formal supplication. He's here to ask for news of Odysseus, whether alive or dead; and he appeals in the name of his father's old friendship and services at Troy, a reference ideally calculated to uncork the bottle of Nestor's copious memories.

C. Nestor's tale I: the homecomings

So Nestor begins the first phase of his story. For an audience who knows the Nestor of the *Iliad*, it's a speech at once like and unlike his typical performances there. On the one hand, it's a long narrative reminiscence with a pointed parallel and lesson for its listener. But there's much less of the pose of an old man rambling, less use of ring-structures in the speech's organisation, less of a calculating and manipulative purpose underlying the speech, and (most strikingly) the adventures of Nestor's youth have now been displaced in his reminiscences by the events of the Trojan War itself. For this later Nestor, the war has become as distant and mythical an event as the events of his own youth were during the war itself. Like Phemius' song, it's a sign that the lost world of the *Iliad* is already taking on the status of myth.

Nestor prefaces his speech with a moving summary of what the memory of Troy means to the survivors. There's little joy or glory in it; the overwhelming memory is of suffering and loss, with the final victory all but buried under a list of casualties including not only Patroclus but Achilles, Ajax, and Nestor's own son Antilochus. (Shewring, like Lattimore, uses the more Greek form Aias for Ajax, though he uses Latinised forms for all other names; I've gone for consistency rather than 100% Shewring-compliance on this one name.)

1. Odysseus at Troy

Nestor's wartime memory of Odysseus is of a kindred spirit: the closest of all the Greeks to Nestor in what Shewring nicely translates as "wits and watchfulness", and his superior in ingenuity. The Odysseus he remembers isn't the warrior, formidable though he was, but the strategist: the side of Odysseus that appeals most strongly to Nestor's own love of tactics and diplomacy.

2. the debate between Agamemnon and Menelaus

But as Nestor's story gets under way, the clouds begin to gather. He doesn't explain why Athene (who we need to remember is sitting there listening to this very tale incognita) was angry, though it's possible the audience would already have known the story of Cassandra's

rape. But her refusal to let the Greeks sail leads into an ominous replay of the start of the *Iliad*: divine wrath prompting an assembly that breaks out in open quarrel between the two principal leaders, who then go their separate ways with disastrous consequences for both. It's a powerful demonstration of the goddess's wrath that even the brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon, the closest of all the Greek warlords in the *Iliad*, could finally end up at odds.

3. Odysseus turns back

If we've been wondering what all this has to do with Odysseus, his fate now gets caught up in the larger story. Odysseus' ships join his friends Nestor and Diomedes in the first wave to try and make it home; but for reasons Nestor doesn't explain, Odysseus falls out with the others on the island of Tenedos and abandons them to return to Agamemnon. That ominous departure is the last Nestor ever sees of him.

4. Diomedes, Menelaus, and Nestor sail homewards

Diomedes and Nestor are left to make it home on their own, which thanks to their careful attention to divine guidance they both successfully do. Menelaus makes a brief appearance en route, having evidently given up on persuading Agamemnon to join him; we'll learn what happened to him in Nestor's second instalment.

5. Neoptolemus, Philoctetes, Idomeneus arrive home

Apart from Diomedes, Nestor has only hearsay to rely on. Idomeneus made it home, as did the Myrmidons (now led by Achilles' young son Neoptolemus) and the long-absent Philoctetes (*Iliad* 2.716–25). The others, as we'll hear more of in the next book, were less lucky; and we already know the story of the unluckiest of all.

6. Agamemnon's fate

Now comes the third telling of Agamemnon's story, with a characteristic Nestorian touch of pointed parallelising. As we'll learn in a moment, Nestor's knows all about the suitors from the intelligence network whose awesome efficiency he's just demonstrated, and his sure eye for a paradeigma has spotted the obvious analogies with Telemachus' situation, to the extent that he doesn't even need to spell them out to make his point to Telemachus.

D. Telemachus' dilemma

Telemachus reads between the lines of Nestor's speech, and allows his own immediate problems with the suitors to come out explicitly into the open.

1. Telemachus on Orestes

Telemachus sees at once what Nestor is getting at, but he's getting used to people drawing this analogy and has by now pinpointed its weak spot: there was just one of Aegisthus, but there are 108 of the suitors. Those are odds that even he can't see a way around.

2. Nestor's encouragement

Nestor admits that he knows a remarkable amount about the situation to which Telemachus alludes. Like Telemachus, he finds it slightly incredible that the Ithacans tolerate the situation, and can only offer the hope that Odysseus himself might return or, alternatively, Athene show Telemachus the support he's witnessed for her beloved Odysseus at Troy.

3. Telemachus' doubts

Telemachus finds this difficult to respond to. To presume Odysseus alive runs such a risk of disappointment that he's always held back from entertaining such hopes, while to presume on the kind of divine favour shown his father feels merely like hubris.

4. Athene's encouragement

This whole exchange has been heavily ironic for the audience, who know that the goddess they're talking about is sitting right there in disguise. Unable to refrain from interjection, she springs to her own defence as openly as she can while still retaining her identity as Mentor.

5. Telemachus' second question

Telemachus needs something more solid than an old man's reassurance, though, and chooses not to continue down this line. Instead, he turns the subject back to Nestor's story. If he can't get clear news of his father, at least he can probe Nestor's impressively network of news for more detail than has reached Ithaca on this story that seems so strangely parallel to his own family's. How exactly did Aegisthus manage to kill Agamemon, and why wasn't Menelaus on hand to prevent it?

E. Nestor's tale II: Agamemnon and Menelaus

And so Nestor resumes his narration, with the fullest version yet of Agamemnon's story.

1. Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, and the bard

Aegisthus' seduction of Clytemnestra, it now turns out, took place during the long years of the war itself, and at first was blocked by the presence in the palace of Agamemnon's agent, the palace bard. The use of a bard for this purpose has been a puzzle since the ancient commentators, who speculated that perhaps he was briefed to regale Clytemnestra with improving songs about female fidelity and virtue. But the Ithacan bard Phemius is closely associated with the page Medon who operates as Penelope's spy on the suitors, so perhaps some such role is envisaged here. As usual, there's a bit of professional self-advertisement by the poet here: keep your bards in business or risk being cuckolded and murdered.

2. Menelaus blown to Egypt

Now we learn what happened to the third member of Nestor's trio of homeward-bound heroes. Nestor and Diomedes were able to sail directly on to their ports in the Peloponnese when they reached the Greek mainland at Sunium on the southern tip of Attica. (If you feel a bit uncertain of the geography here, here's a downloadable map.) But where Nestor and Diomedes were able to sail on around the Peloponnese and home, Menelaus was delayed by the death of his helmsman; and when he finally set sail he was caught by a storm as he rounded the southern tip of the Peloponnese, and found himself blown to Egypt with five of his ships while the rest of his fleet (another 55, according to the original Iliadic catalogue) fetched up in Crete.

3. Orestes' revenge on Aegisthus

Menelaus is stranded in Egypt for more than seven years, and we'll hear more about his adventures there in the next book. It's during this time that Agamemnon returns home and is murdered by Aegisthus, to be finally avenged by Orestes some two years before the poem opens. When Menelaus finally makes it back to Greece, he finds Orestes safe on his father's throne and holding a funeral banquet for Aegisthus and Clytemnestra – the one hint in Homer that Clytemnestra is part of Orestes' vengeance as well.

4. Nestor's advice to Telemachus

Nestor being Nestor, he can't resist pointing out the significance of his story for his listener's own situation. Menelaus' long absence left Agamemnon vulnerable, just as Agamemnon's had Clytemnestra and – the sting in the tail – Telemachus' absence has left his mother and property to the mercy of the suitors. Throughout Telemachus' adventures, we're aware of this mounting danger at home, and the end of the next book will bring it home still more acutely. But Nestor nevertheless recommends that, having made it this far, he gambles a couple of further days on one more trip – to Sparta to question Menelaus, who has travelled more widely and longer. Nestor doesn't know that this is part of Athene's and Telemachus' original itinerary, and helps further with his offer of a chariot and driver to enable

Telemachus to make the journey directly overland rather than circuitously and dangerously by sea.

5. Athene's speech

Perhaps sensing that Nestor's usefulness has been exhausted and that his hospitality could be a drawn-out business, Athene proposes an early night and a return to their ship. They need to be on their way to Sparta at dawn, and an evening in Nestor's leisurely company could be more than their urgent schedule allows.

F. Athene's departure

Now comes an important further stage in Telemachus' independence, as Athene cuts him loose to travel to Sparta without her.

1. Nestor's hospitality

The ceremonies complete, Nestor refuses to allow his guests to spend the night back at their ship. This is another slightly tricky moment for Athene: gods don't casually accept mortals' hospitality, and she'll need to extricate herself without either jeopardising Telemachus' mission or offending Nestor's feelings as host.

2. Athene's reply and departure

Athene makes her excuses as Mentor: Telemachus should stay, but somebody senior needs to go back and keep an eye on the crew. As for the rest of the trip, "Mentor" claims some business to attend to locally (the Caucones were apparently to the north of Nestor's kingdom), which he may as well deal with while Telemachus leaves his ship and crew here and makes his way to Sparta overland.

With that, she pulls a Mentes. Having concocted a perfectly plausible reason for "Mentor" to disappear from the expedition, she now sheds her disguise anyway on departure by turning herself into a bird and flying off. Nestor seems more surprised than Telemachus, who is perhaps getting used to this by now; but with his greater experience he can identify the mystery divinity.

3. Nestor's prayer and libation

Nestor for the first time reveals to Telemachus that the god who has been helping him is none other than Athene. He's quick to gabble out a prayer to their divine visitant for all-round favour and protection, with an instant promise of a generous sacrifice in return.

4. bed

Now at last they retire to the palace for a private evening's drinking (the meal was taken care of by the sacrificial feast), and the day ends with Telemachus put to bed in the palace in the company of Nestor's son Peisistratus, who'll be his escort and growing friend on the journey to Sparta.

G. The next day

Telemachus' final day with Nestor opens with the sacrifice promised to Athene the previous evening. We're treated to a scene of Nestor on his throne, surrounded by his six sons, the very image of a king: just what Telemachus needs to see to counter the unruly anarchy of Ithaca. He's giving out orders left, right and centre – organising the complex business of a major sacrifice by expert delegation of all the different tasks involved.

1. the second sacrifice

The scene that follows has scholars of Greek religion in ecstasies, because it's the fullest account of a Greek sacrifice anywhere in literature, going step-by-step through the requisite ritual actions in order. Here are the stages as I set them out in the Gods handout:

- participants escort the victim in procession to the altar

- participants form a circle around the altar, together with any further victims (as in mass sacrifices such as hecatombs)
- participants wash hands in lustral water, and take a handful of barley grains from a basket
- the sacrificer sprinkles water on the victim to get it to make an involuntary head gesture taken to signify assent to its killing, and the participants throw their barley grains
- the sacrificer cuts some hairs from the victim and throws them into the altar flame, at the same time speaking his prayer
- the sacrificer cuts the victim's throat, women raise a ritual shriek, and the animal's blood is poured on the altar
- the thighbones are wrapped in fat and burned in altar fire as the gods' portion
- the entrails are skewered, roasted, and shared among the participants
- the other meat is boiled and distributed.

Here's a step-by-step breakdown of these stages in the text.

(a) preparation

- Stratius and Echephron **led the beast forward by the horns**, and
- Aretus came to them from the store-room, bearing a flowery-patterned vessel that held the **lustral water**; in his left hand he carried a **basketful of crushed barley**. Nearby stood the warrior Thrasymedes, with a sharp **axe** in his hand to fell the heifer, and Perseus held the **bowl for the blood**.

(b) preliminaries

- Nestor, the aged lord of chariots, **began the rite with the lustral water and the barley**, and with these first ceremonies he
- **prayed** to Athene earnestly and
- **threw in the fire the few hairs cut from the victim's head**.
- When they had prayed and had **sprinkled the crushed barley-grains**,

(c) the kill

- the son of Nestor, Thrasymedes, took his stand forthwith beside the beast and struck her; the **axe cut the sinews of the neck and stunned** the senses of the heifer,
- and at this **the women called out aloud** – Nestor's daughters and daughters-in-law and Eurydice his revered wife, eldest of the daughters of Clymenus.
- Then the young men **raised the victim's head** from earth and held it, and Prince Peisistratus **cut the throat**; the dark blood gushed out, and the life departed from the bones.

(d) the gods' portion

- Then quickly they **divided the flesh**;
- at once they **cut out the thigh-bones** in ritual fashion,
- **covered them with the fat** twice folded, and
- **laid the raw meat above**.
- The old king went on to **burn these offerings on cloven wood** and to pour glowing wine upon them; the young men came to his side holding five-pronged forks.
- When the thigh-bones were quite consumed and they had **tasted the inward parts**,

(e) the sacrificial feast

- they **sliced and spitted the rest**;
- they grasped the spits that went through the meat, and in this fashion they **roasted** it.

Why such a circumstantial description here? Well, we've already seen that Nestor is being set up as a model of piety and kingliness. The careful attention to ritual detail in this most essential of Greek religious acts is a powerful sign to the audience of the orderliness and rightness of his kingdom. It's also, of course, a further guarantee that Athene will favour

Telemachus' cause, and an indication of the high *kleos* he's already achieved in Pylos through this dramatic demonstration of personal divine favour.

Telemachus' bath at the hands of Nestor's youngest daughter is perfectly innocent, but in the *Catalogue of Women* attributed to Hesiod Telemachus was later married off to Polycaste.

2. Telemachus and Pisistratus ride to Sparta.

The sacrifice over, Telemachus is free to leave. Nestor's servants prepare him a packed lunch, Peisistratus is assigned to be his driver, and they set out across the Messenian plain on the two-day journey to Sparta. (Pherae, where they stop overnight, is the setting of Euripides' *Alcestis*.)

BOOK 4. MENELAUS AND HELEN

This is the longest book of the Odyssey by a huge margin, though there are five books as long or longer in the *Iliad*. It falls clearly into three sections: two days at Sparta, each dominated by a long scene of reminiscing with Menelaus and Helen, followed by a series of scenes back in Ithaca as Telemachus' absence is finally discovered. Highlights include the wonderful pair of stories told by Helen and Menelaus on day 1; Menelaus' account on day 2 of his own astonishing mini-*Odyssey*; and the flurry of reactions back in Ithaca to Telemachus' disappearance, ending on Homer's (and I think all Greek literature's) biggest ever cliffhanger.

A. Telemachus in Sparta

The Spartan episode is longer and significantly more spectacular than the Pylian one in the previous book. If Nestor's kingdom is a model of normality, Menelaus' is characterised by fabulous wealth and luxury. Yet the shadow of the past hangs still more heavily over Menelaus, and the combination of these fantastic surroundings with the darker thread of melancholy that runs through the book gives a haunting mood quite unlike book 3. It's here above all that Telemachus will see that even the most apparently fortunate of heroes aren't necessarily to be envied, and that the world that made their achievements possible is not necessarily one he wants to live in.

Arrival Telemachus and Peisistratus arrive at dusk, and as at Pylos they find themselves in the middle of a celebration in which they're immediately invited to join.

the wedding feast The occasion is a double wedding, or strictly a wedding for a son and a bridal send-off for a daughter. The second of these is actually the major occasion. The son is merely Menelaus' bastard by a slave woman and his bride a local chieftain's daughter; but the daughter is Hermione, only child of Menelaus and Helen, and her distant bridegroom is none other than Achilles' son Neoptolemus. This is a major dynastic alliance, and we're told it was contracted back at Troy; perhaps the delay of a full ten years, which puts Hermione now in her early twenties, is a sign of how difficult it's been for the parents to part with this child, and the burden on Menelaus of the marriage's painful failure to produce a legitimate male heir of his own.

arrival and welcome In contrast to the solemn sacrificial feast that greets them in Pylos, this is a scene of jollity and entertainment, with a bard and acrobatic dancers performing for the entertainment of the guests. (We'll see a similar kind of performance in Scheria in book 8.) But the festivities soon fade into the background as the memory of the past takes its grip on Menelaus and Helen.

Menelaus' hospitality The princes' arrival is reported to Menelaus with the option of sending them on their way; this is, after all, a major family occasion. But Menelaus will hear none of it, and points out to Eteoneus that they should count themselves fortunate to have made it home to all this at all. The least they can do is show the kind of hospitality to guests that they've received from others.

The horses are stabled and fed and the chariot parked, and in a narrative coup involving a bold switch of viewpoint we now see the palace we've just been in through the astonished

eyes of the young princes. This is a completely different world from even the wealth of Pylos, and to Telemachus especially it's so far beyond his experience as to seem not quite of this earth.

There follows a standard hospitality sequence, with many of the standard lines; the only variation worth noting is that they're treated to a bathe and new clothes before the meal, having spent two days on the road. As usual, no questions are asked until the basic requirements have been satisfied.

1. The past and its banishing

But as they finish eating, Telemachus can't resist an awestruck comment *sotto voce* to Peisistratus on the spectacular surroundings in which they find themselves. In a flash of backwoods naivety, he voices the thought that Olympus must look like this: a dangerous comparison which Menelaus is quick to preempt.

(a) Menelaus' speech

Menelaus, overhearing, is anxious to tone down the potential hybris of this comparison of his own mortal palace to that of Zeus himself, and gently deprecates any similarity. The wealth, as he explains, comes from his seven years' enforced wanderings in the rich lands of Africa and the near east – a considerably wider travelogue than that implied by Nestor's summary. But the thought leads his memory down a melancholy path: as Nestor's already emphasised, it was this lucrative absence that kept him out of Greece while his brother was murdered, so that the wealth around him is a constant reminder of his loss.

And it's not just Agamemnon, but all the others lost at Troy. Take Odysseus: missing for ten years, with a son who (we now learn) was newborn at the time of his father's departure and has grown up never knowing his father… This is a classic *Odyssey* moment, anticipating the still more famous parallel scene at the end of book 8 where Odysseus himself gives himself away under similar circumstances. Menelaus notes his guest's reaction, and is still deliberating how to pursue his suspicion tactfully when a sensational new arrival on the scene makes the decision for him.

(b) enter Helen

Immediately Helen makes her entry, the narrative camera is fixated on her. All she does is come downstairs from her room (the wedding party now completely forgotten) to work on some wool, but the accompanying details make a spectacular contrast to Penelope's comparable descents in the Ithacan palace. She looks like a goddess; she's surrounded by named handmaidens, who produce comforts and treasures around her; her wool-working kit is silver and gold, and has its own feminine version of the obligatory heroic history as guest-gift.

(c) Telemachus identified

Conversation has stopped dead at her arrival, and Helen immediately takes the initiative, going straight to the point with awesome frankness: their guest looks too much like Odysseus not to be his son (something Menelaus seems to have strangely missed), and she speaks quite casually of her own responsibility for the war that took his father away from him. The self-criticism we saw in her great *Iliad* scenes is still there, but almost offhand now; it's hard to read her tone. Like Penelope and Circe, she remains a somewhat elusive, mysterious character throughout the amazing scene that follows: an archetypal Odyssean female.

Menelaus agrees, and collates his own observation of the young man's tears, though heroic manners still prohibit direct questioning of their guest. The fact of his resemblance to his father is important news for Telemachus, who needs a lot of reassurance that others see his father in him even if he doesn't feel it himself. But it's left to the less tongue-tied Peisistratus to speak up and explain their identities and mission, as well as delicately excusing Telemachus' own silence.

(d) Menelaus on Odysseus

This sets Menelaus off. He launches into an extravagant and frankly impractical counterfactual fantasy about what he'd have done for Odysseus if he'd come home safely.

But he comes back to earth with a bump at the end, emphasising rather insensitively the finality of Odysseus' failure to return.

(e) tears all round

This now sets everyone off in floods of tears, starting with Helen. Even Peisistratus, who we might think has least cause to be upset, is shaken with grief for his lost brother Antilochus. His own speech to Menelaus displays his mixed feelings eloquently: on the one hand he pleads to switch to a less gloomy topic, but on the other he's aware that Menelaus was closer to his brother than anyone but Achilles. Menelaus responds by pulling himself together and commending Peisistratus' sense; do we detect a further hint of envy of Nestor from the heirless Menelaus? He also postpones further discussion of Telemachus' situation and mission, hinted at by Peisistratus earlier; that will wait for the morning. As it turns out, the evening has even more remarkable things in store.

(f) Helen spikes the wine

Now a famous moment: Helen ensures the cheerfulness of the conversation by spiking the wine with an amazing euphoric drug picked up on her Egyptian travels. This kind of semi-magical feminine pharmacology gives her something of a Circe-like aura, and the surreal mood is enhanced by the parade of horrors to which we're told it produces indifference. But the real point of this moment is to make it possible for the characters to speak openly at length about Troy and Odysseus without interrupting themselves to burst into tears. As we'll now see, it makes possible a kind of storytelling unlike anything else in Homer in its emotional ambivalence and contradictions.

2. Two tales of Troy

What follows is a fascinating and brilliant pair of stories from Helen and Menelaus, contributing a memory of Odysseus from either side of the last days of the war. But as each unfolds, unreconciled contradictions and tensions emerge that make the stories at least as much about their tellers.

(a) Helen's story

Helen's story was told in full as part of the later cyclic epic called the *Little Iliad*, which ended with the building of the wooden horse and the Trojans bringing it into the city. Proclus' summary of the *Little Iliad* clarifies that Odysseus' expedition into Troy took place after the death of Paris and Helen's marriage to his brother Deiphobus, when the horse was already built. It's unclear much of this was already established before the *Odyssey*, when the whole episode has such close parallels with Odysseus' infiltration of the Ithacan palace in disguise and his recognition by Eurycleia. But as Helen tells it, it's a tussle of wits between two well-pitted tricksters, in which Helen herself emerges as no less crucial a player than Odysseus himself, and finally proves her loyalty to Menelaus and the Greek cause. Her closing praise of Menelaus is another of Helen's more teasingly elusive moments: is she sincere, and was she then, or should we suspect a combination of discretion and drug-fuelled sentimentality? The "blindness" is Greek *ate*, Agamemnon's notorious "Delusion" – but should we take it any more seriously here than we did in *Iliad* 19?

(b) Menelaus' story

Menelaus, at least, counters with a story that presents Helen in a very different light – though it too is ostensibly about Odysseus, illustrating his skills of strategy and endurance to complement the cunning and force of arms highlighted in Helen's tale. We're now a few days later; the horse is inside the walls; and Helen, far from being a fifth columnist for the Greeks, is openly trying to expose the Greek trick by an Odyssean counter-ploy of her own.

It's an eerie, unsettling episode whose tone has been variously read, both in Helen's motives at the time and Menelaus' now in recalling it. Is his "doubtless at the prompting of some divinity" ironic? Is he trying to refute her claims of loyalty by reminding her of an episode which flatly contradicts it? Commentators sometimes wonder about the illogicalities in the story – how did she know whose wife to imitate, and what they sounded like? why were the Greeks taken in, and why did *Menelaus* respond? – but it's too good a tale to bear picking apart in this way.

(c) and so to bed

Telemachus seems to feel the drugs wearing off, as he finds himself depressed rather than encouraged by these tales of his father's resourcefulness. But as we'll see, both of these episodes highlight qualities Odysseus will need again for the final challenge in his own palace in Ithaca, where he'll have to deal not just with the exposure of his identity by an insider but with the need to resist the very wife he's spent the last ten years trying to recover.

The day closes with a formulaic bedtime scene, leaving Telemachus' mission and the climax of his Spartan quest for tomorrow's dawn.

3. The second day

Day two opens with a refreshed and purposeful Menelaus who gets straight down to business. This second phase is dominated by Menelaus' long speech recounting his own extraordinary *Odyssey* in miniature, and bringing Telemachus at last the news of his father he needs – unwelcome though the information turns out to be.

(a) Telemachus airs his mission

Telemachus' speech is a replay of his words to Nestor at 3.75–101. But with the reminiscences of Odysseus taken care of by the previous evening's conversation, Menelaus' answer to the same appeal is very different from Nestor's both in tone and in content.

(b) Menelaus' response

This is much the longest speech in the *Odyssey* so far, and its fantastic tale of bizarre adventures in distant lands is closer to Odysseus' own story in books 9–12 than anything else in the poem.

(1) his prayer for Odysseus' vengeance

Menelaus prefaces his story with a vehement prayer for the suitors' death at Odysseus' hands, led into by a familiar element of Homeric poetry that's up until now been strikingly absent from the Odyssey. As mentioned in the Narrative seminar, extended similes are far rarer in the Odyssey, whose setting and storyline are at once more varied and less remote from the audience's own experience. But the reduction in frequency of similes throws more weight on to the ones we do find, and the less standardised action of the Odyssey tends to encourage more adventurous simile types. Even this superficially Iliadic lion-and-deer simile connects the imaginative world of heroic brutality with the Odyssean values of family and home.

(2) his story

Like Odysseus' own story in the next book, Menelaus' tale is of escape from a remote island on the edge of the world; and the elements of the story have a lot in common also with the roles of Circe and Teiresias in books 10–11.

Menelaus in Pharos Menelaus skips to the point in his story where Nestor's account left off: blown off course to Egypt, and stranded on an offshore island with the winds against him. The historical island of Pharos, site of the famous Alexandrian lighthouse, was actually only a mile offshore; but whether or not Homer knew that, Menelaus' predicament has been made closely parallel with Odysseus' own on Thrinacia and Ogygia.

Eidothea's advice Menelaus' men are so hungry that they actually stoop to eating fish – an element otherwise missing from the Homeric diet except in similes. But Menelaus' luck changes when he encounters a sympathetic minor sea-goddess, who like Circe can tell the hero how to find the way home. As with Circe's instructions, there's a catch: he has to seek out and question the one entity who knows the answer to his question, and he's not human. Menelaus' Teiresias figure is the goddess's father Proteus, who can tell him not just how to get home but also what's been going on in his absence. But how, Menelaus reasonably counters, can a mortal like him force his will on a god?

catching Proteus Now comes the first occurrence of a pattern that turns up repeatedly in books 9–12: a mortal can overcome a god only with the support of another god. Eidothea reveals the divine secret of how Proteus can be caught; but it'll take all Menelaus' strength and endurance to hold him through his transformations.

Menelaus puts the goddess's plan into action, which turns out to be a messier business than she'd let on; he's only saved from nausea by the goddess's deodorant use of the ambrosia treatment last seen in the preservation of Patroclus' and Hector's corpses. The combination of fantasy and realism here is very typical Odyssey, where the more bizarre flights of fancy often find themselves tethered to credibility by touches of unexpected real-life grittiness. Quite how Menelaus and his team manage to hold on to Proteus during his transformation into "running water" is far from clear, but they should count themselves lucky he didn't fulfil Eidothea's prediction that he might turn into fire.

the sea-god's prophecy Now comes an extended sequence of direct speech within a speech – something generally avoided in the Iliad, but characteristic of the Odyssey's relish in the farther reaches of narrative experiment. The novelist John Barth took this moment as the cue for his story "Menelaiad" (in the collection Lost in the Funhouse) which presents stories within stories seven layers deep. Proteus begins by asking Menelaus who told him how the old god could be captured, a question Menelaus delicately sidesteps by a complimentary reference to the god's own omniscience. The rest of his response is as scripted by Eidothea, and Proteus' answer is succinct and informative, if slightly dispiriting.

(i) Menelaus' homecoming

Menelaus' way home lies back, not forward; he has to return to Egypt to make up for the sacrifices he failed to make on setting out.

(ii) the returns

As with Odysseus' visit to Teiresias, though, there's much more interesting information to come, as Menelaus asks his follow-up question: what news of his former comrades? Proteus' long answer begins with a summary of the fates of three unnamed heroes, the first two of whom he goes on to identify.

Ajax II First is Locrian Ajax, who at least in later tradition was the source of Athene's anger against the returning Greeks in general. As so often, it's hard to know whether the vague reference to Athene's enmity here is a coy allusion to the story of Ajax's rape of Cassandra, or a trace of an earlier tradition later overwritten by what became the standard account. At any rate what destroys him is pointedly *not* Athene's vendetta, but a boast at the expense of Poseidon, who drowns him on the spot. This is neat use of the privileged knowledge of Proteus as a divine narrator; a mortal wouldn't be able to describe the god's involvement so fully. But it's also a story with ominous parallels to Odysseus, who (as we know, though Telemachus doesn't yet) is also a victim of Poseidon's anger, and will turn out to have triggered it by a comparable boast of his own.

Agamemnon The identity of the second victim comes as a surprise to nobody but Menelaus. This latest telling of the story of Agamemnon's murder is more detailed and circumstantial, with deft use of false climaxes and suspense, but is also extremely problematic and confused. Some modern editors have tried to force better sense of the sequence by supposing the lines have got into the wrong order, as in Lattimore's translation and Jones's commentary, but this only introduces further problems. As the text stands, Agamemnon narrowly escapes being blown to Aegisthus' estate (though Cape Malea , the southern tip of Greece, is quite the wrong direction for this), only to fall foul of him in his own home.

Aegisthus' ambush has obvious parallels with the one the suitors are about to lay for Telemachus, though the consequences will be very different. But the most offensive aspect of the plot to Homeric sensibility is the radical perversion of the codes of *xenia*, murdering his own guest at the feast which should be the most sacrosanct demonstration of the rites of hospitality presided over by Zeus himself.

For Menelaus, of course, this news is the worst of all; but Proteus is able to revive him somewhat by holding out the prospect, clearly pertinent to Telemachus, of Agamemnon's avenging by his son.

Odysseus Despite his distress, Menelaus has the presence of mind to ask one last question: the identity of the third hero alluded to earlier, who is not dead but captive on a remote island. Here at last Telemachus learns the truth about Odysseus, and the name of Calypso as his captor; but the nature of the information makes it difficult to do much with it.

(iii) the Elysian fields

For Menelaus, at least, there's better news at the end: alone of all the heroes in Homer, he's destined along with Helen for a privileged afterlife in the mysterious land of Elysium. This is a very different conception of the fate of the dead from anything elsewhere in Homer (including book 11 of the *Odyssey*), though it became quite a standard feature of later accounts from Hesiod on. In context here, it's clearly meant to be part of the parallels between the fates of Menelaus and Odysseus, and to suggest that Odysseus too may at last live happily ever after – if not quite as ever-after as Menelaus.

the offerings and cenotaph

Menelaus puts the god's instructions into action the next day, and has an unproblematic journey home; but not before a gesture of commemoration to Agamemnon, albeit on a distant shore. This of course is the option Telemachus has proposed in the event that he discovers Odysseus is dead: another slightly ominous connection. The narrative ends at the point where Nestor's version resumed; we don't need to be told again of Menelaus' homecoming and his discovery of Orestes' vengeance.

(3) gifts for Telemachus

Menelaus' long speech ends by returning to his guest, whom he asks to stay for an extended visit and promises an extravagant parting gift at the end. There's a notorious chronological problem here, as Telemachus seems to refuse, yet is still in Sparta a month later at the start of book 15. Clearly we have an acute case of Zielinski's first law, which forbids anything to happen in the Telemachus strand of the story while the Odysseus one (starting in the next book) is under way; and commentators generally accept that the invitation and its not-quite-refusal mark a certain self-consciousness by the poet about the awkwardness here. It's not really worth worrying about, but I'll come back to it briefly at the start of 15.

(c) Telemachus renegotiates the gifts

Telemachus is torn, but is careful not to express his anxieties about what might be going on in Ithaca during his absence. Instead, he reminds Menelaus that he's left his ship and crew back in Pylos; while the gift of horses and a chariot wouldn't do him much good in Ithaca anyway. This looks like a polite attempt to extricate himself graciously from Menelaus' relentless hospitality, but if so it fails. Menelaus simply substitutes another gift, and we're perhaps meant to infer that on the matter of departure too Menelaus is unable to take no for an answer.

B. Meanwhile, back in Ithaca

Now at last we cut back to Ithaca and find out what's been going on at home following Telemachus' abrupt and furtive departure. This closing section of the book cleans up the narrative loose ends as part of this book's preparation for the main event in book 5, the switch to Odysseus' own storyline at the point Telemachus now knows it's reached. The narrative alternates dramatically back and forth between the suitors and Penelope, ending on a bold cliffhanger that won't be resolved till book 15.

1. the suitors find out

First comes a moment of neat comedy and cross-purposes, as the victim of Athene's last impersonation but one inadvertently gives away Telemachus' departure to the suitors. (Noemon, you'll remember, was the Ithacan shipowner whose vessel Athene borrowed while disguised as Telemachus himself.)

Noemon's surprise

Noemon asks casually if the suitors know when Telemachus will be back, assuming that his departure is common knowledge in the palace. The suitors' reaction not only shows them wrongfooted, but explains why they haven't thought to query Telemachus' absence earlier. (The reference to "the swineherd" is the first mention of the pivotal character of Eumaeus, the royal pig-farm manager who'll play such an important role in the second half of the poem.)

Antinous responds with an angry cross-examination that puts Noemon on the defensive. But a further mystery emerges: Mentor ("or," as Noemon astutely puts it, "some god who resembled Nestor") sailed with Telemachus, yet Mentor is visibly still in Ithaca. This is the only time in Homer a divine impersonation is exposed in this way, and the suitors' obtuseness in failing to realise the implication is yet another divine warning unheeded.

the ambush hatched

Once Noemon is out of earshot, Antinous delivers his frank reaction to the news that Telemachus has eluded their clutches. His proposal now is to escalate the feud as threatened, laying an ambush at sea for Telemachus' ship on its return voyage. (Greek ships tended to hug coast where possible and hop from island to island, so Telemachus' journey home would follow a largely predictable route.)

2. Penelope finds out

But now we learn something new: Penelope has an spy monitoring the suitors, the page Medon who now makes his first appearance in the poem. This will raise the stakes still further, as Penelope is simultaneously informed of her son's departure and the death-trap set for him on his return.

Medon leaks the plan

The scene is finely constructed. It starts with an unusually outspoken rant against the suitors by Penelope in private to Medon, hinting again at the political tensions glimpsed in the assembly. Poor Medon is momentarily lumped in with the suitors, though the moment quickly passes as he reveals that the situation is even worse, indeed far worse, than even she imagines.

Now comes the double bombshell: Telemachus is gone, and the suitors plan to murder him on his return. Medon knows no more about his purpose than he's been able to gather from his eavesdropping on Noemon and the suitors; only that he's gone to Pylos in search of news of Odysseus.

Penelope and Eurycleia

A distraught Penelope is now left alone with her women. Her speech begins almost like a formal lament (like Andromache's in *Iliad* 22 and 24); but gradually Penelope's purposeful, calculating side comes to the fore again, as she considers her options in the light of the news. She accuses her women (in one case with justice, as we know) of complicity in Telemachus' secret, but her thoughts race ahead to formulate a plan: perhaps something can be done with Laertes, her husband's last surviving male kin? (Here's yet another subtle trailer for the events of book 24, as the poem again reminds us that Laertes is being kept around in the background of the story for a purpose as yet unguessed. We'll meet Dolius, named here for the first time, in the final book, though his children Melanthius and Melantho will be prominent in the interim.)

Eurycleia now confesses, and urges against Penelope's plan, which assumes a more desperate state than they've yet reached. All's not yet lost; the immediate need is to secure Athene's protection for Telemachus on his journey.

her prayer to Athene Penelope sees the sense in this, and prays privately to Athene. The accompanying ritual is a little obscure; it's not clear what Penelope does with the barley, and the ritual shriek is more usually associated with animal sacrifice. But the poem is experimenting in new techniques of narrative transition between different plot strands, and the use of the cry here is a neat way of linking back now to the suitors.

3. the suitors again

The short scene that follows encapsulates the ironic interplay between the two conspiracies, as the suitors are for the second time outflanked without realising it.

Penelope's cry interpreted The suitors, as usual, completely misread the signs, and misinterpret Penelope's shriek altogether. As far as they're concerned, Penelope is still three books behind them; Antinous has to hush them in case their reference to the murder plan is overheard. If they'd thought of this earlier, Medon wouldn't have been able to overhear them in the first place; but this is typical of the suitors' fatal lack of the forethought that characterises their enemies.

the ambush party sets out Antinous now leads his ambush party down to the shore, in a sinister replay of the preparations for Telemachus' departure. It's a good example of the use of type-scene material and formulaic action in different contexts with contrasting effects and an ironic, suggestive connection between them.

4. Athene appears to Penelope

Now we cut back to Penelope in her room, and another bold transformation of the Iliadic lion simile (never elsewhere applied to a woman). As she falls into a troubled sleep, Athene slips a dream into her sleep (as Zeus did to Agamemnon in *Iliad* 2), taking the form of Penelope's sister. The actual conversation, however, is very unIliadic – a series of five short speeches back and forth between the queen and her dream, culminating hauntingly in Penelope's question about Odysseus himself in the moment before the dream slips away leaving her question unanswered. We get the sense that Penelope's taking rather more of the initiative here, even in her sleep, than Athene intended.

5. the suitors lay the ambush

The book chooses to close, however, not on this episode of reassurance and peace, but on the dramatic cliffhanger of the suitors' ambush. It'll be another ten books before we find out what happens next; and by that point the story will have moved on in ways the suitors can't even imagine.

ODYSSEY 5–8: SCHERIA

Now come the four books which finally introduce the figure of Odysseus himself, as he begins his homeward journey from the unearthly prison of Calypso's island back to the known world and the society of mortals. The stories of Telemachus and the situation back in Ithaca are put on hold, as the narrative shifts for the next eight books to unknown lands of fantasy, and the story of Odysseus' voyage from Troy to Ithaca. The story is told in a series of flashbacks reaching deeper into Odysseus' past: his three years with Calypso, his arrival there, and finally in books 9–12 the seven preceding years from Troy to the final loss of the last of his surviving companions. All this is framed in a story set in the poem's present moment: Odysseus' arrival and adventures among the Phaeacians of Scheria.

In the first four books, we've seen Odysseus through the eyes of others, and been introduced to his world. Now we leave Ithaca far behind, and enter an altogether different kind of story. The events of these books show Odysseus' re-emergence into the world of men after seven years' captivity in the unearthly realm of Calypso. But the principal setting is the strange in-between land of Scheria, where Odysseus makes landfall at the end of book 5 and will remain until his final voyage home in book 13. Over the course of these four books, we'll explore in depth the society and culture of the Phaeacians who inhabit this unearthly utopia, and its implications for the real world to which Odysseus is about to return.

At the same time, we'll be travelling deeper into the mind of Odysseus himself. We'll see his skills of planning, endurance speech, improvisation, diplomacy, physical prowess and psychological insight all in action, and we'll learn what drives him after all these years to the seemingly unattainable destination of Ithaca. We'll see his ultimate confrontation with his divine nemesis Poseidon and how he survives it, and we'll watch him take his first tricky steps back into the human world. But all this is leading up to a still greater confrontation in book 8: with his own lost past, and with the legend he has become. Along the way, we'll meet two very different members of the poem's cast of complex, subtle female supporting players, as well as seeing Athene gradually insinuating herself back into Odysseus' story.

The eighth book will end with the poem's past and future both ready to unroll. The return journey to Ithaca is booked, and all that lies on the other side of it; but first we need to learn the story of Odysseus' wandering so far, and what he has learned between Troy and Scheria that will crucially help him to survive the challenges that await him at home.

Highlights of these books include:

- Calypso's scenes with Hermes and Odysseus
- the great storm narrative in the second half of book 5
- the encounter of Odysseus and Nausicaa
- the three songs of the Phaeacian bard Demodocus.

BOOK 5. CALYPSO

This superb book falls into two distinct halves. The first is set on Calypso's island, and deals with the release of Odysseus from his seven years' divine captivity. Then the very different second half is given over to the great narrative of Odysseus' perilous journey of survival across open ocean through storm and shipwreck to an unknown shore beyond.

A. The second divine council

The new beginning here is marked by a second scene on Olympus, recapping the council at the start of book 1 and setting in motion the action agreed on there. You might wonder why all this didn't happen a week ago when Zeus originally agreed to it, but it's one of the places where the *Odyssey*'s fondness for parallel action has to find a compromise with the Zielinskian rule about not narrating the same time-period twice over. For whatever reason, Homeric narrative doesn't seem to allow the clock to be turned back to what was happening all this time somewhere else, so the release of Odysseus has to follow chronologically from Telemachus' journey to Sparta. When we eventually rejoin Telemachus three weeks later,

we'll see that he's spent the time hanging around in Sparta doing nothing very much. See the chronology for details.

1. Athene prompts Zeus

Athene reasonably reminds Zeus that he agreed a week ago to Odysseus' release, and nothing has so far been done. Her opening complaint is a pointed quotation of Mentor's speech in the Ithacan assembly, and she follows up with a neat summary of the situation as it stands: Odysseus still trapped on Ogygia, Telemachus in Sparta unaware of the ambush set for his return. But she's diplomatic: she doesn't rebuke Zeus directly, doesn't spell out that they've already had this conversation, and addresses her speech to the gods collectively rather than Zeus in particular.

2. Zeus goes into action

Zeus understands her point well enough, however, and makes two speeches in response. The first, to Athene, makes the interesting claim (new to us) that the suitors' murder plot against Telemachus is all part of Athene's plan, to give Odysseus better justification for their murder than their mere consumption of his property would allow. He indicates the next stage of the Telemachus plotline by instructing Athene to take care of his homecoming, though this in fact won't happen until book 15.

Zeus's second speech is addressed to Hermes, a new player in the game. He turns up three times in the poem, reappearing in book 10 to give Odysseus the magic herb to protect against Circe's enchantments, and in 24 to escort the suitors to Hades. We'll consider his character and role in a bit more detail in the next topic, but he's introduced here in his familiar Iliadic role as a messenger between Olympus and earth.

Zeus's speech to Hermes is one of those key foreshadowing speeches like his great speech at the start of *Iliad* 15. We hear for the first time of Scheria and the Phaeacians, who will not only convey him on the final journey to Ithaca but will load him with treasure. It's an intriguing teaser, but as usual much of its effect lies in what's left out: the nature of the troubles awaiting Odysseus en route to Scheria, and how he'll deal with the situation facing him on his return to Ithaca.

B. Hermes and Calypso

The famous sequence that follows is a fascinating demonstration of the gulf between gods and even their favourite mortals, as we follow the progress of Zeus's command as it's relayed first by Hermes to a reluctant Calypso and then, in a highly edited form, by Calypso to an incredulous Odysseus.

1. Calypso's cave

Hermes makes his descent in a passage of baroque fantasy that recalls Hera's journey from Olympus to Lemnos in *Iliad* 14.225–30. Such moments are a sign that the narrative is firmly in the world of the gods: the flying sandals, the magic staff, the running on water are the kind of casually miraculous detail reserved in both poems for moments when the divine plot is momentarily in the foreground.

It's through Hermes' eyes that we view the celebrated and influential description that follows. This is the first in a long line of idyllic landscape descriptions in Greek (and later) literature, sometimes tagged by the Latin term *locus amoenus* meaning "delightful location". We start with the distant smell of burning wood from her hearth, and then as we close in the unearthly sound of the goddess's singing becomes audible. As we approach, the surroundings take shape as a supernaturally fertile and lovely wood, with multiple species of tree and bird, rich growth of wild plants, and ample running water (always a detail valued by Greeks in their dry Mediterranean uplands). Even the god is impressed enough to linger for a moment, as the narrative does, to relish the landscape for its own sake.

Only as Hermes enters do we get any mention of Odysseus, and it's a significant one after the idyllic description that's preceded. Neither the goddess nor her divinely beautiful home is enough to hold him; instead, he prefers to mope on the desolate beach. This is an important

touch of characterisation, as well as a convenient explanation of his absence from the remarkable scene that follows.

2. the goddess's welcome

Calypso subjects Hermes to an abbreviated version of the hospitality sequence (seating, food, conversation) we're already familiar with in its mortal variations. Gods, we've been told, know one another by sight, so the delicate protocols for the questioning of strangers may not apply here; but it's still striking, and perhaps a sign of her agitation, that she questions her guest before she's served him food and drink. Does she already suspect why he's here? Notice how carefully she hedges her expression of willingness with conditions that don't apply to the release of Odysseus…

3. Hermes relays Zeus' order

Hermes, perhaps pointedly, chooses not to reply until the proper moment in the sequence. (Notice the ambrosia and nectar that serve the gods in place of food and drink.) His speech is carefully constructed, prefacing the message by stressing his own role as merely the reluctant messenger of Zeus, whom neither he nor any other god (or goddess) dares disobey. Only the final lines actually quote Zeus's original speech; the rest is Hermes' artful elaboration, suppressing all the part about the Phaeacians and their treasure, and playing up the role of Zeus and destiny as the ultimate authors of the command.

4. Calypso's reply

Calypso erupts nevertheless, unloading a tirade against Zeus with poor Hermes caught in the crossfire. Her reaction reminds us of Poseidon when Iris relayed Zeus's cease-and-desist order at *Iliad* 15.174ff. – fury and resentment, calming to grudging acquiescence in the inevitable. It's a revealing speech about the boundaries between god and mortal and the gods' sensitivity over moments when those boundaries are crossed. As far as Calypso's concerned, this isn't about pity for Odysseus or the fulfilment of his supposed destiny; it's about the other gods' intolerance of goddesses who bed down with mortals, and the murderous vendettas they pursue against the unlucky human. She quite reasonably complains that nobody seemed terribly interested in helping Odysseus get home when she dragged him out of the sea seven years ago; on the contrary, Zeus was the one who smashed his ship to pieces himself. (We'll later find out why, but not till book 12.) We also learn the remarkable detail that Calypso had it in her power to make Odysseus immortal – and, by implication, that he refused.

Nevertheless, like Poseidon, she can't disobey a direct order from Zeus – though she makes it clear that that's the only reason she's agreeing, and that she has no intention of lifting a finger to help.

5. Hermes departs with a warning

Hermes could argue with quite a lot in this speech, but chooses not to. Instead, he picks up on her acceptance and her obvious reluctance alike, with a barbed parting warning that Zeus will be straight on her case if she starts to have second thoughts.

C. Calypso and Odysseus

Now, at last, Odysseus enters his story in person. The two scenes that follow show the relationship between goddess and mortal, and the personalities and manoeuvrings of each, in a pair of deft and economical exchanges: the first in the poem's long series of Odyssean mindgames, as Odysseus and a well-matched opponent probe one another's motives and intentions by speeches full of tricks and traps.

1. on the shore

Calypso's approach is accompanied by a rare piece of fill-in narrative in the poet's own voice, telling us of Odysseus' emotional state, his coldness towards Calypso, and his now-regular routine of avoiding her during the daytime to gaze mournfully out across the empty ocean. Homer generally avoids this kind of thing, but it's needed for this first glimpse of

Odysseus in action because we haven't yet had the chance to form a picture of his motivation from his own words and behaviour.

(a) Calypso's permission

In a brilliant Odyssean moment, Calypso suppresses the truth behind her change of heart, and all hint of any divine involvement. She presents the decision to let him leave as her own spontaneous change of heart, and gives him permission to build a raft, though she holds back from offering any assistance beyond the promise of supplies and a following wind. At the same time, she makes it clear that if he takes up her offer he's on his own, and hints that once he's out of her domain other, much less friendly gods may take an interest.

(b) Odysseus' suspicion

In a first sign of the psychological acuity that is one of his great tactical strengths, Odysseus immediately senses that something here isn't right. He knows Calypso well enough to know that she'd never change her mind of her own accord, but jumps from this to the wrong conclusion: not that something else has happened to change her mind, but that she hasn't changed her mind at all, and is up to something. We'll see this same wariness in book 13, when Athene assures him he's in Ithaca but he suspects a trick, and she responds in lines which echo Calypso's reaction here. He refuses to accept her offer unless she swears a binding oath not to trap him: a trick we'll later learn that he picked up from Hermes himself in his dealings with Calypso's counterpart Circe.

(c) Calypso's oath

Calypso responds with a touching gesture and expression of affection (repeated by Athene in 13), and she swears the oath by the Styx that Sleep used to bind Hera at *Iliad* 14.271–80. But she still gives nothing away about her true motive, and her final insistence that she means him nothing but well is at best a highly selective account of her reasons. Odysseus never does learn about the role of Zeus and Hermes, because part of the poem's strategy is to delay till Ithaca any hint to the hero himself that the gods might be with him rather than against him.

2. in the cave

The second exchange takes place back in the more intimate surroundings of the cave, in an ironic replay of the earlier scene with Hermes. But this time the diners are on pointedly different diets: nectar and ambrosia for the goddess, but mortal food for the man. Without a word spoken, and in a type-scene composed entirely of formulaic lines, Homer has provided a dramatic reminder of the unbridgeable gulf that still separates these two, and always will.

(a) Calypso's speech

It's Calypso who has to break the silence of the meal, in a wonderfully crafted speech whose "joy go with you" message is heavily undercut by the hints at ghastly sufferings en route and the attractions of staying here with Calypso, forever, immortal. What's the attraction? What can this Penelope possibly have that Calypso hasn't got far more of?

(b) Odysseus' reply

Instead of trying to explain or argue, Odysseus brilliantly deflects her argument by merely accepting the truth of all she says. Penelope isn't a goddess; there's no competition; and yet, he still longs to be home, and would forego everlasting life and comfort for it. The prospect of further trouble he takes in his stride; it won't be the first time, and he's pretty used to it by now. There's nothing more Calypso can say to this, and she never speaks again in the poem.

D. Preparations and departure

Dawn brings a new energy and purpose. After seven years' idleness, Odysseus' skill, planning, and physical strength all find release in a burst of intense activity.

1. making the raft

Calypso supplies the tools, but all the work is Odysseus': cutting the trees, preparing the wood, joining the timbers, assembling the structure, and finishing off with sealant and rigging

before preparing his vessel for launch. Not surprisingly, there's a very extensive and mind-numbing literature on the design of Odysseus' craft – the most interesting conclusion from which is that it can't actually be a "raft" as the Greek word implies but must be an actual boat with a deck. (Rafts aren't nailed together from shaped timbers, but lashed together with ropes to allow the beams to absorb some of the motion of the waves.) But ancient vase-painters got this wrong too, so don't worry too much about the distinction. The main point of this passage, obviously, is as a comprehensive demonstration of Odysseus' qualities of focus, purpose, physical energy, and skill.

2. Calypso's provisions

Perhaps because the earlier conversation said all that was needed between them, the actual scene of departure is surprisingly briefly told after the long description of the boatwrighting. Calypso merely carries out her promise to provision the craft with food and drink, and to send him off with a favourable wind; and without a word, Odysseus leaves Ogygia and Calypso forever behind.

3. Odysseus sets sail

An epic voyage now begins, with only the constellations of the northern sky for navigation. The Wagoner is Boötes, and the Bear or Wain of course the Plough or Big Dipper. Some Homer obsessives have argued that, taken together, these constellations suggest that Odysseus is sailing in late September or October, at the very end of the Greek sailing season when the seas become treacherous with the first winter storms. (If you've been in Greece at the time of year when the weather changes, you'll instantly recognise this.) It's a nice idea, but is probably pressing the astronomical data rather harder than it'll bear.

Odysseus' feat has uncanny echoes of the experiences of modern long-distance solo yachtspeople. The statement that he goes seventeen days without sleep tends to be dismissed by Homerists as exaggeration or epic fantasy, but one of the key skills of endurance solo sailors is to redistribute their sleep in micronaps rather than sleeping in long continuous stretches. At any rate his stamina is rewarded on day eighteen, when the hills of Scheria become visible on the horizon (the "like a shield" mini-simile is a particularly nice touch of observation). But here, like the glimpse of Ithaca in book 10, is where his troubles really begin…

E. Poseidon's revenge

Without warning, the story takes a devastating new turn with the arrival on the scene of the god whose absence made the start of the poem possible: the sea-god Poseidon, Odysseus' divine enemy, who is implacably opposed to his return. What's worse, Odysseus is exposed on the open sea: Poseidon's own domain. As we saw in *Iliad* 14–15, the only god who can stand up to Poseidon is Zeus himself; and Zeus is far away on Olympus, his attention entirely elsewhere. There'll be no help from him; Odysseus is on his own.

1. soliloquy and storm

An intriguing feature of this sequence is the largest run of soliloquies in Homer, with both Poseidon and Odysseus delivering a string of speeches to an audience of themselves alone. In the case of Odysseus, the point is clear enough: this is the hero's moment of deepest isolation, when he has only his own resources to fall back on. But Poseidon's isolation from the other gods is also part of the point of the scene, and his first outburst here underlines this: as he rightly perceives, the other gods have taken advantage of his absence to go behind his back. At the same time, he reveals for the first time that his power to prevent Odysseus' return will end if Odysseus can make it to the shore of Scheria. On one level this reads like a piece of ad hoc invention to explain why Poseidon doesn't continue to pursue Odysseus past Scheria; but it does fit with what Zeus has already said about Odysseus' destined return, and at the very least it raises the stakes for the scene that follows, as Poseidon raises the mother of all storms to prevent Odysseus ever making landfall.

2. Odysseus' first soliloquy

Part of the irony of this whole episode is that Odysseus himself knows none of this. His own soliloquy wrongly (but reasonably, given his past experience) blames Zeus for the storm. More than at any other moment in the poem, this is the moment when the hero looks his death in the eye. He sees no way out, and in a telling flashback to his heroic past his primary thought is for the sheer anticlimax of dying like this, alone and unknown, instead of with the *kleos* that attends the death of a warrior in battle. As the ideal moment to have died, he chooses the struggle over Achilles' corpse: the first of three visits in the course of the poem to that climactic moment beyond the end of the *Iliad*. Even now he still thinks like an Iliadic warrior; but the following scenes will show that he's also something more.

3. the shipwreck

Now the first wave strikes, with two effects: the mast is smashed, and Odysseus is washed overboard. With fine irony, Calypso's gift of elegant clothes nearly becomes his death, weighing him down as he struggles to break the surface. Even so, he has the presence of mind to fight his way back to his craft as the one chance of survival, and this time he clings to it for dear life as a rare Odyssean simile conveys its motion back and forth with the wind and wave.

4. Ino lends a hand

The scene that follows may seem something of a surprise, but one of the unspoken rules in the *Odyssey* is that a mortal can only resist a god with the help of another god. In this case it's only a minor sea-goddess, but her assistance will prove crucial for Odysseus' survival of the fateful final phase of his ordeal. She gives the sensible enough advice to strip off Calypso's clothes (which have already nearly drowned him once) and to try to make it to shore with the help of her magical flotation device. But to do so will mean abandoning his craft and putting his trust in the advice of a strange goddess. What should he do?

5. Odysseus hangs on; his second soliloquy

This is the moment of decision dramatised by Odysseus' second soliloquy. As with Calypso, he's wary of taking a goddess's advice on trust, and in a characteristically cool and rational speech he weighs up the case either way. As the "shield in the sea" image nicely evoked, land was still a long way off; Odysseus trusts the timbers beneath him more than he trusts the goddess, and opts for the compromise of staying with the vessel so long as it's in one piece. Once it's gone, however, he may as well go with the goddess's plan, because he really won't have any other chance.

6. Poseidon yields

This compromise is nearly his undoing, as Odysseus has no time to change from his heavily sodden clothes and wind the goddess's scarf around him before his craft is smashed to driftwood by Poseidon's biggest wave yet. But Odysseus is able to buy time by straddling a lone plank while he changes from one goddess's clothes to another's; and this time he abandons the timber and strikes out for shore on his own.

Perhaps surprisingly, Poseidon abandons the struggle at this point; has he seen Ino's scarf, or developed a grudging respect for his victim's resilience? Whatever the case, Odysseus is far from out of the woods; on the contrary, his real ordeal is only beginning.

F. Landfall

Odysseus is kept afloat by Ino's scarf, but he's still a long way from land, and the storm shows no sign of abating even after Poseidon's departure.

1. the sight of land

Two gruelling days follow, the toughest test yet of the exhausted Odysseus' remaining powers of endurance. Day three brings a respite when the wind finally drops and he finds himself close to land, but there's still the problem of find a safe way to shore. Nevertheless, the sight of land is accompanied by one of the poem's greatest emotional similes, as

Odysseus views land with a poignant surge of feeling – only to realise that the coast ahead is nothing but jagged rocks and cliff, with nowhere to come ashore.

2. Odysseus' third soliloquy

The moment is weighed up in another of Odysseus' soliloquies of decision-making. First he contemplates the cliffs: no way ashore there. Next, the rocky shoreline: but there the sea is too violent for him to clamber ashore unhurt. The only alternative is to swim further along the coast in search of a safer landing; but that exposes him to the twin dangers of being swept out to sea or attacked by the sharks which were a well-known hazard in the ancient Mediterranean. Odysseus knows well enough that the sea is the domain of his enemy Poseidon, and the longer he spends there the more dangerous for him.

3. the cliffs and rivermouth

In the event, the decision is made for him. Odysseus is swept into shore anyway, and saved only by his own agility and foresight, augmented in the nick of time by Athene (intervening with a couple of discreet boosts to his reaction time now that Poseidon is off the scene). Even when he has the rocks in his grasp, the waves pull him out again, with the brilliant and memorable simile of the octopus.

Odysseus has no choice now but to swim for it; but the plan pays off when he catches sight of a rivermouth. If he can swim a little upstream, he can find a sheltered place to come ashore. But it's a risky strategy, which is why he takes the precaution of a prayer of supplication to the local river-god. (The reference to knees here sounds rather surreal, but as we'll see in more detail in the next couple of books it's a standard element of suppliant ritual, invoked even when it would be impossible or inappropriate to realise literally.)

4. on the shore: the final soliloquy

Odysseus' prayer indeed makes the difference; the unnamed river-god relents, and Odysseus is finally able to come ashore. Even in his exhaustion, though, he still remembers Ino's instruction, and with his last strength throws her scarf back into the sea as she commanded; as with the river-god, Odysseus knows that the favour of gods isn't something to be taken lightly or for granted.

One last decision awaits: how, in his exhausted condition, to avoid death from exposure in the damp, frosty night that follows? He knows he's about to pass out, and that he has only enough strength left to struggle uphill to the nearest clump of bushes, where he runs the risk of being preyed on by wild beasts. But his assessment of the risk rates this lower than the near-certainty of death if he stays out in the open, so he struggles up the hill and under cover. The final simile of the book, which has had more of the *Odyssey*'s spare but brilliant stock of similes than any other book of the poem, is a powerful image of dormant energy and hope. We leave Odysseus asleep, as the narrative now takes a new and dazzlingly unexpected turn.

BOOK 6. NAUSICAA

This and the next book are the shortest in the poem, but book 6 in particular is among the most memorable and celebrated. In another of the bold narrative coups in which the *Odyssey* delights, Odysseus himself is dropped from the first 110 lines as we're introduced to an entirely new character, the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa. Only gradually does it emerge that the details of this engaging character's life and day are part of a carefully-plotted storyline designed to intersect with Odysseus' own, in one of the most famous encounters in literature and one of the finest displays of Odysseus' skills of word and wit in action.

A. Athene takes charge

The book opens with one of the boldest narrative leaps in Homer. Without warning, we leave the sleeping Odysseus for 110 lines while the narrative follows Athene on a journey inland whose purpose only gradually becomes apparent. We're introduced to a complete new cast of characters, and what seems like an entirely irrelevant storyline about the princess's laundry. Only by degrees do we come to realise that the appearance of irrelevance is itself a narrative

puzzle to tease and intrigue the audience, and that small details in this storyline will prove crucial to Odysseus' own, in ways that only Athene can foresee.

1. the Phaeacians and their history

As Athene makes her journey, the narrator pauses for a kind of background voiceover. All we've heard about the Phaeacians so far is what Zeus told us in the previous book at 5.28ff., which was limited to some tantalising glimpses of their role in Odysseus' story. But who are these people, and what are they doing in this land?

The account we're given here is a famous passage among historians, for two interconnected reasons. First, its tale of settlement overseas is the one glimpse we get in Homer of the dark age phenomenon of "colonisation": the foundation of new Greek communities in previously non-Greek parts of the Mediterranean and Black Sea basin. Population pressure and limited resources seem to have been a main driving force behind such movements, and we seem to get a reflection of that in the tale of the peaceful Phaeacians' conflicts with the violent Cyclopes.

Second, and even more intriguingly, the description of the Phaeacian colony in Scheria is the closest we get in Homer to an early Greek polis, with its city walls protecting a fortifiable centre commanding a wider area of cultivable land. In the next book, we'll see other characteristic landmarks of the early polis in the assembly-place and harbour. There's endless debate over just how far we should see this description as a glimpse of the "emergence of the polis" in Homer's own world, but it does seem a more advanced kind of settlement than Ithaca. That, as we'll see, is part of the point.

This passage explains, incidentally, why it's technically wrong (as some scholars carelessly do) to speak of somewhere called "Phaeacia". The Phaeacians are the people, but the land they've settled in is called Scheria, and even their previous homeland was called Hypereia. As the Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad* shows, early Greeks tended to think of their political geography in terms of people rather than places.

2. Nausicaa's dream

In an elegant glide from outward to inward, the narrative tracks Athene as she slips into the palace, bedroom, and dreams of the current king's daughter, silently bypassing the sleeping attendants with an evocative mini-simile. The narrator drops a careful hint to the audience in the cryptic aside that all this is part of the goddess's plan for Odysseus' homecoming, but it's hard at first to see how. You'd have to be quite sharp to realise that Bronze Age royal laundry requires "washing-places" in fresh water such as a rivermouth, and sharper still to realise that the clothes, mulecart, and accompanying girls will all have an important part to play in Athene's plan.

As commonly when a god appears in a mortal's dream, Athene assumes a mortal disguise, because she doesn't want Nausicaa to think this is a divine prompt. On the contrary, she plays artfully to what we'll soon see confirmed as Nausicaa's key obsession, the dream of marriage complicated by the absence at this stage of a plausible suitor.

3. Athene departs

Athene's exit from the narrative at this point is heavily emphasised; she's wound the plot up and set it down ticking, and the pleasure of the scene that follows lies in seeing her plan played out through the machinery of purely human psychological processes. To mark this moment, the poem treats us to Homer's most famous description of Olympus, much imitated in later literature and a pointed contrast with Odysseus' own state at the end of the previous book.

B. The laundry expedition

Now we see the action outlined in Athene's instructions put into brilliantly-told effect – with the audience still teased with the riddle of what all this can possibly have to do with Odysseus.

1. Nausicaa and Alcinous

The narrative camera stays on Nausicaa as she wakes, and catches a brief glimpse of the queen Arete (later an important figure) on her way to intercept her father. We'll see the purpose of this glimpse of the queen at work with her yarn in the next book, where a moment of Penelope-like acuity will threaten Odysseus' whole cover story.

What follows is a famous moment in discussions of Homeric characterisation: both characters are holding back their true thoughts as they speak, but Alcinous at least understands what the conversation is really about, and unusually the narrator spells out the nuances explicitly. We already know that Nausicaa's real motivation is the link planted by Athene between clean clothes and marriage; but Nausicaa is never going to say that to her father, so comes up with an alternative pretext centred on her father's and brothers' clothes. (The inclusion of male clothes in the plan is of course central to Athene's design.) Alcinous, we're told, actually sees through this, but gives his permission anyway. Normally such unspoken undercurrents are left to the audience to infer; but these are two entirely new characters whose subtle personalities have to be established quickly ahead of their imminent role in Odysseus' story. Nausicaa, especially, is now established as an intriguing combination of adolescent romantic fantasy and shrewd, calculating diplomacy: a promising sparring-partner for Odysseus in the great scene that will follow.

Notice the reference to dancing, by the way. We'll later see that this is one of the great Phaeacian cultural pursuits.

2. setting off

Perhaps mercifully, we're spared the detailed (and fairly baffling) description of the mechanics of the wagon we had in *Iliad* 24.265ff. Instead, the narrative of the preparations focusses on the elements that will play a role in the plotting: the clothes, picnic, and bathing-oil. By now we're beginning to guess how these are going to be used, and why the laundry site has to be sufficiently far from the town to make a full day's expedition (for which they'll need to take food).

3. the washing

Nausicaa's speech revealed for the first time that the washing-places mentioned by Athene are indeed at the mouth of a river, and the audience surely by now has made the connection. This gives a neat undercurrent of irony and suspense to the description of the laundering here: surely Odysseus is nearby, with neither party yet being aware of the other. What will happen when they meet?

The washing done, the clothes have still to be dried, requiring the girls to wait and fill in the time while the clothes dry in the sun. This not only detains them long enough for Odysseus to wake, but more importantly gives them a reason to fill in the time with an activity calculated to rouse him from the deep sleep he's been in all this time.

4. the ball game

With time to kill, the girls finish their picnic lunch and pass the time in what we'll later see is something of a local speciality: a musical ball game, somewhere between a dance and a game of catch, such as we see the young men performing at 8.370ff. Nausicaa's speech to her father already hinted at the importance of dance and song in Phaeacian culture. But here too the lightness of the scene is offset by the audience's awareness that somewhere off-camera, unsuspected by the dancers, is the hiding-place of the unconscious Odysseus.

The book's first extended simile compares Nausicaa and her girls to Artemis and her nymphs, with the princess singled out as the Olympian figure among minor goddesses. Tellingly, Odysseus will make the same comparison in his speech to Nausicaa: one of the ways that he's able to size up at a glance things that we've had to spend 100 lines being told at length.

C. Odysseus & Nausicaa

Now comes the book's central scene, and the moment this whole bravura narrative detour has been leading towards. Like the events of the storm in the previous book, it's a key test of

Odysseus' skills at a pivotal moment in the plot; but where in book 5 the qualities tested were mainly those of physical endurance and physical fortitude, here it's his powers of instant psychological profiling and fast-thinking diplomacy.

1. awakening and soliloquy

At this key moment, Athene abruptly reappears in the narrative to make the decisive move. It's a brilliant piece of divinely-engineered accident, whose purpose only she and we can see: Nausicaa's throw misses and the ball goes in the water, which in turn prompts a loud collective wail from the assembled female voices. It's this that finally rouses Odysseus from his deep sleep of exhaustion; but Odysseus is still in book 5 mode, and speaks the last in his series of deliberative soliloquies, utterly and ironically unaware of the incongruously harmless scene that awaits him.

His opening lines are repeated, again in ironically welcoming surroundings of which he's unaware, when he wakes up in Ithaca at 13.119–21. It gives it the flavour of an instinctive reaction, distilling down to a single alternative question all he's learned from his manifold experiences of exploring the cultures of unknown islands with results ranging from divinely hospitality to savage brutality and bloodbath. All he has to go on is the sound of female voices ringing in his ears, and having not heard a human voice in seven years it's natural that he doesn't make that his first guess. His only option is to venture into the unknown to find out.

2. the encounter

Crucially, Odysseus has the presence of mind to anticipate the effect his naked, bedraggled appearance risks making. As in the Cyclops' cave, he improvises a solution from materials to hand: clearly he can't knock a set of clothes together, but a branch to cover his genital zone is sufficient to send out a whole set of civilised signals: non-aggression, sense of shame at nakedness, and downplaying of any sexual threat.

The moment of suspense is drawn out by one of the poem's cleverest similes, a lion driven by hunger to go hunting among domestic flocks. De Jong's commentary calls it "a parody of the traditional lion simile", which on one level it is. For Odysseus, still thinking like the beleaguered hero of the storm scene, he's venturing into danger, driven by desperate need – just as the lion knows that in hunting the flocks of men it's entering potentially lethal territory. But for Nausicaa and her girls, they are the flocks and he the lion: the apparition of a naked tramp advancing from the bushes is a predatory sight to inspire the panic which indeed ensues. (Even Nausicaa's resolution, we're told, is the result of Athene's inspiration rather than her own unaided courage.) Only the audience appreciate the ironic duality of the image: the mismatch between Odysseus' readiness for danger and the actual threat level of the scene he encounters.

Now Odysseus has a split-second to decide on his tactics, knowing that everything hinges on what he does in the next moment. He has a single glance to assess the situation and his lone remaining listener, and to frame the strategy of his appeal. Supplication carries more intrinsic weight, but involves a physical contact that could be construed at best as invasion of personal space, at worst as attempted rape. To discard that option will make his task even harder; but he chooses to risk all on his powers of speech. And what a speech it is…

3. Odysseus' speech

Odysseus begins by activating the code of supplication verbally rather than physically, and then switches into an elaborate softening-up routine. He pretends uncertainty as to whether she's goddess or mortal, though if he entertained any serious suspicions of her being divine he certainly wouldn't offend her by voicing the alternative. The Artemis comparison, as already noted, picks up the earlier simile as a demonstration of Odysseus' ability to deduce from a single glance what the audience has had to be told at length.

But it's with the turn to her putative mortal status that the hero's skills of psychological profiling really come into their own. We know about Nausicaa's parents and brothers because we've already met them; about her fondness for dancing because we've just seen her in action; and about her obsession with marriage because we've been literally inside her head. But Odysseus has to infer all this from visual cues alone: her age, her dress, her physique, her

aristocratically pale complexion, the fact that she's still free to travel out of town where a young married woman would normally keep to the house. The brothers are a shot in the dark, but a good one; otherwise, he calculates that a girl of her age is most likely to be stirred by (i) feelings for family and (ii) dreams of marriage.

Now comes a clever change of direction. Under the pretext of ransacking his memory for the most beautiful thing in his experience to compare her to, he picks on the arresting image of a sacred palm at the sanctuary of Apollo in Delos. It's a delicate, striking, and carefully asexual comparison; but the main point is to drop hints of his identity and past that will quicken her curiosity and sympathy. He's travelled; he was once a man of influence, commanding a host; he alludes darkly to a journey of long suffering (to Troy, of course; but he's giving nothing away). As for who he is and how he comes to be in his present condition, he gives away no more than he need – other than a single tantalising reference to the island of Ogygia, which will probably mean nothing to her but is a long, long way off if it does.

Only now does he proceed to his actual suppliant request, and it's expressed with calculated modesty. All he asks for is directions to the city, and a bit of old cloth to wrap himself in; the laundry-sacks will do fine. But if he's worked out her business has been laundry, he must have spotted – and have his eye on – the freshly-washed princely robes lying crisply on the beach, and the mule-wagon harnessed for the journey back. Odysseus being Odysseus, he know his chances of a lift and a suit of clothes will be considerably boosted if he frames his appeal as a request for less.

Finally, he plays his trump card in a devastating emotional coda that hits her most sensitive button a mighty thump. May the gods, he says, bring you your heart's desire – which he then describes to her with eerie accuracy in lingering romantic detail. Yet at the same time we hear behind his words the experience of his own marriage with Penelope, and the longing that drives him to recover this experience for himself. At this moment of supreme manipulative artistry, it's a moment of poignant self-exposure, detectable only by the audience.

4. Nausicaa's reply

This time, the narrator refrains from telling us what's passing through Nausicaa's mind; but she responds with the adroit tact and presence of mind we saw in her dealings with Alcinous. She responds coolly but sympathetically, fending off his flatteries with blandly pious platitudes, but at once seeing through his modest request and granting what he's really after. At the same time, she makes it clear she's doing this because he's a suppliant, not because of any of his unctuous praise or claims of past greatness and woe. And by the way: my father's the king, so best behaviour is advised.

5. Nausicaa to her girls

Now comes a favourite trick of the cleverer Homeric speakers: Nausicaa delivers a speech ostensibly to a third party, her handmaidens, but designed to be overheard by Odysseus himself. Obviously the girls don't need to be told where they live or that they're specially favoured by the gods.

The reference to "the billowing sea all around us" may imply that Scheria, like Odysseus' other fantastic ports of call, is an island. Ancient scholars, who were keen to find real-world map locations for the poem's invented places, favoured the island of Corcyra (modern Corfu).

D. Odysseus freshens up

So the maids return to help, and Odysseus' transformation begins from salt-encrusted naked castaway to hero in waiting.

1. the bathing

First, he needs a freshwater bath, and conveniently the river provides one which the girls themselves have just used, thoughtfully bringing along the after-bath oil that was such an essential part of ancient bathing. Here Odysseus has another opportunity to demonstrate his tact and civility, refusing to bathe in their sight – a detail they instantly pass on to their increasingly impressed mistress, as perhaps he had calculated.

2. Athene's makeover

But being out of their sight also presents the opportunity for a dramatic transformation. Nausicaa and her girls only see the before and after shots, not the gradual process of cleaning-up and grooming, and this makes the transformation all the more dramatic. Poetically, it's presented as a supernatural intervention, a makeover job by Athene herself, with a fine accompanying simile to mark Odysseus' transformation from unsightly beggar to dashing prince.

3. Nausicaa's reaction

Nausicaa, at least, is impressed by the change. As she now confesses in a bit of private girl talk, she was pretty repelled by her first sight of the stranger, her sympathetic speech notwithstanding. Now she's starting to have marital fantasies about him, and setting herself up as a potential mortal Calypso. But she breaks off, and resumes her role of authority by giving instructions for the next stage of his refreshment, a meal with wine from the leftovers from their picnic lunch. Only now are we reminded, with a shock, that this is Odysseus' first food or drink since the start of the storm three days ago. Everything we've seen in this book has been the work of a hero running on empty.

E. The journey to town

The final phase of the book tidies up the remaining arrangements for getting Odysseus to town, where he'll face the next phase of his challenge.

1. Nausicaa's plan

Nausicaa has clearly spent the time since her last speech thinking through the logistics of her promise. She's decided against escorting him to the palace herself; she's sensitive enough to her image as the most eligible bride in Scheria to realise that that could send out politically problematic signals. Instead, she'll lead him as far as she can risk, and then leave him to make his own way to the palace alone.

Nausicaa's description of the town and its setting continues the intriguing glimpses of an early proto-polis, with its fortified walls, harbour, and assembly-space all features of the archaic and classical polis that was beginning to take shape in Homer's time. But the other main interest of her description is the paramount role of ships and seafaring in Phaeacian culture. As we'll later see, the Phaeacians are dedicated mariners, a cultural obsession reflected even in their personal names, and presented here as dominating even over other kinds of aristocratic skill and prowess valued in other societies. For Odysseus, clearly, this is a useful people to have fallen among, if only he can win them round to his assistance.

Nausicaa still has the challenge of explaining tactfully to the stranger why she can't let him accompany her to the palace. She hits on the inspired device of inventing an imaginary ill-wisher and allowing Odysseus to eavesdrop on his words. It's a neat way of dramatising the social and political delicacy of the situation, but it also of course lets slip sidelong a number of artful insights into how she now views the stranger: tall and handsome, a potential husband, even mistakable for a god, while she could have her pick of local suitors but is still waiting for Mr Right. Segal and others take these lines at face value, and read them as problematising the picture elsewhere of the Phaeacians as idealised hosts. For others, it's merely a masterful piece of coded flirtation, ostensibly distancing herself from her own coquettish assessment by putting it into the mouth of a hostile rival.

Finally, to business: she gives detailed directions of where she'll leave him, how to get from there to the palace, and what to do when he gets there. The palace itself is laid out on identical lines to Odysseus' own, with the same outer yard and doorway giving straight into the megaron. (Here's the plan again from the previous topic if you find this hard to visualise.) The surprise in all this is the instruction to supplicate not the king but Arete her mother, a notoriously puzzling detail that's been variously explained as a relic of matrilineal succession (with Arete the real ruler and Alcinous a kind of "king consort") or merely as an insider tip on the best route to a successful appeal from one who knows the personalities and politics inside-out.

2. Odysseus' prayer and Athene's response

And so they set out, parting company at the grove sacred to Athene – a fortuitous choice of landmark that allows the goddess to make another unseen appearance in the narrative. Odysseus' prayer shows that he still feels deserted by her; he's unaware of the role she played in the storm, and it's left for the narrator's own voice to remind us that Athene's problem is that she's outclassed in status and power by her uncle Poseidon. The implications of this are now spelled out more clearly: until Odysseus reaches Ithaca, Athene's help will be strictly limited to what she can do behind the scenes, even though that means that Odysseus will continue to feel abandoned by his patron goddess. Once we get to Ithaca, however, it'll be a different story entirely. Poseidon will no longer be a factor, and Athene will be free at last to write the rules her way…

BOOK 7. THE PALACE OF ALCINOUS

The tiny seventh book is the shortest in Homer, but is crammed with fascinating discoveries, as we leave Nausicaa behind for our first proper view of the Phaeacian city and court. Up until now we've only glimpsed Nausicaa's father Alcinous in his scene-stealing cameo appearance early in the previous book. Now, we see king, queen, and court in action, and a pivotal moment of testing Odysseus' skills of diplomacy and quick thinking.

A. Nausicaa arrives home

First, the narrative has to tie up the Nausicaa plotstrand by seeing her safely home to her palace. The homely narrative of her arrival to the security of familiar surroundings has echoes of Telemachus and Eurycleia; but it's also charged with the knowledge of Nausicaa's secret, and the self-restraint with which she acts out her everyday routine as if her life hadn't just turned upside-down.

B. Athene plays tour guide

With the fall of darkness, Athene gets bolder. She won't reveal herself to Odysseus in person, but she's happy to devise ways of smoothing his path without exposing her role directly.

1. the meeting

First, she shelters him from prying eyes with an Iliadic mist of invisibility: another in a series of echoes of Priam's journey to, and into, Achilles' shelter in *Iliad* 24. It's also another of the passages which some see as hinting at a darker, less hospitable side to Phaeacian culture which has to be handled with care.

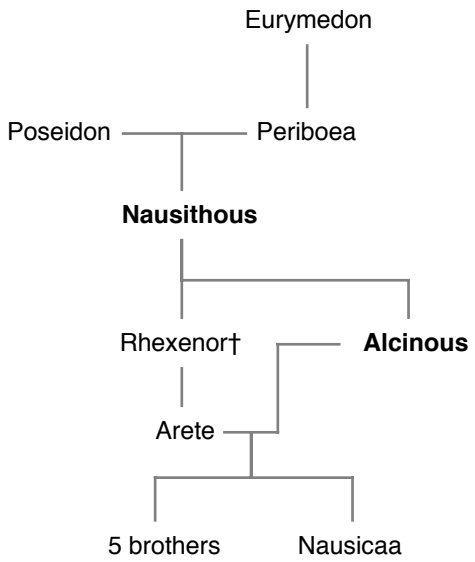
Next, she takes the role of a passer-by herself, posing (as she does in Ithaca in book 13) as a local child who can give the directions Nausicaa instructed him to ask for, without attracting the curiosity and suspicion of a real local. Again we think of *Iliad* 24, and the role of Hermes there. To Odysseus' question she responds with what may or may not be an exaggerated description of Phaeacian suspicion of strangers; at the very least, Odysseus will hardly be reassured to know that their patron god is his nemesis Poseidon. The reference to the ships' uncanny speed is the first in a series of increasingly insistent hints that the Phaeacians' society is a little more magical, a little closer to the gods, than any normal earthly kingdom. Later, we'll learn some even more extraordinary things about the Phaeacians' mysterious ships.

2. the journey into town

The journey into town is seen through Odysseus' eyes, as he passes the docks, the meeting-place, through the walls into the city proper, and up to the palace. But for the walls, it could be a kind of mirror Ithaca – but a heightened, more prosperous and fantastic version, capable of exciting wonder even in one as widely-travelled as Odysseus.

3. the royal family

Athene now expands on Nausicaa's instructions with an intriguing run-down on the history of the ruling family. As you'll see from the family tree, Arete the queen occupies an intriguing position in the dynasty: the daughter of the deceased heir to the throne Rhexenor, she was married (apparently after his death) to her uncle Alcinous, Rhexenor's younger brother, who succeeded his father and her grandfather as king in Nausithous' place. As the daughter of the prematurely deceased rightful heir, she's a royal figure in her own right independently of her marriage to the present king: presumably one reason for the high regard in which she's held, and the authority which her protection carries towards any suppliant earning her favour. She's also, as we learn here, a skilled diplomat in her own right – and we'll see just how sharp her "unprompted wisdom" can be when Odysseus makes the mistake of underrating her later in the book.



Nausithous, incidentally, means "Ship-swift": a typical Phaeacian sea-name of a kind the poet seems to enjoy riffing on in this and the next book.

4. departure to Athens

Athene now makes another of her emphatic exits from the narrative, leaving Odysseus reliant on his wits for the rest of the book. It's an unusual exit line, though – implying that Athene actually dwells with the king in the Mycenaean palace on the Athenian Acropolis, which in historical times was the site of her great temples the Parthenon and Erechtheum. There seems to be a memory here of the Acropolis as the site of a Bronze Age palace which by Homer's time had become a purely religious sanctuary.

C. The palace

Now comes one of the most celebrated descriptive passages in Homer: Odysseus' first astonished sight of the palace and gardens of Alcinous. It's here that we get the clearest indications yet that the Phaeacians, though mortal, are not quite of this earth, in a series of touches of baroque fantasy and magic that indicate their closeness to the gods.

1. the palace

First comes the palace, whose extraordinary description is like a fairytale version of Menelaus' palace in Sparta – itself a sight of wonder for a backwoods boy like Telemachus. The walls are of bronze, the door of precious metal, and (an extraordinary touch) on either side are robot guard-dogs made by Hephaestus himself. (You might remember we caught a couple of glimpses of Hephaestus' robotics experiments in *Iliad* 18.375–7 and 417–21.) The torchbearing statues, reminding us that all this is viewed at night, also seem to have been

parachuted in from another age; and even the everyday handicrafts of the palace slave-women seem a heightened, slightly unearthly version of their real-world counterparts back in Ithaca.

2. the gardens

Now the description turns to the exterior, and a famous *locus amoenus*-style description of the improbably rich, well-watered orchards that speak to Greeks of a land just a little more fertile than any real Mediterranean landscape. As Odysseus must be realising, we're not quite in the real world here, but somewhere a little off the edge of the map and halfway to heaven.

D. Arete and Alcinous I: the banquet

But Odysseus is no more tempted to linger here than he was in the equally fantastic gorgeousness of Calypso's cave. Like Priam with Achilles, he walks straight in on the banquet and makes directly for the object of his supplication; and here too the divine mist rolls away only at the moment when he's assumed the formal knee-grasping suppliant posture he denied himself with Nausicaa. The astonished reaction of the guests also echoes the corresponding moment in *Iliad* 24, as Odysseus launches into his speech while he still has the advantage of the moment.

1. Odysseus supplicates Arete

Odysseus puts Athene's briefing to good use: he's memorised the royal genealogy at a single hearing, and addresses her by her full name and patronymic. His stripped-down, straight-to-the-point appeal here contrasts strikingly with his long, elaborate speech to Nausicaa – perhaps to underline the extra advantage conferred by the physical suppliant posture.

2. Echenaus' speech

Perhaps surprisingly, neither Arete nor Alcinous replies directly, and it's left to a Phaeacian elder with the typical local name "Shipowner" to recommend that the stranger be at least treated to a standard hospitality sequence while the royal couple decide his fate. (Echenaus is used again in book 11, and is evidently a kind of Nestorian elder statesman.) It's an effective piece of suspense, drawing out the moment when one or other of king and queen will give a hint of their response to the supplication. Will they be hospitable, as Zeus has promised, or will they fulfil the darker hints dropped by Nausicaa and Athene about Phaeacian attitudes to strangers? Odysseus can only wait for the fateful verdict…

3. the hospitality routine

Echenaus addressed himself to Alcinous, and it's Alcinous who responds with actions rather than words: unseats his favourite son to make room for the stranger, and plays out word-for-word the hospitality routine we've seen in Ithaca, Pylos, and Sparta. At the end, he's at liberty to question his guest, but he holds off, proposing instead a prayer and libation to Zeus as patron god of suppliants.

4. Alcinous' speech

Only then does Alcinous reveal his verdict on the stranger's request. Yes, they'll convey him home, and he proposes an assembly in the morning to work out the logistics. But that will be the limit of their responsibility; once he's home, he's on his own. All this makes further use of the shrewder Homeric speakers' technique of sidelong third-party address: the speech is as much for the stranger's benefit as the diners who are its purported addressees.

And he follows up with an even more direct example: if the stranger is a god in disguise, testing them, it's rather an unfair trick, because here in Scheria the Phaeacians are used to receiving the gods as honoured guests undisguised. Like their former neighbours the Cyclopes (also descended from Poseidon) and the giants from whom they also descend, the Phaeacians are still part of the divine world, though they're mortal and dwell on the mortal earth. Odysseus has already seen hints of this in the supernatural handiwork outside the palace; now it's confirmed that he's still not yet back in the lands of ordinary men.

At the same time, this is an example of what we'll soon come to recognise as Alcinous' distinctive brand of characteristically oblique but shrewd diplomacy. He's not going to

question his guest directly, but he's just issued an open invitation to the stranger to speak up and say something of his identity. How will Odysseus respond without giving away more than he wants to?

5. Odysseus' response

Odysseus is quick to disavow the suggestion that he might be a god in disguise, but deftly ducks the implied invitation to explain who he really is. All he'll say is that he's as mortal as they come, and has experienced pretty much all the misery that mortality has to offer. He certainly has a story to tell, but it would hurt him and perhaps distress them if he told it; so if they'll excuse him, he'd rather just thank them for their generous promise, accept their terms, and get on with the meal in silence. All this goes down well, and Odysseus has discreetly extricated himself from having to reveal his identity publicly to an audience he still has no reason to think will be pleased to learn it.

E. Arete and Alcinous II: the private audience

So the banquet plays out, and the guests depart, leaving Odysseus alone in the hall with the king and queen. But if we think Odysseus is out of the woods, there's a heart-stopping moment still to be negotiated. Arete has been strangely silent throughout the banquet, especially considering both Nausicaa and Athene specifically singled her out for supplication. What does this silence mean? Is it merely that she's too much the model queen to speak out in public with her husband there to speak for her, or is there a reason for her reticence?

1. Arete's question

Now, at last, Arete breaks her silence. Our first glimpse of the queen, in the previous book was a telling one: she was already up and working yarn with her women when Nausicaa came in, and we've also heard in this book what virtuosi Arete and her weavers are in the production of fine cloths. Like Penelope, she may not get out much, but there's one skill she knows better than anyone, and that's weaving. Even in the torchlight, her keen eye recognises the stranger's clothes as her own handiwork. *Where did he get them*, if he's just been washed up from a shipwreck?

2. Odysseus' story

Odysseus has to think fast. He sees at once that he can't get past her with a lie, of the kind he uses so casually once he gets back to Ithaca; he's going to have to explain about Nausicaa, and why he left her out of his story. His solution is to tell his story in the most sympathetic way he can, presenting a highly edited version of his adventures from his arrival on Calypso's island. As de Jong nicely points out, by the time he gets to the end and the climactic involvement of Nausicaa, his listeners have entirely forgotten that he hasn't actually answered Arete's original question about his identity.

Odysseus' own version of his story is the first of the *Odyssey*'s striking examples of first-person re-narration of events earlier told in the narrator's voice, with shifts of perspective and emphasis pointing up the differences between what we know and what the character knows. The most remarkable cases are the dead men recounting their own murders in books 11 and 24, but this passage is an interesting forerunner of Odysseus' first-person account of his adventures to Penelope at the end of 23.

The first part of Odysseus' story here is new: how he was washed to Ogygia in the first place after the destruction of his ship by Zeus himself with a thunderbolt, and survived only by clinging to a piece of the wreckage for ten days. This only whets our appetite for more of the story: why did Zeus, now so sympathetic, destroy Odysseus' ship? Where were they coming from, and what happened to the other ships?

The seven years with Calypso are briefly told, including his refusal of immortality and everlasting youth, but of course omitting the role of Hermes in her strange change of heart. Odysseus still hasn't figured this out, though he now suspects a message from Zeus as one possible explanation. He briefly mentions the (inferred) role of Poseidon in the shipwreck, but it's little more than a figure of speech, and he leaves out entirely the contribution of Ino (as well as that of Athene, of which he remains unaware). A gripping narrative of his narrow

escape from the ocean leads brilliantly into the salvation of his meeting with Nausicaa, which he serves up with copious commendations of her wisdom and maturity. It's a pretty irresistible performance; but Alcinous still has one niggle.

3. Alcinous on Nausicaa

It's all very well commending Nausicaa's good sense, but if she was so thoughtful, asks Alcinous, why did she abandon her suppliant on the edge of town and say nothing about him when she got home?

4. Odysseus' response

Odysseus has to tread carefully here. He can't exactly say, "Well, she was understandably worried that if she was seen with a good-looking stranger it would be all over the tabloids next morning." So he goes for a white lie: she actually asked me to accompany her to the palace, but I was the one who demurred on the grounds that, well, it would be all over the tabloids the next morning.

5. Alcinous' promise

Alcinous is not only appeased, but impressed. Paradoxically, this fictional display of sensitivity seems to reassure him that Odysseus could indeed be what Nausicaa fantasised him as: the husband material she's been so short of among the Phaeacians. Ancient critics were as startled by this sudden offer of Nausicaa's hand in marriage to a still-nameless stranger Alcinous has only known for a couple of hours, and wondered whether he was subtly testing his story. But he does confirm in the same breath that he's already promised the stranger a passage home in the morning, so all this is speculation about what might have been. Nausicaa is often rather carelessly spoken of as a "temptation" to Odysseus, but there's no sign that this offer is seriously made or that Odysseus feels the slightest attraction to Nausicaa; the whole point, I'd prefer to say, is that she's no temptation at all.

Alcinous' promise of a free ride home is another of his artful sidelong probings. Clearly he's fishing for an indication of where exactly he's just promised his guest a ticket to, though he softens the hint with reassurances that distance is no object, and his ships and crews are capable of going to the farthest end of the known world in a single night. The idea that the island of Euboea (perhaps the least remote of all Greek islands, lying just off the coast of Attica) might be for the Phaeacians the edge of the earth has sometimes been taken as a joke, but if Scheria is imagined as Corfu or somewhere similarly on the western side of Greece then it's not such a daft choice, though still hardly the back of beyond. Two of the most adventurous contemporary Homerists, Martin West and Barry Powell, have both used this passage to argue that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* owed their existence to Euboean rather than Ionian poets. I don't think anyone much buys this, but it's the least unconvincing solution to the problem here. As for Rhadamanthus' visit to Tityus, even ancient commentators were baffled by this one. There are other myths about both figures, but the best guess is that the allusion here is to an otherwise unattested local Euboean myth.

Odysseus, at least, resists this artful attempt to extract more details of his identity and homeland, and merely replies with a prayer for the fulfilment and rewarding of Alcinous' promise. Clearly Alcinous is going to prise no more information from his guest tonight; and all retire in a reassuringly formulaic bedtime sequence.

BOOK 8. THE PHAEACIAN GAMES

After the comparatively intimate and low-key book 7, the eighth book is on a more expansive and public scale. Odysseus' second day in Scheria is marked by mass celebration, by feasting, athletics, and song. We see Phaeacian society at play, and learn more about their strange culture. We also see an Odysseus beginning to ease himself back into the world of competitive performance and public pursuit of kleos. But threaded through the book is a different strand entirely: the three great songs of the Phaeacian bard Demodocus, which hold up a poetic mirror to Odysseus' story in which his own past and identity find themselves painfully exposed to view. On the eve of his long-awaited journey to Ithaca, Odysseus will

have to unburden himself of the whole vast story of his wanderings from Troy to Ogygia, and the lessons and sufferings met with on the way.

The book takes place on a single day, and falls into four parts. The morning is taken up with the assembly called by Alcinous the previous evening; there's then a midday banquet leading up to the first of Demodocus' songs, and the afternoon is given over to the royal games in the stranger's honour, which culminate in Demodocus' second song. Finally, the evening is taken up with a final banquet, at which Demodocus' final song triggers Odysseus' unmasking and the telling of his story over the next four books.

A. Morning: the Phaeacian assembly

The first episode is a pointed counterpart to the Ithacan assembly in book 2. Where the earlier episode highlighted the breakdown of order, this one shows how such a scene should go: strong leadership, unanimity of purpose, and communal participation in the decisions reached. It's not as democratic as the Ithacan assembly; only Alcinous speaks, and the tone of his speech suggests he's not so much consulting as commanding. But the *Odyssey* seems to want us to see this as actually a good thing. A well-ordered society is united behind its chief and respects his judgment, in contrast to the rudderless drifting of the Ithacan aristocracy.

1. re-enter Athene

In book 2, Telemachus himself organised the summons to the assembly via a team of local heralds. In Scheria, Athene herself takes on that role, assuming the form of a royal henchman and spreading the word in terms calculated to motivate attendance and sympathy, by building up the stranger as an object of curiosity and wonder. Throughout these books, Athene's been taking an increasingly hands-on role in the action now that Poseidon is no longer a direct threat, and this will culminate later in the book when she actually allows Odysseus a fleeting glimpse of her presence on the scene. For good measure, she touches up the previous day's makeover, so that Odysseus will live up to the expectations she's sown. But the reference to "trials" to come is the clearest hint yet that Odysseus will have to face some tricky challenges still before the day's out.

2. Alcinous' speech

Alcinous comes to the assembly with a ready-formed plan for getting the stranger home. Despite his attempts the previous evening, he still has no information to share about the stranger's identity and homeland, and his pointed statement to this effect is (characteristically) as much a sidelong comment for Odysseus as it is an announcement to the assembly itself. Nevertheless, Alcinous orders a ship to be prepared, and commands a special feast in the stranger's honour while the preparations are being made. This second banquet will bring on a new player and the star of this book: the bard Demodocus, already viewed in antiquity as Homer's alter ego in the poem, and another counterpart to the Ithacan books (where we saw in book 1 how the Ithacan bard Phemius is another victim of the coercion and disorder that has taken root in the palace).

3. preparations

Alcinous' instructions are put into action without demur, and the description of launching the ship directly quotes lines 4.780–3 from the launch of the suitors' ship: another Ithacan correspondence. But the banquet simultaneously being laid on in the palace is a very different banquet from that enjoyed by the suitors left behind, and stands as the poem's supreme demonstration of what life in Ithaca ought to be like but isn't.

B. The second banquet

The sacrifice and meal are very briefly narrated here, because the focus of the scene is overwhelmingly on Demodocus' performance.

1. Demodocus' first song: the quarrel at Troy

Demodocus' first entrance is the occasion for a fascinating introductory description. His blindness was in antiquity taken as an autobiographical detail from Homer himself, and no doubt does reflect actual examples of the ancient and modern phenomenon of blind musical virtuosi. But it also has a poetic significance, an affliction compensated by divine favour just as Odysseus' own sufferings are redeemed with Athene's help. There's a particularly nice touch of naturalistic detail in the blind man being shown by touch where his instrument is hanging. As an honoured guest, he participates in the meal first, and only when appetite has been satisfied is the guests' attention ready for his performance.

Demodocus is prompted by the muse rather than his guests, though as we'll later see he also does requests. Again we think back to Ithaca, and the dispute between Penelope and Telemachus over the appropriateness of Phemius' choice of a song more to the suitors' taste than to hers. Here there's no such controversy, but like Penelope one member of the audience finds the subject a little too close to home.

The subject of the song is fairly mystifying; it's not an episode told by anyone else, and there've been some pretty desperate and unconvincing attempts to find a match in episodes attested in the *Cypria* (the lost prequel to the *Iliad* in the epic cycle) or a lost play of Sophocles. Some scholars have concluded that it was made up for the purpose at this point in the *Odyssey*, while others argue (not terribly convincingly, to my mind) that the references to feast and oracle are too obliquely allusive unless Homer's audience was already familiar with the story. The best solution remains that of the ancient commentators, who refer it to an otherwise unknown episode after the end of the *Iliad* when Achilles and Odysseus debated whether it would be better to try and capture Troy by force (Achilles) or trickery (Odysseus). That would make a neat confrontation between the heroes of the two epics and the values they stand for; but the absence of a source reference leaves us to suspect the story may be an invention to explain this passage.

Whatever the source and details of the story, this is one of the key moments where the *Odyssey* may be playing to its audience's awareness of the *Iliad*. We can't prove that the *Odyssey* even knows the *Iliad*; it notoriously never refers to any of the events of the *Iliad* directly, and it's widely accepted that the *Iliad* and this episode are just two instances of a "heroes quarrel" story-type that was quite widely used in the epic tradition. Nevertheless, if the *Iliad* is in the audience's mind then this episode takes on a rather satisfying extra layer of irony. At the time of the quarrel, Agamemnon rejoices, because he thinks that Apollo's prophecy (which seems to have predicted that Troy would be taken after "the noblest of the Achaeans had fallen out") has been fulfilled. But the audience know that the reference is to the *Iliad* itself, and its quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. This only works, of course, if the feast and quarrel here are imagined as being early rather than late in the war, before rather than after the events of the *Iliad* – so either the ancient commentator has got it wrong, or the *Odyssey* may not know the *Iliad* after all.

2. Odysseus' reaction

Odysseus, at least, is uncontrollably moved. We're not told precisely why he weeps, but this is the first indication he's had that his name and story are even known to the Phaeacians, let alone that in ten years he's become a figure of myth – thought of alongside such long-perished heroes as Achilles and Agamemnon, who were once among his closest friends. The power of Demodocus' story is in evoking a moment of misplaced optimism for the future; but Odysseus has spoken to both Achilles and Agamemnon in the underworld, and knows only too well that all their hopes led only to their own disaster. And yet, despite this unprecedented loss of emotional control, he has the presence of mind to try and conceal his reaction, and to play out his part in the feast during pauses in the song (an interesting performative detail, by the way).

3. Alcinous' response

But we've already seen that Alcinous keeps a close and canny corner of his eye on his guest, and he not only notices but draws some quiet conclusions from what he sees. Being Alcinous, however, he keeps his curiosity to himself, and merely spares his guest further discomfiture

by coming up with a pretext for ending the performance early. Now that everyone's been fed and entertained, what better way to show off Phaeacian skill to their guest than by an impromptu tournament? Such a display of provincial athletics is hardly likely to impress one of the champions of Patroclus' funeral games, but of course Alcinous doesn't yet know that his guest has competed successfully against the greatest warriors ever to have lived…

C. The games

The tournament uses the same large public space as earlier served as the meeting-ground for the assembly. Demodocus is carefully kept in the scene, because this central episode to the book will once again culminate in a performance by the bard.

1. the catalogue of princes

As with Thetis's nymphs in *Iliad* 18.39–49, the introduction of the Phaeacian aristocracy becomes an excuse for what in Greek is a delightful catalogue of made-up names all reflecting the Phaeacian obsession with ships and seafaring. Here's W.H.D. Rouse's translation of these lines: "Topship and Quicksea and Paddler, Seaman and Poopman, Beacher and Oarsman, Deep-sea and Lookout, Goahead and Upaboard; there was Seagirt the son of Manyclipper Shipwrightson." Euryalus son of Naubolus is "Broadsea son of Shiplauncher", and Halius and Clytonaus "Seafellow and Famedship"; only the more thoughtful Laodamas, "Host-tamer", bears a more conventional heroic name.

2. the events

The contest itself is a miniature version of the much grander programme of Patroclus' funeral games in *Iliad* 23.262ff. There's no chariot race, combat, archery, or javelin, and the discus event there is more of a shot-put – significant omissions all, showing that Phaeacian culture is missing the combat sports and martial arts that encapsulate the close relationship between warfare and athletics in the *Iliad* as in the historical Greek world. This is a people without a warrior culture, for whom the competitive display of athletic prowess is nothing more than a demonstration of aristocratic excellence. From one point of view, it's a utopian dream; but for an Odysseus there's perhaps something slightly sterile and pointless about the exercise.

the footrace: Clytonaus Now comes a rapid summary of the individual events. Of course we're not interested in these minor Phaeacian nobles, so the details of their victories are sketchily presented. The first victory, in the footrace, goes to one of the three princes competing…

wrestling: Euryalus … followed by Euryalus' victory in the wrestling, another event in which Odysseus excelled in *Iliad* 23. Euryalus is the first non-royal victor, but was singled out in the catalogue as the most physically impressive competitor after Laodamas. We'll see more of him in a moment.

jumping: Amphialus Next comes the only event not included in the games for Patroclus – though it did form part of the classical pentathlon.

discus: Elatreus The discus event is not only a pentathlon classic, but affords the unique narrative opportunity that Odysseus will exploit in a moment.

boxing: Laodamas If we've been wondering when the much-hyped Laodamas will win something, it turns out he's been reserved for the climactic and most violent event. But we don't learn anything about his opponent – further confirmation that the interest here is only tangentially in the athletics, and far more in the reaction of Odysseus.

3. the challenge

Up to this point, Odysseus has been notably absent from the narrative, even as a spectator. But now comes the turning-point of the book, as Odysseus' relationship with his hosts is put unexpectedly to the test.

(a) Laodamas and Euryalus confer

The initiative comes from Laodamas, who suggests to the other contestants that they invite the stranger to join in. It's a neat opportunity for the poet to slip in another description of how Odysseus strikes others' eyes, but where Nausicaa saw good looks, Laodamas' practised athlete's eye is more drawn to his muscled wrestler's physique. Euryalus agrees, and Laodamas makes the approach.

(b) Laodamas' invitation

Laodamas' speech tries to be friendly and reassuring, but it inadvertently lays bare the gulf that separates the Phaeacians' utopian world from Odysseus' grim life-experience. Laodamas' good intentions backfire almost immediately with his bland claim that a man's greatest *kleos* is his athletic achievement. For Odysseus, who knows more about the attainment of glory and its terrible cost than these unwordly princelings will ever experience, this is like being lectured to by a child. And it's hardly helped by the closing reassurance that his ship homeward is already prepared, as Odysseus' patience will only be stretched further by the invitation to fritter away the afternoon in play when he could be on the sea bound for Ithaca at this very moment.

(c) Odysseus demurs

Odysseus' reply tries to be restrained, but an edge of irritation shows in his opening question. Laodamas of course didn't intend to mock him, but Odysseus is astonished that he can't see how inappropriate this invitation at such a time. He reminds Laodamas and the others how much he's been through, and how desperate is his anxiety to be on the way home; but still they don't seem to get it.

(d) Euryalus' taunt

Now beefy Euryalus, already established as a slower thinker than the courtlier Laodamas, weighs clumsily in. All he's understood of the exchange is that Laodamas invited the stranger to choose a sport, and he refused. How can anyone who won't prove himself in athletics maintain any claim to *kleos*? The only possible explanation is that the mysterious stranger belongs to an altogether lower class of human: a merchant, despised by the Homeric aristocracy as participating in a demeaning activity associated more with non-Greeks such as Phoenicians. Where Laodamas privately commented on Odysseus' athletic physique, Euryalus sneeringly claims otherwise. It's an important speech, because it gives us our first taste of a pattern that will turn up in much more highly-charged contexts later in the poem: an inept and boorish self-styled wit attempts to score points off the stranger, who retaliates with a brilliant display of barbed verbal skill that leaves the speaker utterly squashed.

(e) Odysseus' response

Odysseus' speech here is a foretaste of his later rejoinders to similar attacks from the suitors. His opening line administers a short, sharp smack before apparently softening his tone into a little homily on the three gifts of good looks, good sense, and good speaking. On the one hand, there are those who aren't much to look at, but command admiration for their intelligence and eloquence; we think of Antenor's description of Odysseus himself at *Iliad* 3.205–24. But there are also those who are handsome on the outside and worthless on the inside. And that, he says, unveiling the steel beneath the softness, is you: godlike to look at, but it's all on the surface. (Euryalus belatedly cottons on to the realisation that the flattery of his godlike appearance was actually an insult, and that he's just been been treated to the verbal equivalent of a sucker-punch knockout.)

But Odysseus isn't finished; Euryalus has impugned his very *kleos*, and that can't be allowed to stand unchallenged. Once, he admits, he was indeed an athlete, but his powers have been diminished by sufferings they can only begin to imagine: not just his recent troubles by sea, but also (he lets slip for the first time) in battle. Even so – a brilliant surprise twist – he'll accept their invitation after all, and he'll choose his event right now.

(f) the discus

Before anyone can react, Odysseus has grabbed a spare discus, left out of the formal event because it was oversized, and thrown. Now we see why the discus event was included: it's

the one event it's possible to win after the official contest is over, by throwing further than the winners. There's a lovely touch of dry comedy as all the Phaeacians, for all their pride in the seamanship, instinctively duck as the high-velocity missile flashes past. It's a brilliant piece of point-scoring, in more senses than one.

Scarcely less remarkable is the announcement of the result. Athene materialises, again taking human form, and calls out the result herself; and Odysseus, just for a second, seems to through her disguise.

(g) Odysseus' boast

The Greek, like Shewring's translation, is carefully ambiguous as to whether he actually recognises the disguised goddess for her true self. De Jong, almost the only commentator to discuss this issue, thinks not; Odysseus rebukes her in book 13 for her apparent absence, and the only other place where a mortal sees through a divine disguise is the very unusual scene between Helen and Aphrodite in *Iliad* 3. But it's hard to see why the mere sight of a mere track official would cheer Odysseus in the way described here, and I prefer to see this moment as the culmination of Athene's increasing visibility as a part of Odysseus' story in this and the previous two books. This is the moment Odysseus' spirits start to pick up, and a glimpse of the goddess at this point makes good psychological and narrative sense.

Odysseus' speech shows a significant shift in mood. He begins by challenging the local athletes to take him on not just in the discus, but in all the other events as well. Like Achilles with Agamemnon at *Iliad* 23.886–95, he tactfully exempts his Laodamas, as master of ceremonies and a provenly courteous host, from participation in the general humiliation that must follow. Or how about some other events they haven't tried yet? – archery, for example, which he was quite good at in the thick of battle at Troy. (Cue sound of Phaeacian jaws falling open at the dropping of this name.) Odysseus modestly limits his claim to be only the world no. 2 at archery, and no match for the record-breakers of past generations. This leads into a slyly Nestorian touch of pointed mythologising: Eurytus issued a rash challenge, and ended up dead, which should give Euryalus pause next time he thinks about doing likewise. – Or how about the javelin, another good martial skill? He'll give the running a miss, being out of training, but otherwise it's their turn to choose an event to be beaten at.

(h) Alcinous' response

Alcinous sees where this is going, and swiftly intervenes with a fine display of kingly conciliation and diplomacy. Euryalus, he acknowledges, was out of line; but the stranger has made his point without the need to humiliate all the rest of them. In his earlier speech at 97ff. he cheerfully boasted of Phaeacian prowess in such sports; now, faced with a real athlete, he retracts that claim. Phaeacians aren't really much at combat sports, but only at the track events the stranger has decided to stay out of. Their excellence – the Greek word is *arete*, "prowess" or "virtue" – lies in other areas: in seafaring, and in an increasingly comical list of civilised pleasures. Few Greeks would see eating, dressing up, hot baths and soft beds as proofs of excellence; but the Phaeacians take genuine and justified pride in their quality of life, of a kind only possible in a divinely-favoured land without war. Garvie has a nice note on these lines pointing out that each of the Phaeacian pastimes listed here has in fact been prominent in, and even contributed to, Odysseus' rescue and recovery.

Alcinous pronounces the games over, and calls instead for a display for the stranger's benefit of what the Phaeacians really do best: music, dance, and song. Demodocus now takes centre stage again, and provides the music for a dazzling display of Phaeacian choral dancing – one of the great early Greek performance artforms, and a show that genuinely impresses the watching Odysseus.

4. Demodocus' second song: Ares and Aphrodite

Now comes Demodocus' solo spot, an interlude between two dance performances, and a song on an altogether more expansive scale than its predecessor. This famous story is one of the most celebrated, and notorious, passages in Homer: an outrageous tale of divine adultery and its come-uppance that appalled censorious theologians in later ages, and stood as the supreme example of the sheer immorality of the Homeric gods. But despite its comic and titillating tone, it's actually a deeply moral story with strong relevance to the main plot, and whose

summing-up message articulates perhaps better than any other lines in the poem the moral and narrative rules that govern the *Odyssey*'s world.

(a) the lovers

The heavenly crime is a mirror of a story that's already been used as a warning parallel to Odysseus' own, the adultery of Clytemnestra with Aegisthus. Like Aegisthus and the suitors, Ares woos a married woman, and like Aegisthus he succeeds; but unlike Agamemnon, the cuckolded Hephaestus discovers the plot, and like Odysseus he plans a carefully devastating revenge.

(b) Hephaestus' trap

Hephaestus, as we saw in *Iliad* 14, is the smith-god and master of technology. It's an easy job for him to come up with a trap made of invisible but unbreakable chains, and to set it to trigger when anyone lies down in his bed while he pretends to be away. Sure enough, as soon as the couple attempt to take advantage of her husband's seeming absence, the trap springs, and they're caught fast and helpless.

(c) Hephaestus demands penalty

But the most interesting part of the story is what happens next. Hephaestus summons all the gods to witness his shame, and to demand compensation from Zeus himself. If the story has seemed comic so far, Hephaestus' outcry tempers the comedy with pathos. He insists that the situation is no laughing matter at all, and that the disability the gods laughed at in *Iliad* 1 has been abused by Aphrodite's contempt and infidelity. Now it's for Zeus himself to make amends, or there the lovers stay: an object of permanent public spectacle and ridicule.

(d) the gods comment

The other goddesses, unlike Aphrodite, have sufficient sense of shame, and ignore the invitation – as apparently does Zeus, whose dignity remains above involvement in a story of this kind. But the other male gods roll in and warmly applaud Hephaestus' revenge. The verdict quoted is one of the key distillations of the poem's wisdom, and Shewring's translation of these lines is the best I know:

- **Ill deeds never prosper**. In the *Odyssey*'s world, sin triggers punishment, unpredictably but certainly nevertheless.
- **Swift after all is outrun by slow.** In the *Odyssey*, brain overcomes brawn, and superior strength and odds can be overcome a carefully-planned delayed response rather than an immediate and unthinking counter-strike. Hephaestus is the weakest of the Olympians, Ares the strongest; but look who's had the last laugh.
- **Ares must pay an adulterer's penalty.** If you set your sights on another man's wife, punishment will surely follow. The Trojans lost the war and their city; Aegisthus is dead; and the suitors have been warned.

The younger generation of male gods, despite Hephaestus' insistence on the seriousness of the situation, are more amused than edified, and crack laddish jokes about Aphrodite being worth the humiliation. But the main function of this exchange is as a foil to the response of the senior god present, the Phaeacians' patron god and ancestor Poseidon, who sees it as no laughing matter at all.

(e) Poseidon settles the debt

Poseidon takes it on himself to negotiate Hephaestus down from his initial insistence on divorce and compensation from the coffers of Zeus himself. Hephaestus indicates his willingness to accept compensation from Ares himself instead, but needs someone he can trust to stand surety. Poseidon formally commits himself as guarantor, and Hephaestus releases the lovers, who return to their normal divine role none the worse for wear. It's been a classic demonstration of the contradictions of the Homeric gods, for whom nothing is ever serious for long, and even crime and punishment can be smoothed over and forgotten in a moment in ways that human offences so obviously aren't. We also see the strange combination of solemnity and irreverence, fantasy and everyday domesticity, and the extension of human procedures of justice and dispute resolution to even the heavens

themselves. It's all a reminder of how all-encompassing the *Odyssey*'s moral vision is aiming to be, bringing even the lawless, carefree gods into a humanly intelligible system.

D. Evening: the third banquet

The afternoon's entertainment now comes to an end, and the action adjourns to the palace for a final banquet and song. This phase of the book sets about wrapping up the strands of the Phaeacian action, clearing a narrative space for the climactic revelation of Odysseus' identity and telling of his story over the next four books.

1. the ball dance

First, the afternoon's entertainment concludes with a display of what the Phaeacians do best: Laodamas and his brother Halius perform a virtuoso dance routine with ball, recalling their sister's ball-dance with her handmaidens at 6.99–116, with the rhythm this time provided by the young men from the games. The poet seems to be enjoying the challenge of trying to give an impression of this intricate, acrobatic performance in words alone, and there's no reason to suppose Odysseus' praise anything but sincere.

2. Alcinous' gifts

Alcinous is delighted; this is the first unqualified praise they've had from the stranger, and it's enough to trigger an extravagant display of *xenia*. We've seen such guest-gifts before, of course, when Menelaus offered Telemachus a chariot as a going-away present in Sparta. But this far eclipses even that. At 5.38–40 Zeus promised that Odysseus would receive from the Phaeacians "bronze and gold and clothing in plenty, more than he would have brought from Troy if he had made his return unharassed and with his full share of spoil." The thirteen talents of gold (plus thirteen cloaks and thirteen tunics) Odysseus is awarded here are the single largest treasure in Homer, and are topped up at 13.13–15 with a further tripod and cauldron from at least all of the thirteen chieftains, and perhaps from every single guest at the banquet.

How do the gifts here stack up against other Homeric treasures? Here's a quick checklist of other major-league treasures. Don't be too distracted by the assorted extras; the gold is the main item in all cases other than Agamemnon's uncollected IOU to Achilles once Troy is sacked. (We don't know exactly how much a Homeric talent weighted, but gold was worth about 100 times as much as bronze, so Meriones seems to have done rather better out of the chariot race than Menelaus and Antilochus, whose argument is all over a horse and a cauldron.)

occasion	reference	talents of gold	tripods	cauldrons	horses	slaves	robes	mantles	cloaks	tunics	extras
consolation prize for the loser in the footrace	*Iliad* 23.751 (doubled at 23.796)	0.5									
fourth prize in the chariot race	*Iliad* 23.269	2									
Aegisthus' bribe to the watchman	4.525–5	2									
Maron's gift to Odysseus	9.202	7									12 jars of wine
Polybus' gift to Menelaus	4.129	10	2								2 bathtubs, 1 silver mixing-bowl
Agamemnon's compensation to Achilles	*Iliad* 9.122–34	10	7	20	12	8					

additional compensation from Agamemnon to Achilles upon sacking of Troy	*Iliad* 9.135–56	1 ship-load			20					7 citadels, 1 daughter in marriage
Priam's ransom to Achilles	*Iliad* 24.232	10	2	4		12	12	12	12	1 goblet
Phaeacians' gift to Odysseus	8.390–3, 8.430–1, 13.13–15	13	13+					13+	13+	

The twelve "princes" are *basilees* in the Greek. As we saw in the History topic, this is a Mycenaean word whose scope in Homer seems a bit variable. Interestingly, Alcinous presents himself as on equal terms with them, and meets no opposition when he unilaterally proposes this extremely generous gift from all of them. As in the assembly, we seem to be intended to take this as a sign of a well-ordered kingdom whose ruler commands unqualified respect among his peers.

3. Euryalus' apology

Alcinous' second instruction is for an apology from Euryalus. This is another potentially uncomfortable loose end that needs to be formally tied up: as with Agamemnon and Achilles, the tension between these two needs to be publicly put behind them. Euryalus rises well to the occasion, with an appropriate gift for the warrior, and a well-omened wish on top of the apology and present. Odysseus' reply shrewdly decodes the significance of the gift for him and for the audience: it's the only sword we ever see in Scheria, and may such weapons continue to serve a merely symbolic (rather than a practical) purpose.

4. packing

Now the party adjourns to the palace for the evening banquet, and the promised gifts for Odysseus are gathered and packed, together with an additional golden goblet from Alcinous and a trunk to pack it all in. The elaborate routine of sealing the trunk with a special divine knot is an opportunity for one of the poem's artful trailer moments: this is the first mention of Circe, and the tantalising reference to her knowledge here will be picked up by a further hint of her nature and role in the story at the start of the next book.

Odysseus' bath here not only checks off another of the items on Alcinous' earlier list of Phaeacian specialities, but recalls the version of this standard hospitality sequence in book 6. It's a subtle preparation for the brief return of a favourite character from the poem so far.

5. farewell to Nausicaa

The tying-up of loose ends continues – metaphorically, this time – in a last glimpse of Nausicaa, who was rather disappointingly ejected from the narrative at the end of book 6 after such a vivid starring role in that book. Though the brevity of the scene may not seem to give her much to do, it's a delicately constructed moment. Though we see each through the other's eyes (her "heavenly beauty", his "wonder"), there's no flirtation this time, but only an elegant exchange of formal farewells, in which she takes the initiative, and a grateful reassurance on his part of her pivotal importance in his homecoming. Nausicaa has been marginalised from the moment she entered the palace, where she's confined to the women's quarters and like Penelope can only linger on the outskirts of the megaron. But she'll still be a central part of Odysseus' story, and it's tempting to see his reference to "Hera's husband" as hinting at hopes of a happy outcome for her dreams of marriage.

6. the banquet

With even Nausicaa's storyline now wrapped up, it seems as if the Phaeacian episode is ready to be wound up. In fact we're barely a third of the way in, because the scene that follows will unexpectedly transform both his relations with his hosts and the direction of the poem.

The banquet begins innocuously enough with Odysseus continuing the more outgoing role he began to assume in the tournament. Taking the initiative, he awards Demodocus a prime cut from the banquet, with a fairly shameless piece of professional self-advertisement by the *Odyssey*'s own bard put into his mouth.

7. Odysseus' request

As it turns out, though, Odysseus is planning a quid pro quo. Referring back to the bard's earlier Trojan song, he smoothes the ground for his request with further compliments to his divine talent and the accuracy of his account. It's the second time he's dropped a hint that he himself was at Troy, and now he issues a request for one particular song, with an outline of the story to help Demodocus along.

Why does Odysseus request this story now? Presumably because it's the supreme achievement of his life, the thing for which he expects to be remembered. He's now had time to come to terms with the revelation that the Trojan war and his part in it are already the stuff of song, and it's highly characteristic of a Homeric hero to be interested in the afterlife of his *kleos*. What, of course, he hasn't reckoned on is the effect the story will have on him…

8. Demodocus' third song: The Trojan Horse

We heard a little about the Horse in the reminiscences of Helen and Menelaus in book 4, but this is the first full telling of perhaps the most famous moment in all of Greek epic. The actual narration is on a much less expansive scale than the song of Ares and Aphrodite, with no direct speech this time and no circumstantial description. Nevertheless, we can recognise the outline of a full-blown Homeric narrative here:

- the choice of a specific starting-point, which the proems of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey* show was thought of as a key narrative decision in epic;
- division into separate scenes, centring on (i) the debate and (ii) the sack, with relatively little bridging narration to cover the actual bringing of the horse into the city;
- summary indications of three separate speeches in the account of the debate scene;
- a climactic *aristeia* by Odysseus himself;
- the operation of hidden divine machinery made visible to the audience by the narrator.

9. Odysseus' reaction

It's unclear whether Demodocus ever finishes his song, whose summary breaks off with Odysseus and Menelaus battling their way to the palace of Deiphobus to retrieve Helen. It's as if the bard's words blur together and fade into the background, as the narrative closes in on Odysseus' tears and then zooms in still further to go under his skin and probe his innermost emotions.

For many, the magnificent lines that follow are the greatest simile in Homer. The *Odyssey* uses similes sparingly, but they're unusually rich and poetically adventurous, often dealing with complex emotional states in contrast to the *Iliad*'s preferred use of similes to colour in more external and physical kinds of action. But even by Odyssean standards, this simile is exceptional. In contemplating the moment of his greatest triumph, Odysseus is momentarily aligned with his own victims: with figures like Andromache, whose fate on this very night was anticipated at *Iliad* 6.454–63 and 24.725–45. Of all the tearful situations that could have been compared to Odysseus', this carries the most poignant and ironic resonance. Odysseus' feelings for his past are those of an Andromache for the dying Hector: everything that gave his life meaning, dead, and an unbroken future of servitude and suffering. It's another of the moments where the *Odyssey* seems to be looking back on the world and values of the *Iliad*, viewing them with a painful hindsight that leaves even Odysseus' own supreme heroic achievement as a warrior as pitiable as the experience of his victims.

10. Alcinous' response and question

Once again, however, Alcinous has been watchful, and intervenes to cut short the entertainment. But this time even his tact and discretion has run out of patience. This time he makes no diplomatic excuses for ending the cabaret prematurely; on the contrary, he draws

his guest's grief to the attention of all. He delicately reminds the stranger how much they've already done for him with their ship and gifts, and how little he's trusted them with in return. In the light of this, it's time for some frank questions: who is the stranger, and where does he come from? At the very least, they'll need to know where to take him.

The Phaeacians' invisible telepathic ships are a startling detail, and the most dramatic confirmation yet of the slightly unearthly nature of the Phaeacians' society and culture. But if the Phaeacians' world is a kind of halfway house between men and gods, the real world and the fantastic, there are hints in what follows that the gateway may be about to close. Sooner or later, at some point between this night and the audience's own time, the Phaeacians will be cut entirely off from the rest of the human world by their own ancestor and patron Poseidon; and the audience know what Alcinous still doesn't, that the passenger they've so generously promised to carry is Poseidon's own bitter enemy. (All this will come home to roost in book 13.)

Alcinous expands on his original question, in terms that call more for a full-blown story of travel and the nature of his experience at Troy. His opening words echo Odysseus' own on first waking in Scheria at 6.120–1, and frame Odysseus' ensuing narrative in terms specifically of civilisation and barbarity. There's been a lot of talk in this book about how well Odysseus will speak of the Phaeacians in the future among distant peoples; now it's confirmed that the Phaeacians are just as interested in the reputation of other lands.

The topic of Troy is more delicately broached, because Alcinous already knows it's a sensitive topic. He significantly refrains from asking whether the stranger himself was actually there, even though he's strongly implied this on a couple of occasions already. Instead, he nudges him to speak with a prompt about loved ones lost – a rather shrewd reading of his guest's emotional state as described in the earlier simile, though even he hasn't grasped the object of the stranger's grief. The book ends, tantalisingly, with Alcinous' questions hanging in the air. The answer will take up the next four books, whose fame probably outweighs the whole of the rest of Homer put together.

ODYSSEY 9–12: ODYSSEUS' TRAVELS

We come now to the most famous section of the *Odyssey*: Odysseus' long narrative of his extraordinary adventures between leaving Troy and arriving on Ogygia. This is the most exotic and colourful part of the poem, and its rather different texture from the rest is marked by the introduction of a new storytelling voice, that of Odysseus himself. But it'd be a mistake to see these books as the heart of the poem, as modern retellings so often present them. All this is merely preparation for the greater challenge to come when Odysseus finally reaches Ithaca.

The eighth book ended on a cascade of questions from Alcinous: who is the stranger, what is his connection to Troy, and where have his travels taken him? These four books are Odysseus' answer, in ten major episodes if we count the whole sequence of Book 11 as a single long episode. At the end of book 8, Odysseus is on the eve of the final leg of his journey home. But he hasn't told his hosts their destination, or his identity, or how he came to wash up on their shore in the first place. Even Homer's audience have only had glimpses of what happened between the departure from Troy and Odysseus' arrival on Calypso's isle. We've heard several times of a man-eating monster called a Cyclops, and at the start of book 1 we had a glimpse of a pivotal episode involving Odysseus' crew and the cattle of the sun-god Hyperion. But what exactly happened, and how do these episodes fit into Odysseus' story? What happened to his ships, and their crews? How did he end up on Ogygia? Now, at last, these questions and many others will be answered.

It's in these books above all that we see the diplomat-warrior of the *Iliad* transformed into the hero of the *Odyssey*, as little by little he finds himself painfully forced to unlearn the heroic simplicities of the *Iliad*'s warrior ways in favour of a more complex and thoughtful set of survival skills for the unpredictable world the war has left behind. In particular, we'll see how the warrior's impulse to violence, instant retaliation, and the pursuit of glory is retrained into endurance, calculation, and disguise – all skills he'll need for the decisive showdown back in Ithaca.

Almost everything in these tremendous books is a highlight, but if I had to single out one from each it would probably be:

- the cave of the Cyclops
- Circe's palace
- the ghosts of Agamemnon and Achilles
- Scylla and Charybdis.

BOOK 9. THE CYCLOPS

Most of this great book is taken up with the pivotal episode of the Cyclops, whose special importance we'll come to shortly. But before we get to that point there are two important shorter episodes that prepare the ground not just for the Cyclops but for the nature of the adventures to come. It's in this book that Odysseus crosses the boundary between the real world of the known Mediterranean and the unknown lands beyond, where the challenges he faces are increasingly unearthly and the heroic skills he's honed in this world seem ever more out of place.

A. Odysseus' prologue

Odysseus professes no enthusiasm at all for telling his story. He draws a contrast between their present situation, which as he points out is as close to contentment as the Homeric world can imagine, and the sufferings he'll have to revisit in telling his story.

Note the reference to the bard as an essential part of the ideal scene of festivity. This isn't just professional self-advertisement by the poet (though that's surely part of it) – it's part of a series of comparisons of Odysseus himself to a bard in his role as storyteller, something we'll look at more systematically in the upcoming session on Stories and Storytelling. Like a bard, Odysseus hesitates over where to begin such a huge and seemingly shapeless story; and like a

bard, he prefaces his narrative with a short overview of the story as a whole, with glimpses of key episodes (here Circe and Calypso).

Notice in all this that Odysseus doesn't directly answer Alcinous' question about Troy at all. In a sense, telling his name is all the answer they need, because we've seen in the previous book that the Phaeacians already know who Odysseus is. But like his giveaway tears at Demodocus' songs, it's also one of a series of indications that the war itself is still too painful to be revisited. We'll see the culmination of this series in the emotional and thematic climax of book 11, where he comes literally face-to-face with the ghosts of his Iliadic past.

In revealing his identity at last, Odysseus indulges in a famous and telling piece of self-characterisation. (If you look at the bottom of the page in the printed edition of Shewring, there's my favourite couplet from Chapman's translation here.) He could have described himself, as he does earlier in his wanderings, as "sacker of cities" – but as far as this later, wiser Odysseus is concerned, his main claim to *kleos* is not his war-skills but his cunning. In fact, though, most of his eloquence here is devoted not to his own qualities but to the celebrated description of his home island, which we looked at in detail in the seminar on Ithaca. It's a more personal, emotionally-charged version of what the narrator told us of his driving motivation in the poem's opening lines: he wants to get home, and even goddesses (or, he might have added, Alcinous' offer of Nausicaa in marriage) can't offer a tempting enough alternative.

B. The Cicones

The departure from Troy has already been told in more detail by Nestor at 3.130–64, and Odysseus picks up the story from a later point, after his second and final departure. Rather than island-hopping across the Aegean as Nestor and Diomedes did, Odysseus takes the northern coast-hugging route via Thrace. This is enemy territory: the Cicones are Trojan allies at *Iliad* 2.846 and 17.73, and Odysseus sees them as legitimate targets for a raid. But it backfires horribly, in a foretaste of things to come – though it also, quite unexpectedly, furnishes the means to save his life at a later and still more desperate juncture in the book.

The episode of the Cicones is brief but full of importance. It's Odysseus' last contact with the known world of the *Iliad*, before the storm that blows him off the map and into another kind of story entirely. As such, it has an Iliadic realism that contrasts with the fantastic variations we'll see in later episodes. But the basic pattern is established early on: tensions between Odysseus and his men, who won't be ordered; perils in the pursuit of gain; the perils of short-term thinking and lack of forward planning. We'll see these elements echoed repeatedly in the more exotic episodes that follow.

C. The storm

The opening sentence here is one that will recur like grim refrain after each new disaster, and on this first occasion of casualties Odysseus lingers affectingly over the funerary custom of calling three times on the dead to guide them to their resting place. But now comes another of the storm scenes that the *Odyssey* uses to blow its characters off the map of the known world entirely. On the map, Cape Maleia is the south-east tip of the Peloponnese, notorious for bad sailing, and you'll see Cythera marked as the island that lies off it to the south. Odysseus' ships are being blown south and west past the Greek mainland and islands into uncharted waters beyond.

D. The Lotus-Eaters

The short but famous episode that follows develops further some of the patterns seen in the Cicones incident. Odysseus' ships make landfall, and a crisis develops with the natives. But this time the threat is the more sinister for its complete non-violence. The Lotus-Eaters mean no harm; the threat they pose is to motive and morale, and warrior skills are irrelevant. On this occasion Odysseus takes firm charge, and his men are saved; but the eerie loss of the desire to return home is a disturbing forerunner of other temptations Odysseus and his crew will face along the way.

In all this, the element of fantasy is kept to a minimum. The Lotus-Eaters may be strange, but at least they're human, and Odysseus' skills of leadership are adequate to the challenge. In the great episode that follows, there will be no such consolations.

E. The Cyclops

The Cyclops sequence is probably the single most famous episode in Homer, and the *Odyssey* has already trailed it more extensively than any other adventure. (Have a look at Shewring's index under "Cyclops", and you'll see no fewer than four earlier mentions, as well as some back-references in the later books.) Though all ten of the episodes in Odysseus' story of his travels are significant for the poem's overall plotting and themes, this is the one that's most densely packed with implications for things that happen elsewhere. In particular:

- It's the origin of Poseidon's vendetta against Odysseus.
- It's the most comprehensive analysis of civilisation and savagery as the *Odyssey* wants us to understand them.
- It's the definitive demonstration of the Odyssean superiority of brain over brawn and thought over impulse.
- It's the episode whose plotting most closely anticipates and rehearses the challenge that will face Odysseus in Ithaca.

For the first time, Odysseus uses his benefit of hindsight to tease us with an introductory glimpse of things to come. He knows from Alcinous' remark at 7.206 that his Phaeacian audience are familiar with the Cyclops race, and he gives a concise sketch here of the main ways in which their culture differs from that of civilised peoples. Specifically, they lack:

- **agriculture** – they're pastoralists, who herd, gather, and even make cheese and wine, but don't farm arable crops;
- **communal living** – including everything from the construction of artificial shelters to collectively agreed and enforced codes of behaviour.

Both of these features, as we'll see, play a crucial role in the plot.

1. The island

This is a carefully-plotted episode, and small details turn out to be an important part of the story. The idyllic offshore island is just such a detail. Odysseus' trained eye instantly assesses its possibilities for settlement, agriculture, and seafaring, so why haven't the Cyclopes colonised it as any Greek would? Because they *haven't learned to use boats*. Why should this be important? Wait and see…

(a) day 1: arrival by night

None of the foregoing description is apparent to Odysseus and his men on arrival, because they sail in under the cover of darkness and in an atmosphere of delicate mystery. Notice how Odysseus is subtly marking a distinction between what he knows with hindsight as a narrator and what he and his men knew at the time. This distinction is always an important device of suspense in first-person narration, and we're about to see it put to brilliant use.

(b) day 2: hunting, feasting

Day comes, and the untapped bounty of the island is just what the Greeks need to restore their spirits. They hunt, feast, and drink the proceeds of their Ciconian raid. (Notice the twelve ships, the same number as in the Catalogue at *Iliad* 2.637.) But across the strait they hear the sounds of sheep and goats, and see smoke rising: unmistakable sounds of habitation. Who are these mysterious neighbours?

(c) day 3: the expedition ship

Odysseus takes the decision to investigate with a single ship, while the rest of the fleet remain behind in the island's natural harbour. His speech frames a now-familiar question, heard from his lips on waking in Scheria and from Alcinous at the end of the previous book. It's not just curiosity: if the natives are civilised, they may be a means of getting home, or at least of knowing where they've landed.

2. The mainland and the cave

The Cyclops' cave is close to the shore: another detail that will prove important for the plotting of the escape. Notice again how Odysseus supplies from hindsight things he and his men couldn't know at the time: the nature of the cave's inhabitant, his character, his lifestyle, and even his appearance. These ominous details rack up the suspense while also planting seeds that will bear fruit later in the plot: Polyphemus' isolation from the other Cyclopes; his routine of keeping the animals in the cave overnight.

(a) the wine of Maron

Odysseus again minimises the risk by leaving most of his crew behind, and in a classic Odyssean touch equips himself against possible danger not with a spear, but with a skin of wine. If his host is civilised, it'll make a fine gift; but it could also serve a different purpose if, as Odysseus suspects from a glance at the cave, they have to deal with someone rather less pliable.

The story of the wine is an important point of its function. Ismarus was the city of the Cicones sacked at 39ff., but now we learn of an incident during the sack that Odysseus didn't report at the time. Odysseus spared Maron, the local priest of Apollo, and his family, and was repaid with treasures including this secret wine, which he'd never have found unaided and is a reward for his piety and mercy. As we'll see, it's Maron's wine that will end up saving his life.

(b) the cave

Now a twist of suspense: for all Odysseus' forebodings, the cave is deserted, because its owner spends the daylight hours tending his flocks. There's nothing whatever to stop Odysseus and his men from making off with all the animals and cheese they can transport before the landlord returns. Nothing, that is, but Odysseus' own insistence on playing by civilised rules for possible higher advantage. His forebodings should have warned him against this, together with the urgings of his men; but like so many warnings in the *Odyssey*, they go fatally unheeded.

3. Enter Polyphemus

So Odysseus and his men install themselves in the cave, help themselves to cheese, and wait. For six of the thirteen, this will be their last mistake.

(a) his routine

The Cyclops' arrival is brilliantly told. His actual size is never directly stated; all we get is what's implied from the crash of his mighty bundle of firewood, the men's reactions, and the size of the stone he uses to seal the cave. He's so much bigger than the humans that he goes through his entire evening routine before he finally notices their presence in the cave. But as usual the details are anything but casual. The fire, the presence of the flocks overnight, and especially the stone are crucial details in the story. If only the Cyclops can move the stone, then Odysseus and his men are trapped at least until morning; and it's going to be a grisly night.

(b) his question

His opening speech gives nothing away, but a shrewd observer of the *Odyssey*'s protocols of hospitality will know that he's broken a fundamental rule. What?

A civilised host will only question his guest at the end of an elaborate series of welcome rituals concluding with a meal. (Of course, Odysseus and his men have rather pre-empted this by helping themselves to their host's cheeses; such freeloading is looking dangerously like that of the suitors.)

The name Polyphemus, incidentally, only turns up a couple of times in the text, and isn't actually mentioned here until almost the end of the episode – perhaps a deliberate narrative strategy to dehumanise the monster until after his blinding.

(c) Odysseus' supplication

Odysseus responds to this unnerving interrogation with the best diplomacy he can muster. He quickly drops the names "Troy", "Zeus", and "Agamemnon" into the conversation, as likeliest to carry weight with any civilised host. Then he follows up with a claim of suppliant status, such as we've seen work so well in Scheria. A little cheekily, he tacks on a reminder that good hosts give gifts; but he's also careful to lay it on three times over that the rights of guests are protected by Zeus.

(d) Polyphemus' response

Polyphemus is unimpressed by the attempt to cow him with the fear of Zeus. Like the suitors in the Ithacan assembly, he riskily scorns the suggestion of supernatural punishment. He also seems indifferent to the *kleos* of the sackers of Troy. Both of Odysseus' tests of civilised sensibility have resoundingly failed. But Polyphemus fancies himself as something of a trickster, and probes for information about Odysseus' ship: a sinister hint of violent ulterior intent.

(e) Odysseus' lie

Of course Odysseus is more than a match for this kind of crude fishing, but it's one of those moments where the undercurrents of meaning are sufficiently subtle to need spelling out by the narrator. Odysseus explains to his audience that he saw through the Cyclops' question, and that he in turn framed a counter-stratagem: the first of his crafty lies, claiming to have been shipwrecked. As well as diverting the monster's attention from his ship, this conceals the important information that he has in fact a ready means of escape nearby, if only he can get out of the cave.

To the audience, of course, there's an extra touch of irony in the reference to Poseidon and shipwreck, as we've just witnessed exactly such a scene in book 5.

(f) the first pair eaten

What comes next is shocking not least for its suddenness. All the narrative signs have indicated an extended conversation under way, and at least a pretence of civilised behaviour on the part of the monster. Now, without warning, he terminates the conversation with a deed of compound horror. He executes not one but two of the humans, carelessly and brutally; dismembers them with his bare hands; eats them, raw; and consumes even the inedible guts and bones, as an animal would. It may seem a bit redundant to point out that civilised people carve and cook their meat, sacrifice to the gods first, and leave the parts that are unfit for consumption. But Odysseus is demonstrating how basic human taboos against murder and cannibalism are closely linked with more coded kinds of civilised behaviour, and that a sentient creature who'll eat raw meat whole is declaring himself subhuman no less clearly than he is by murder and cannibalism.

Notice the tiny but telling simile comparing the victims to puppies. The *Odyssey* likes to use animal similes for pathos; there's a couple of great ones in the coming books.

(g) Odysseus' reaction

Now comes a classic Odyssean moment. The Cyclops confidently lies down for the night, indifferent to any threat posed by his remaining prisoners. Odysseus' first impulse is to strike back as a warrior: he still has a sword, and knows enough about anatomy to guess how he could do some damage even to this gigantic creature. But then he realises there's a problem: only the Cyclops can move the stone. If they kill him, their deaths will be lingering but certain. What's needed is not brute heroic force, but endurance, calculation, and daring.

4. The second day

What follows is a textbook demonstration of Odyssean thinking in action. All the elements are in place: the problem to be solved, the contents of the cave, the Cyclops' daily routine. Somehow Odysseus must improvise a way out from the elements available; but the clock is ticking, and the longer he dithers the higher the toll.

(a) morning: the second pair eaten

This is shown right away by another brilliant, brutal demonstration of the Cyclops' savagery. In a grotesque parody of pastoral routine, he stokes up the fire, does the milking, has his breakfast, and goes whistling off to pasture. But the breakfast is another two of Odysseus' comrades, dispatched as casually as if they were muffins. Yet despite the horror, Odysseus is watching and noting every detail of this morning ritual: somewhere, somehow, there's something here he can use…

(b) Odysseus' plan

In what (thanks to the *Odyssey*) has become a standard way of spinning out the suspense in such plots, we're not told what the plan is. Instead, we watch bemused as Odysseus organises a set of strange preparations, using materials available in the cave: part of the stick, the fire, a pile of animal dung. Only when the preparations are complete does he reveal his plan (and perhaps also to his baffled crew at this point): the stake is for the monster's eye. But how will that help? And how will they get it there?

As you may have noticed, Homer never actually spells out that the Cyclopes only have one eye – though that was how their name ("circle-eye") was understood in antiquity, and this one at least clearly just has the one.

(c) evening: the third pair eaten

Now the evening ritual is repeated, confirming the regularity of the routine on which Odysseus is counting. The only exception is that tonight he brings the male animals into the cave as well, which will turn out useful for Odysseus' plan of escape. Otherwise, it's the same as before: milking, lambs and kids to teat, and then dinner. The twelve who entered the cave with Odysseus are now down to six.

(d) the wine

This time, Odysseus suppresses his horror and revulsion; it's time to play his part. Again we're not told what the plan is; Odysseus hasn't mentioned Maron's wine since they entered the cave. But now he offers it gratis to their cannibal host to wash down the remains of two of the men he was supposed to be protecting. What's going on? We notice he can't resist a backhanded compliment to the Cyclops' savagery: somehow the monster's scorn for civilised norms is going to be the means of his destruction.

Sure enough, Polyphemus doesn't even pour a libation, but swigs the whole bowl immoderately down, and asks for more; and in a crude parody of the protocols of hospitality, he demands his guest's name and promises him a special guest-gift of his own. (The Greek word Shewring translates as "favour" is *xeinion*, "guest-present".) If we can't guess what this is, Odysseus can.

(e) the Noman game

This is a famous moment, though it's cleverer in the Greek than it comes over as in English, where personal names only have one case-ending. Odysseus gives his name as *Outis* in the nominative and *Outin* in the accusative, whereas the word for "nobody" has the accusative *outina*. They're only the same word if you use them as the subject or complement of a sentence (as in "My name is Noman"). But when Odysseus, picking his words carefully, immediately goes on to say "Noman is what my mother and father call me" he's using the Greek accusative *Outin*, and that's the form that the Cyclops picks up in his reply. It's only when he tries to put it back into the nominative at the end of the book that he discovers the unfortunate double meaning.

My favourite translation of this wordplay, incidentally, comes from a children's television version by Tony Robinson and Richard Curtis in the 1980s, where Odysseus gave his name as *No Juan*. "It's Spanish," he explains, "for 'Not John'."

(f) the blinding

As the Cyclops passes out, the narrative enters top gear. The wonderfully revolting detail of the vomited bits of undigested human flesh helps to build up the horror, and makes what follows as much a test of Odysseus' leadership as of strength and courage. Then the five-man

team thrusts the red-hot stake into the eye with a twisting motion, and an unsparing description of the gory consequences is adorned with two extended similes to raise the imaginative temperature still further.

Incidentally, the printed edition of Shewring has "goblets of human flesh", which is an arresting image but I don't think can be what he intended, so I've quietly corrected it here…

(g) the Noman ruse pays off

One of the first things we learned about the Cyclopes was that they don't live in communities; each household is, in effect, an independent state. Neverthless, Polyphemus does have neighbours, and his screams bring them running to his cave. But the cave is sealed, and the only one who can explain why Polyphemus is screaming is Polyphemus himself. Again the Greek works better than the translation here. What Polyphemus actually says is simply "Noman's craft, and no violence, is killing me" – meaning that Odysseus/Outis is indeed killing him, but by craft rather than by open violence. But in Greek this sounds like a pair of negatives: "no man is killing me by either craft or violence", which is enough to send the dim-witted Cyclopes back to bed. A human community would probably take more interest; here again Odysseus has taken advantage of a sub-civilised feature of Cyclops culture.

Notice the revelation of the Cyclops' name, Polyphemus. Odysseus only ever calls him "the Cyclops"; to Odysseus he's a monster first and an individual second.

(h) waiting for dawn

Polyphemus still thinks he can outwit the humans. He makes a great show of unsealing the cave by rolling away the stone, but plants himself in the doorway to intercept anyone who makes a run for it. Odysseus sees that if they simply try to escape among the flocks they'll be caught by the giant's groping fingers. But he's only examining between the sheep, not beneath them; and as luck would have it, this night he's brought the big rams in as well as the ewes. Knowing that his daily routine involves releasing the flocks to pasture, Odysseus lashes his men in place with the withies the Cyclops has been using to plait his curd-baskets, and clings on to the largest ram by main strength, waiting through the long night to see if the plan will work.

5. The third day

Never has the Homeric dawn-formula been more dramatically used. Odysseus knows that the pastoral world lives to a set routine which will be triggered by the arrival of dawn, and is relying on that for his escape. But he also knows that Polyphemus is on guard against the very escape plan he's devised.

(a) escape

Sure enough, when day comes, the pastoral routine kicks in. The ewes, their milking neglected, bleat their complaints, while the rams head out to pasture through the guarded entrance. Polyphemus feels their backs, but doesn't think to check underneath, and six of the seven escape before the heart-stopping moment of suspense as he lingers suspiciously over the alpha ram.

(b) the Cyclops' speech

This is a wonderfully dramatic moment. There's an unexpected touch of pastoral sensitivity in the first part of the speech, which stirs a moment of pathos and sympathy. But then he reminds us once more of his brutal side, in the savage threats delivered, with heavy irony, mere inches from the lurking Odysseus.

(c) back to the ship

Once past the courtyard gate, Odysseus and his men seem to be safe. In a neat bit of retaliation, they herd the Cyclops' own sheep on to the ship. There's an uncomfortable moment as the crew back at the ship realise half of the party is missing; but Odysseus curtails lamentation, knowing they won't be safe till they're out at sea where the Cyclops can't pursue them, and that their wailing is the surest way to alert the Cyclops to the existence of their ship.

(d) Odysseus' boast I

Now comes the turning-point of the poem. Once the ship is safely away from the shore, Odysseus allows himself a moment of triumph. His attitude is an interesting combination of Iliadic heroics and Odyssean moralising. On the one hand, his hero's concern for *kleos* won't let him leave his feat unrecognised; but he's also keen to point out that the Cyclops earned his own punishment by his contempt for Zeus and his code of hospitality.

(e) the rock throw

But Odysseus' forethought has failed him. The Cyclops may not be able to see him or pursue the ship out to sea, but he can locate the source of the voice and throw things towards it. It's a good shot, which just misses the ship but washes it back to shore, and they only escape by concerted and vigorous seamanship.

(f) the crew try to stop Odysseus

Odysseus shrugs off this unnerving warning, and simply waits till they're out of missile range before taunting the Cyclops a second time. Even his crew are appalled: the first time he did this he nearly got them all killed, and the only thing that saved them was keeping silent so the monster couldn't get a bearing. How can Odysseus be sure they're out of range even now?

(g) Odysseus' boast II

But Odysseus is driven now by anger rather than reason, and issues the second of his taunts. This time there's no suggestion of driving home a pertinent moral lesson; this is sheer vaunting for reputation's sake, to make sure his deed is known under his real name. (Notice he's still "Odysseus the city-sacker", an identity that seems a long way behind him in Scheria.) But in releasing his true name, he gives the Cyclops a weapon that will be turned against him to devastating effect – destroying not just his scout ship but his entire fleet.

(h) the Cyclops' response

Polyphemus recognises the name as the fulfilment of an old Cyclops oracle. In his bitter touch of wit we get another glimpse of the tension between traditional Iliadic values and the qualities Odysseus is already starting to favour in order to survive in this unpredictable postwar world. Polyphemus was fooled because he assumed that anyone who could put out his eye would have to be a mighty hero; he hadn't reckoned on cowardly subterfuge. Yet he rather undercuts his own argument by once more trying to out-trick Odysseus, using the renewed offer of *xeinia* or guest-gifts. Obviously, Odysseus is hardly likely to fall for this when he saw through it the first time. But Polyphemus also lets slip for the first time that his father is none other than Poseidon himself. In boasting of his exploit against a son of a god, Odysseus is playing with fire.

(i) Odysseus' boast III

Odysseus responds with his final taunt, which takes him to the edge of blasphemy. Whether Poseidon will heal Polyphemus' eye is up to him, as even the Cyclops himself admits; but it's certainly not for Odysseus to presume that he won't. This "if only I could know X as surely as I know Y" formulation is a familiar pattern of rash boast that we'll see again from Melanthius at 17.247ff. Up until now, Polyphemus has been the one scorning the name and power of the gods; now, the roles are unsettlingly reversed.

(j) the Cyclops' prayer

Polyphemus prays to Poseidon in terms that we'll hear again from Tiresias at 11.114–5. This is the definitive formulation of Poseidon's curse on Odysseus: to deny Odysseus' homecoming unless it's already fated; and in that case to enforce instead four conditions on his return. Two of these have already been fulfilled by the time Odysseus tells the story; the third is about to be accomplished; and the fourth has ominously to be confronted. Notice that Polyphemus *doesn't* pray for healing: that, as he's acknowledged, is up to the god.

(k) back to the island

Odysseus' men were right to be concerned about the range of the Cyclops' missiles; his final throw only just falls short, though it has the effect this time of propelling them away from

rather than towards the shore. The episode is rather brilliantly wrapped up by a morale-restoring meal on the shore at which Odysseus sacrifices to Zeus the very ram on which he escaped. But ominously the sacrifice is rejected, and the book closes with a series of formulaic phrases that culminate in what by now is becoming something of a sinister refrain.

How does Odysseus know that the prayer to Poseidon was granted, and that Zeus rejected the sacrifice? The first is easy: he's told as much by Teiresias at 11.97ff. But what about Zeus? Odysseus could have been told something by Calypso, as with the rather clumsy explanation of another piece of private divine information at 12.389–90. But it's more likely to be inference by the later, wiser Odysseus who's telling the story to the Phaeacians in the light of subsequent events. In fact there's no indication Zeus ever did get involved in Odysseus' fate. He tends to get blamed by default, especially for storms, but the main narrative has been careful to distance Zeus from Odysseus' sufferings ahead of the climax of book 12. We don't have to believe everything Odysseus tells us, even if he does.

BOOK 10. CIRCE

The tenth book follows the same pattern as the ninth: two short but important episodes at the front of the book, followed by a major one told at much fuller length which has been carefully trailed by tantalising mentions in earlier books.

The sequence of episodes continues to raise the stakes and the prominence of the supernatural element. In book 9, Odysseus suffered nothing worse than loss of bearings, a few casualties from each ship, and a single hair-raising encounter with a half-divine monster. By the end of this book, Odysseus will have seen and lost Ithaca, lost eleven of his twelve ships, and found himself for the first time tangling directly with the gods themselves. Throughout, the tensions we've seen developing between Odysseus and his men will come increasingly to the surface, culminating in a near-mutiny which ominously prefigures the climactic events on Thrinacia in book 12.

A. Aeolus

The episode of Aeolus and the bag of winds is the point where Odysseus' fortunes turn decisively and dramatically for the worse. It's a carefully constructed episode for its purpose, beginning in hospitality and luxury that puts even the Phaeacian court to shame, and ending in the most devastating reversal in any of Odysseus' adventures.

1. the island realm

After the horrible travesty of hospitality under the Cyclops, Odysseus' next port of call seems unnervingly and fantastically opposite. With Aeolus and his eerie island kingdom we're back among mortals, but only just. The royal family is close to the gods, but so cut off from the rest of humanity that the island is disconnected both physically and socially from the rest of the earth. Scheria has been unearthly, but at least its inhabitants communicate with the rest of humankind. Aeolus' family marry incestuously, exclude the rest of humanity with impenetrable fortifications, and spend their days in a permanent feast like a moment of mortal bliss frozen in time.

2. reception and gift

Odysseus is welcomed, and pumped eagerly by his host for tales of Troy – a reassuring contrast with the Cyclops' indifference to the very name. Like any truly civilised host, he presents his guest with a generous *xeinion* or guest-gift on departure: nothing less than the means of a fair voyage all the way back to Ithaca. But Odysseus as narrator injects an ominous glimpse of the twist to come, the word "folly" an inadvertent and sinister echo of the opening lines of the epic.

3. back at sea

Throughout book 9, Odysseus has trusted his crewmen less and less, by the end taking all responsibility on himself. It was his men who, by their disobedience, brought on the massacre by the Cicones, and members of his crew who succumbed to the lotus fruit. By the end of the

book, Odysseus was following his own anger and pride against the urgings of his own men. What would his men have done if he'd trusted them with the secret of Aeolus' bag? We can't know, but even Odysseus should have realised he can't steer a ship unaided for nine days straight without sleeping. A memorable detail is the sight of figures and fires on the shore of Ithaca: for Odysseus, the signal that at last he's home and can sleep, but for the audience a poignant glimpse of how close he and his doomed crews came to safety.

4. return and rebuff

The sting in the story is the change in the demeanour of Aeolus, until now a model of generosity as a host. Once the winds blow them back to his island, Aeolus correctly diagnoses that his guest is no friend to the gods his patrons; and the very closeness to heaven that made him hospitable before now turns him implacably against the hero. As Aeolus' response emphasises, it doesn't matter that it was the crewmen rather than Odysseus who were primarily responsible; bad luck in itself is a sign of divine disfavour, and someone somewhere has it in for Odysseus.

B. The Laestrygonians

The strange episode that follows has a bodycount out of all proportion to its brevity. It's now that Odysseus loses eleven of his twelve ships, again through an error in judgment by his crews. The actual narrative is full of incidental oddities – beginning with the perplexing description of the mysteriously long Laestrygonian day, which is usually taken as a half-understood traveller's tale of the far north of Europe.

1. the harbour

Unlike the introduction to the Cyclops episode, we're told nothing of the nature of the inhabitants as Odysseus' ships sail into the striking natural harbour encircled by cliffs, and see smoke rising inland. As we'll see, this is all part of a narrative strategy of mystery followed by shocking surprise. But Odysseus has forebodings, as he did when he packed Maron's wine on his scouting party to the Cyclops' cave; and the audience is by now trained to anticipate the worst.

2. the expedition inland

This time Odysseus stays with the ships, and sends a trio of scouts to make contact with the source of the smoke. What follows is a grotesque parody of the encounter with Nausicaa: a princess encountered at a stream, who politely gives directions to the palace where her queenly mother presides near the assembly-place where the king consults with his elders. But though the princess seems to be normal, the queen is a monstrous ogre, and her husband a Cyclops-style cannibal; in a couple of lines, the episode has transformed from a replay of Nausicaa into one of Polyphemus.

3. slaughter and escape

The very rapidity of the storytelling here is an important part of the point. At this sudden moment of grisly reversal, everything happens fast. Like the Cicones, the Laestrygonians muster in pursuit; and like the Cyclops, they begin to pelt the ships with rocks. The inviting natural harbour has become a death-trap, and once again the human victims are pathetically reduced to animal status in a poignant passing simile. Only Odysseus' ship, moored outside the harbour mouth, escapes. Of the twelve ships he took to Troy and kept safe through ten years of war, eleven have just been wiped out at a stroke.

C. Circe

Like the Cyclops, Circe has had a couple of mentions earlier in the story. At 8.446ff., she taught Odysseus the knot he used to secure his Phaeacian treasures for the voyage home, and we saw at the start of book 9 that she played a Calypso-like role in the early stages of the hero's travels. But the details have been held back, and the brilliant episode that follows

marks a new phase in Odysseus' perils, as he finds himself for the first time pitted against an antagonist who is not monstrous but actually divine.

1. days 1–2: landfall and grief

By now the formula of mixed relief and sorrow is becoming a resonant refrain, and it's not surprising that the Laestrygonian slaughter should demoralise Odysseus' crews to the extent that they do nothing for two days and nights after landfall. As narrator, Odysseus ramps up the suspense by telling us ahead of time a little of the island's ruler and her mortal and immortal kin. But as a character in his own story, Odysseus knows nothing yet of what he's about to encounter.

2. day 3: the hunt and meal

As with the Cyclops' cave, it's Odysseus who takes the initiative to explore, but this time alone. From the beach, there's been no sign of human habitation, but from a height Odysseus is able to see the by now familiar (and ominous) tell-tale of smoke rising inland. Resisting the temptation to go and investigate, he puts his responsibility to his crew first: a decision rewarded with an opportune kill to furnish a morale-boosting meal. Notice the casual turn of expression suggesting the hand, and pity, of a god behind this turn for the better, too neat to be entirely accidental. It seems just a way of speaking, but it's an artful anticipation of the role Hermes will play in the coming encounter with the formidable Circe.

Odysseus doesn't hurry things; he lets the venison meal take up the rest of the day, knowing all too well that his news about the island will call for strength and courage.

3. day 4

Sure enough, Odysseus' brisk report immediately reminds them of the last two times they followed a trail inland towards a source of smoke. If he leads a scouting party himself, it'll be like the Cyclops all over again; if he sends others, it'll recall the Laestrygonians. But as he points out, they have to do something; they don't even know where they are.

(a) Eurylochus' expedition

Odysseus' solution is to draw lots between two groups, and the figure of 22 in each group allows us to calculate the size of Odysseus' original band. With Odysseus and Eurylochus, we have 46 surviving members of his ship; add six killed by the Cicones and six by the Cyclops, and that gives us 58 (plus possibly the spokesman killed by the Laestrygonians, if he was from Odysseus' ship). Multiply by 12 for the original number of ships, and Odysseus sailed with just under 700 men. 60 or so is at the low end of the crew numbers in the *Iliad*'s Catalogue, but presumably there'll have been some Ithacan casualties during the war.

This is the first we hear of Eurylochus, who'll play an increasingly important role from here on as the emerging ringleader of opposition to Odysseus' command among the crew. (Later tradition made him Odysseus' brother-in-law, husband to his sister Ctimene.) In an unusual move, it's Eurylochus' point of view we track in the great sequence that follows, to which of course Odysseus himself wasn't a witness. But at the same time, Odysseus as narrator drops in bits of information none of them could have been aware of at the time: that the animals' unnatural behaviour is the result of Circe's magic potions, and that the singing from within the palace is Circe at her weaving. Despite this explanation, the description of animals and palace accentuates the eerie, unsettling abnormality and mystery of the place.

A second individual sailor, Polites, is introduced as a counter to Eurylochus, who alone hangs back when all the rest go in. Now we switch viewpoints again, and follow what Polites and the others encountered inside: instant and luxurious hospitality, including what Stanford's 1946 commentary memorably describes as "the kind of thick, sweet sticky mess that Greeks still love". But the yummy dessert has a dark side-effect, triggered by a tap from Circe's wand; and in the pigsty, with a nice touch of irony, they face a rather different standard of fare. (We're left to wonder about the origin of the other animals on the island, including the deer they ate yesterday – though Homer never enlightens us one way or the other.)

(b) Eurylochus and Odysseus I

All this, of course, is unknown to the waiting Eurylochus, who knows only that 22 men went in and none came out. His report back to Odysseus is a further step in the uniquely complex ballet of narrative voices and perspectives, as he relays a first-person account of what he himself witnessed that of course leaves out all the details that Odysseus supplied as narrator from his later knowledge. The result is that Odysseus is left with the bare minimum to go on: there's something female in the palace, and that it's done something unthinkable to his companions.

Odysseus doesn't hesitate. He doesn't ask any of the others to join him, but he does need Eurylochus to show him the way. But Eurylochus is too scared, and begs him to cut his losses as he did with the Laestrygonians. Odysseus doesn't press him. He sees that, whatever's up there, he'll have to face it alone.

(c) Odysseus' expedition

Hermes

As he approaches, an unexpected ally appears. As we've seen, it's an unstated rule of engagement in the *Odyssey* that only a god can defeat a god, so Odysseus needs some kind of divine help to go up against Circe. It can't be Athene, who's kept carefully out of view throughout these books; Odysseus can't know that his patron goddess hasn't abandoned him. But we've already seen Hermes intervening on Zeus's behalf with Calypso in book 5, and might even suspect (though Odysseus of course doesn't) the hand of Zeus behind his presence here. With his divine knowledge, he can brief Odysseus on what's happened so far and what Circe has in mind for him; and he can equip him with the means and instructions to counter it.

There's a strong folktale quality about all this. My nine-year-old was reading Grimm the other day, and remarked that the stories are full of mysterious strangers issuing bizarre instructions that have to be followed to the letter. But I have to confess a certain allergy to the kind of criticism that says "Oh, it's a folktale," as if that explained something. The mystery instructions here are crucial to the effect: Odysseus has no idea how to outplay a goddess, and her behaviour and motivation are completely incomprehensible to his mortal mind. All he can do is follow the instructions, however little sense they seem to make.

At the same time, this sequence is one of the most important bits of rehearsal for the showdown in Ithaca. It's here that Odysseus learns the important principle that sometimes your best strategy may be to walk openly into a trap set by a vastly more powerful enemy – so long as

(i) you know that it's a trap;

(ii) your enemy doesn't know that you know; and

(iii) you have something further up your sleeve that your enemy doesn't know about at all.

Notice how only a god can identify, pick, or even name the magic herb. We saw a few examples in the *Iliad* of special names used only by the gods; see *Iliad* 1.403–4, 2.813–4, 14.291, 20.74. The *Odyssey* only has a couple of these, and unlike the *Iliad* doesn't give an alternative mortal name; here and at 12.61, we're in a world beyond all mortal experience and understanding.

Circe outfoxed

Odysseus carries on alone, in a condensed version of the previous expedition's experiences. This time we don't get the animals, Circe's singing, or the ingredients of the potion; the narrative moves swiftly through the preliminaries to the moment of payoff, when Odysseus seizes the initiative.

Circe's reaction to the drawn sword is a wry travesty of a warrior's supplication, of the kind we've seen on the battlefield in the *Iliad* and will see again at the end of the slaughter in book 22. Circe of course is unarmed and female, but far more dangerous than any mortal warrior, and Hermes has already warned her passivity here is merely a ploy. She's still astute enough to deduce the stranger's identity, and lets slip that, like Calypso after her, she's had contact with Hermes on the subject. Whether or not she suspects his hand here, she flatters Odysseus that his resistance to her sorcery is entirely the result of his own inner strength. But

Odysseus remembers Hermes' advice, and insists that she bind herself with an oath. We see now where he got the idea for the similar oath he demanded of Calypso when she seemed so suddenly and suspiciously flexible about his departure.

While Odysseus and Calypso are romantically occupied, we're treated to an elegant interlude as Calypso's magical handnymphs configure the palace for a full Homeric hospitality sequence. There's an attractive contrast between the superhuman status of the personnel and the familiar domesticity of the actions they perform. But the ultimate point of the scene is Odysseus' reaction: he can't participate fully in the rituals of welcome until his men are restored to human form.

the retransformation

Circe is genuinely puzzled. She doesn't understand mortal feelings enough to realise why Odysseus is upset. We're reminded of Calypso's similar inability to make sense of Odysseus' desire to return to Ithaca and Penelope. Odysseus has to spell it out before she'll apply the antidote; but when she sees the emotional reunion, she has her first lesson in human feelings, and even seeks to make up by inviting the rest of the crew to join them.

Eurylochus and Odysseus II

Odysseus goes off alone to deliver the message, and a second scene of reunion follows, with a particularly touching instance of the *Odyssey*'s distinctive use of emotional similes. But Odysseus' lone appearance is an ominous sign, and they infer that their companions are lost for good. It's an awkward moment for Odysseus, because if he tells them the whole truth of what happened to their comrades they're hardly likely to want to risk the same. He opts for a highly edited version that omits the transformation entirely; but Eurylochus senses there's something they're not being told, and makes a surprisingly accurate guess at what it is, perhaps on the basis of the strange tame-wild animals they encountered. But the real sting in his speech is the claim that Odysseus' judgment can't be trusted. He showed that with the Cyclops, where half the men who trusted him ended up eaten.

This is of course completely true, and expressed in uncomfortably forceful language that stings Odysseus into something of an Achilles moment. Like Achilles in the quarrel with Agamemnon, he comes close to committing a disastrous *crime passionel*, and is only restrained by the intervention of an outside force: in this case, the reassurance of his men that Eurylochus speaks only for himself, and that the rest of them are prepared to follow Odysseus. Even Eurylochus, left behind on guard at their compromise suggestion, soon falls in; but the next time these tensions erupt the majority will jump the other way.

4. Circe's hospitality

The third in the sequence of tearful reunions vindicates Odysseus' judgment, and Circe intervenes with an open-ended offer: feast with her until they feel they've put their experiences of the past weeks behind them, however long it takes. As usual, her motives remain elusive, but it's tempting to see her invitation as a further sign of her human side awakening as she witnesses the effects of suffering on mortal spirits. (Unlike Calypso, Circe has a mortal brother, though Homer never makes anything of this, or indeed explains it.)

5. The quest of the dead

So a year passes in a lifestyle that recalls the perpetual feast on Aeolus' island with which the book opened. This, truly, is the way men would live if they were gods; but for once Odysseus' men seem stronger-minded than he, and their rebuke at the year's end suggests that Odysseus himself has caught a touch of Lotus-Eater syndrome in the goddess's bed.

Odysseus waits until the privacy and intimacy of night to make his move. He supplicates Circe as she once supplicated him, and reminds her of a promise (which hasn't been mentioned, so presumably was some time during the year) to help him reach home. In a clever touch, he reveals (or pretends?) that when her back's turned the men go back to their old lamenting ways – not for their past sufferings now, but because they're being kept from home.

(a) Circe's instructions

This is the argument that weighs with Circe: if it's no longer helping to stay, then of course they must go. But now the bombshell: what lies ahead is far more terrifying than anything they've faced on their way here, and the first stop on the homeward voyage is hell. Odysseus is devastated; his reaction here is the second time in this book that his morale has completely collapsed, and this time is even worse than when the bag of winds was opened and Ithaca lost behind them. The lines themselves turned up once before, to describe Menelaus' reaction at 4.538–41 to the news of his brother Agamemnon's murder; and this is Odysseus' own supreme moment of despair, at the point when his spirits are supposed to be most fully restored. If even he can't cope with the prospect of this latest ordeal, what hope for his men?

Nevertheless, when he recovers his powers of speech, Odysseus is sufficiently reconciled to the task to be able to ask practical questions. Circe responds with a fascinating description of the route and destination, and the ritual he needs to perform in order to speak to the ghost of the Theban prophet Teiresias. The kind of sacrifice offered here is a composite of various traditional forms of offering to the gods of earth and the dead, as opposed to the Olympian gods thought of as dwelling in the sky. The main elements are liquid offerings, "libations", poured into the earth, and animal sacrifices with the heads pointing downwards rather than up as in normal Olympian sacrifice, and with the corpses entirely burned rather than cooked and eaten. It's a bit of an oddity that the domain of the dead is here thought of as being at the edge of the earth rather than under it, but that seems just a way of incorporating it into Odysseus' sea-wanderings.

(b) departure

Needless to say, Odysseus isn't going to tell his men this until they're already on their way. Again he presents only a carefully-edited version, giving the misleading impression that their route to Ithaca is already mapped out, without actually telling any outright lies.

(c) Elpenor

The episode of Elpenor, the only accidental death in Homer, seems a little contrived and arbitrary here, but has some nice touches of pathos and retrospective guilt, as well as setting up an important episode in the next book. It's unclear whether Odysseus even registers what's happened; Homer covers himself by having Odysseus immediately deliver the devastating news about their destination as soon as they're gathered, leaving no room for anything as straightforward as a head count.

The final lines are one of the most effective book-endings in the poem. Like Athene in book 2, Circe has dealt with the practicalities unseen: a final touch of atmospheric mystery, as they embark on the eeriest adventure of them all.

BOOK 11. THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

This stunning book is the emotional high point of Odysseus' story and of the whole first half of the poem. In plot terms, its function is to provide Odysseus with the route home to Ithaca; but within the poem's larger dramatic architecture, it serves a number of more important purposes. It's in this book that Odysseus literally confronts the ghosts of his Iliadic past, and makes his first poignant contact with the loved ones he left behind in Ithaca. He'll learn for the first time about what awaits him on his return to Ithaca, and why he can so ill afford to lose time on the journey. And perhaps above all, he'll learn about life and death, and the real meaning of both for a warrior and hero: discoveries that will force him to confront some of the fundamental values of his world.

Aeschylus made this book the basis of the first play of his pioneering adaptation of the *Odyssey* as a tragic trilogy. It's the book that for him drew together both the plot strands and the big themes of the whole first half of the poem in a single, surprisingly intimate and stageable sequence of scenes. Structurally, the book is built around a series of interviews and other encounters with celebrity ghosts, in four main sections. First comes a trio of conversations with figures of immediate personal significance to Odysseus himself; then the strange and wonderful pageant of fourteen heroines from Theban and related myth; then a second trio of personal encounters, this time with figures from the *Iliad*; and the book closes

with a series of glimpses of the extremes of damnation and reward among the wider population of the dead, closing on a triumphantly unexpected note of optimism as Odysseus finds encouragement from the greatest of all Greek heroes.

It's only fair to note that book 11 is second only to the final book of the poem in the number and difficulty of the problems it raises. Like book 24, it's been a playground for "analyst" critics, and whatever you think of the analysts' detailed arguments it does seem to be partly or wholly a later phase of the poem's composition. In fact, some scenes seem to have been composed later than the rest of the same book; suspicion falls especially on the pageant of heroines in the middle of the book and the final section from Minos to Heracles, though it needs stressing that these are important and highly effective sequences as the book stands. There are also a number of problems of detail and consistency, both internally within the book and externally with the rest of the poem. I'll note these where they seem worth noting, though in general I think there are more interesting things to occupy us in this book than how it may or may not have been put together.

A. arrival and ritual

The journey itself is swiftly told, with a bit more help from the unseen hand of Circe. Atmospherically, the main descriptive emphasis is on the permanent darkness of the legendary Cimmerians whose land borders that of the dead. Circe's rather baffling topography of the rivers of the underworld is skipped past in the actual narrative; we go straight into the ritual, where Circe's instructions are carried out literally to the letter, with the original lines recycled in the narrative of their fulfilment. It's a nice touch to bring Eurylochus in here: he seems for now to be back to his old status as one of Odysseus' right-hand men, though the trust will prove misplaced in the next book.

One of the many minor inconsistencies in this book is the role of the trench of blood. In the early scenes, it seems that the dead can only speak if Odysseus allows them to drink of the blood – even Tiresias, who Circe said uniquely retained his sentience among the dead. But this device is forgotten by the time we get on to some of the heroes of the *Iliad*, who seem to be perfectly able to think and speak without it.

B. the ghosts I

Circe instructed Odysseus to consult one specific ghost, the Theban seer Teiresias. But she didn't specifically forbid him from speaking to others, specifying only that he needs to hold back the others until after he's spoken to Teiresias. But even this doesn't prepare us for the amazing gallery of encounters that now follow, or the unexpectedly personal and painful direction they'll take.

1. Odysseus' past (and future)

First comes a trio of figures connected personally with Odysseus' story, who take Odysseus on a moving journey deeper and deeper into his own history. The sequence has been carefully put together to frame Teiresias between two other figures with a direct personal connection to Odysseus: one of them set up in the previous book, and the other a devastating surprise.

(a) Elpenor

First comes Elpenor, whose death was missed in the larger consternation of the news of their quest of the dead. This is the freshest death in Odysseus' story, so recent that even he hasn't yet caught up with it, and there's a powerful moment of irony and emotion as he finds himself face-to-face with one of the men he thought was at his back.

Elpenor is unburied, either because the crew were too preoccupied (as Odysseus' words here suggest) or because his death went unnoticed (as implied by Elpenor's account and the lack of reaction at the time). It's curious that Elpenor can speak to Odysseus without needing to drink the blood; it's sometimes suggested that this is somehow linked to his unburied status, but it has to be said the text doesn't really offer anything to support this.

It's not actually said that Elpenor's ghost is barred from the underworld until he's buried; his concern is rather for his *kleos*, the memorialisation of his life by a combination of ritual

and marker. The oar is a fine touch: this is the symbol by which Elpenor asks to be remembered, the role he played as a man of Odysseus' ship.

At the end of this moving sequence, Odysseus spots an even more shocking presence among the dead: his own mother, Anticleia, whose death is complete news to him. It's a further test of the emotional self-mastery he'll need for the showdown in Ithaca. Despite his consuming curiosity (and ours) to hear her story, he remembers Circe's instructions. Teiresias has to come first, but already we're being primed to expect a more emotionally-charged encounter beyond.

(b) Tiresias

Circe noted that Teiresias is the one ghost who still has his faculties and awareness, and sure enough he even recognises Odysseus (whom he's never met) and understands what's going on. Where the blood turns other ghosts from amnesiac wraiths to a shadow of human consciousness, Teiresias is aware already, and the blood instils a kind of superconsciousness that allows him to prophesy.

As Circe predicted, Teiresias tells Odysseus how he can get home to Ithaca. But rather than charting the physical route (which will be fleshed out by Circe herself from Teiresias' information), he reveals that the way home is more a matter of moral navigation. The Cyclops' prayer at 9.526ff. has been answered; there's some particularly effective use of repetition here in the ominous quotation of bits of the original prayer embedded in Teiresias' more detailed version. The good news is that a safe return is stil possible; the bad news is that everything the Cyclops prayed for will come true if they fail the test of the cattle of the sun. We've heard of these cattle before, in the opening lines of the poem; and we know already that the crew will fail the test, and doom themselves.

Teiresias now expands on the Cyclops' mysterious hints of trouble in store on Ithaca. There are a number of notorious problems with these lines – not least that Odysseus shows no awareness anywhere else in the poem, including the conversation with his mother that immediately follows, of having been already told about the suitors ahead of his briefing by Athene in book 13. More glaring still is a chronological problem: at 2.89 and 13.377 we hear that the suitors have only been making trouble for three years, which is a good four years in the future at the time of this conversation. (At 7.259 Odysseus told Queen Arete in Scheria that he'd spent seven years with Calypso, so we can't be more than three years into his ten-year wanderings at this point.) It's obviously tempting to suspect the lines as a later insertion, and yet we can't actually get rid of them because they're needed for the next and most remarkable part of the prophecy.

With Teiresias' final orders we're back in the world of baffling supernatural commands that have to be carried out to the letter. The details of this strange charade have been endlessly discussed from antiquity onwards, and probably aren't worth trying to make sense of. The general point seems clear: even after the scouring of Ithaca, Odysseus still needs to appease Poseidon, which he will do by taking the worship of Poseidon to a part of the world so remote from the sea that nobody has even seen an oar. Like the predictions in the *Iliad* of Achilles' death and Troy's fall, it's a way of looking beyond the end of the poem to the real end of the story, and wrapping up loose ends that can't be dealt with in the main narrative.

These lines had a curious legacy in antiquity. A strange and frankly mad-sounding late epic sequel, the *Telegony*, reinterpreted the Greek phrase here translated as "far from sea" to mean "out of the sea", and came up with a bizarre tale of Odysseus being killed in ignorance by his son by Circe, Telegonus, who'd come seeking his father with a spear tipped with a fish-spine. (Telegonus then married Penelope, and Telemachus married Circe. I'm not making this up.) In the fifth century this barmy story was adapted by Sophocles into a great and famous lost tragedy, whose plot he partly recycled with a different family as the subject in the rather better-known *Oedipus Rex*.

Odysseus takes all this calmly enough, but reveals that throughout the scene he's been aware of the silent presence of his mother's ghost, and longs to communicate with her. Teiresias explains that she too can draw consciousness from drinking the blood – leading into one of the most poignant scenes in the poem.

(c) Anticleia

Anticleia is as surprised to see Odysseus there as he is to find her, and her opening question perhaps carries a hint of rebuke. Odysseus has no appetite to tell the full story of his wanderings, and instead questions her in return: how did she die, and what news of the rest of the family? (Notice how he seems already to have forgotten what Teiresias told him about the suitors.)

Anticleia saves the answer to his first question till the end of her speech: an effective use of a common sequencing device in oral style. Penelope is faithful, but deeply unhappy; Telemachus (thirteen or so at this time according to strict chronology) is doing well; again there's no mention of the suitors. But his father Laertes is in a kind of clinical depression, paralysed with grief; and the outlook can't be good, because it was the same grief for Odysseus that killed his wife.

A famous moment follows, as a deeply moved Odysseus desperately tries to embrace his mother, only to find his hands go right through. This enormously powerful image of trying to embrace a ghost made a particularly strong impression on Rome's greatest poet Virgil, who repeatedly comes back to this image at key moments of unbearable loss. But it's also an opportunity for a bit of explanation about the nature of the afterlife as the *Odyssey* conceives it: a place where all that's left of what was once a living body is an insubstantial dreamlike wraith. Already we're beginning to understand that the nature of the Homeric afterlife has profound implications for the meaning of life itself – an insight that will be forcefully developed at the book's emotional climax. If we think this scene is strong stuff, nothing could prepare us for what's to come.

2. the pageant of heroines:

But first, a strange and rather wonderful interlude. The figure of Anticleia leads neatly into an unexpected but fascinating gallery of heroines from the earlier generations of myth, who between them offer a panorama of the different patterns of female *kleos* in epic. On the face of it, this doesn't seem to have much to do with anything, and it's easy to suspect that the whole sequence has got into the text from somewhere else entirely. All the heroines are connected to Boeotia in central Greece, which was also suspiciously prominent in the Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* 2; and Boeotia seems to have been the home of the specialist local tradition of catalogue poetry whose most famous exponent was Hesiod. In fact, one of the famous poems transmitted under Hesiod's name was a long and celebrated *Catalogue of Women* in five books. So it's likely that what we have here is another product of the Boeotian branch of the epic tree that's somehow found its way, like the *Iliad* catalogue, into a Homeric narrative epic.

The catalogue seems on the face of it to have little to do with the rest of the *Odyssey* – but it does do some subtle and rather effective things in its present context.

- Though none of the stories seems at all connected with Odysseus, one of them will in fact cross paths with the action in Ithaca in ways that won't become apparent till book 15.
- Taken together, the stories offer a gallery of comparisons and possibilities within which both Anticleia and Penelope can be significantly compared: a showcase of the capacity of Homeric women for positive *kleos*, which among other things will particularly appeal to the listening Arete.
- Particularly for those who know the stories, there's a running theme of good and bad family histories, and later in the book we'll see the supreme examples of each in direct juxtaposition and comparison.
- The sheer variety of stories gives a sense of the vastness and variety of human experience – a real sense that we, like Odysseus, have been granted a brief glimpse into the whole panorama of human life stories.
- Perhaps above all, it raises a question, in our minds as in that of Odysseus' listeners: where are the men? what are *their* stories? what is Odysseus not telling?

(a) Tyro

First to drink the blood and tell her story is Tyro, whose story here was made into a famous lost play by Sophocles. Tyro exemplifies the type of heroine whose *kleos* is that she became the mortal mother of a god's children and founder of a divine dynasty (or in this case two). Aptly enough at the head of this catalogue, the god involved is the one who's already been most prominent in Odysseus' story. It's a more upbeat, attractive side of Poseidon to the darker face we've seen turned towards Odysseus, and there's a wonderful touch of magic in the river-wave that enfolds the lovers.

(b) Antiope

The other stories are briefer, though many of them later became famous in fifth-century tragedy. Antiope trumps Tyro by bearing her children to Zeus himself, and having them found the great city of Thebes from which so many of the later stories in the catalogue derive.

(c) Alcmene

Alcmene is another consort of Zeus, and her child is none other than Heracles – proverbially the greatest hero of all, and the figure Odysseus will encounter in the final interview of this book.

(d) Megara

Megara follows naturally next, as Heracles' wife. Now we're moving from heroines with divine consorts to those whose *kleos* lay in their marriage. It's unclear how much Homer knows of Megara's later, darker story according to subsequent tradition.

(e) Epicaste

Perhaps the most fascinating entry in the catalogue is Epicaste, better known in later sources as Jocasta. This is the first appearance in Greek of the Oedipus myth, and already has the outline of Oedipus' patricide and incest leading to her suicide on the revelation of the truth. In this version there's no mention of Oedipus' blinding, and it's unclear what form his subsequent sufferings took. *Iliad* 23.679 referred in passing to Oedipus' "downfall", with no more detail; there were a lot of different traditions about what exactly happened to Oedipus after the truth came out, and it's not until Sophocles' last play *Oedipus at Colonus* that one version started to predominate. At any rate the stories seem to be leading into notably darker territory, though we seem to be invited to view Epicaste's suicide as a heroic act.

(f) Chloris

Now for a story that forms part of a complex web of family myths that continues the earlier story of Tyro and her children from 11.235–59 above. Chloris becomes wife to Tyro's son Neleus, and through him queen of Pylos and mother of Nestor. But the main emphasis of the story here is the rather elliptically-told feat undertaken for the hand of her daughter Pero, Nestor's sister. The mysterious unnamed prophet here was Melampus, and we'll hear the missing part of his story at 15.220ff. – where his great-grandson will turn up to play an unexpected part in the poem's endgame.

Confusingly, the Amphion mentioned here is a completely different Amphion from the one in Tyro's story, who ended up founding Thebes. This Amphion is the founder of the other great early Boeotian city, Orchomenus, which was the seat of the people known as Minyans.

(g) Leda

Leda was of course the mother not just of Castor and Polydeuces (Pollux in Latin), but of the rather less creditable Clytemnestra and Helen. This seems to be one of the moments where the catalogue is deliberately suppressing a darker side of the story to heighten the positive *kleos* of its leading lady.

(h) Iphimedeia

Iphimedeia is another consort of Poseidon, but her sons illustrate the capacity of the gods' children for destruction as well as for good. Apollo has to execute the twin giants before they can grow to full stature and overthrow the gods themselves.

Phaedra The catalogue concludes with two rapid trios of stories, the first of which momentarily breaks the Boeotian thread for a detour over the border into Athenian myth. Phaedra is famous in later tradition as the second wife of Theseus, king of Athens, who in Euripides' *Hippolytus* falls disastrously in love with her stepson. If Homer already knows that notorious story, he discreetly suppresses it here.

Procris Procris is another figure made famous in tragedy, though best known to us from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. She was an Athenian princess, unfaithful to her husband Cephalus, who killed her accidentally when she suspected him of the same offence.

Ariadne Ariadne was Phaedra's elder sister, famous for her role in the story of Theseus and the Minotaur. Homer seems to know a mysterious alternative version of her abandonment by Theseus on the island of Naxos (where later tradition had her then wooed by Dionysus). How she died in Homer's version, and what role Dionysus played, can only be guessed at.

Maera For the second and closing trio, we're back in Boeotia – except for the enigmatic Maera, one of the most obscure of all Greek myths, who seems to be attached to Tiryns in the north-east Peloponnese. The story known to later writers has her an attendant of Artemis who bore a child to Zeus and was killed by the goddess as a result. But whether that's Homer's story is anyone's guess, as is what it's doing here.

Clymene Clymene is a figure in the dynastic history of Orchomenus, who seems to have no real story of her own – though her son Iphiclus was Melampus' captor in the saga of Chloris at 11.281ff. above, to be continued in book 15.

Eriphyle Eriphyle takes us back to Thebes, and the civil war between Oedipus' sons. Eriphyle, another figure famous in tragedy, took a bribe of a golden necklace from the Theban pretender Polynices to induce her husband Amphiaraus to join the war, though he was a seer and knew it meant his death. Later tradition had her murdered in revenge by her son Alcmaeon, in a story closely parallel to that of Orestes' revenge on Clytemnestra.

Whether Homer knew the sequel is unclear, but this darkest tale in the catalogue is a sinister case to end on, and the parallels with Clytemnestra have a direct bearing on Odysseus' next and most disturbing encounter of all.

C. interlude in Scheria

But now comes perhaps the biggest surprise in Homer. Odysseus suddenly breaks off his story to the Phaeacians, pleading tiredness and the sheer number of stories to be told. Arete, Echenaus, and Alcinous propose further gifts, to be collected in the morning before a sailing later in the day. (Commentators tend to claim this is a postponement, but in fact the time of departure has been unspecified until now. We'll see in book 13 why an evening departure is chosen.)

Why does Odysseus break off at this point? I've never been very convinced by the standard answers: that he's fishing for more gifts, or is offering his audience a chance to break for bed, or is trying to nudge them into letting him go aboard ship now. None of these explains why he should choose this point in his story to halt – before Thrinacia, before Calypso, before even the conclusion of the present episode. Clearly there's something in what he says about there being too many stories to tell; it's as if the vastness of the corpus of myth momentarily overwhelms his ability to relate, an impression supported by the acceleration at the end of the catalogue.

But it's always seemed obvious to me that the real reason for his sudden silence is the factor raised by Alcinous in his follow-up prompt. Odysseus has stopped because the next part of his story is too painful to tell; and the king, who's already shown himself an astute judge of his guest's preoccupations and feelings, seems to guess what that might be. With characteristic diplomacy, he's saying: "I know why you've stopped. You saw some of your dead comrades from Troy, didn't you?" It's an adroit bit of buildup to what is indeed one of the greatest scenes in the whole poem.

Notice, by the way, Alcinous' comparison of Odysseus to a bard. We'll see more of this as the poem goes on, and think about its implications in the seminar on storytelling.

D. the ghosts II

Odysseus takes up his story with a rather bardic prologue, introducing the mood and main theme of the sequence that follows. As he points out, it's worse than Alcinous imagined: it's not just that he met the ghosts of those who died at Troy, but also of those who survived. The "wicked woman" theme picks directly up from the figure of "loathsome" Eriphyle at the end of the catalogue; and if we haven't yet guessed who's meant, it'll become clear soon enough.

1. heroes of Troy

Three very different encounters follow: three superb scenes that together present a composite view of the world and values of the *Iliad* as seen through the eyes of the *Odyssey*. It's probably the single most important confrontation of the two epics' outlooks, as well as Odysseus' most direct and painful encounter with the ghosts of his past.

(a) Agamemnon

First comes Agamemnon, whose presence among the dead is of course a complete shock to Odysseus. Odysseus can only imagine that he was lost at sea, or the casualty of a Cicones-style disaster on the voyage home. The truth turns out to be far more terrifying: he was murdered at home, by his own wife and her lover, who committed the supreme crime against the *Odyssey*'s codes of hospitality by murdering his own unsuspecting and defenceless guest in the middle of a banquet. As his simile rubs home, they were treated like sacrificial animals – a characteristic Odyssean use of animal similes for pathos.

Agamemnon's narration of the scene of the slaughter is the culmination of the different versions we heard from a variety of characters and voices in the first four books. In a brilliant narrative coup, the murder is told in the first person *from the point of view of the victim*, as Agamemnon's fading consciousness registers in its last moments the corpses of his men around him, the shriek of Cassandra as Clytemnestra kills her with her own hands and tosses the body on top of his, and the haunting final glimpse of his wife witholding the final ritual actions as he dies. (His thumping on the ground seems from *Iliad* 9.566–72 to be an action of cursing rather than a death-spasm.)

If the point of all this wasn't already heavily apparent, Agamemnon now hammers it home. Aegisthus' crime against *xenia* was bad enough, but for a wife to murder her husband contaminates her whole sex. This isn't just rhetoric: with Clytemnestra's example in view, even "one whose deeds are virtuous" such as Penelope has to overcome a cloud of suspicion and mistrust, not least from her own husband. Odysseus notes the grim parallel with the deaths caused by Clytemnestra's sister Helen; and Agamemnon in turn warns him against trusting Penelope any more than he has to. She may not be the murdering kind, but a wise man will nevertheless keep his wife out of his plans – advice Odysseus will take to heart in book 19.

The mention of Penelope leads by a natural chain of association to Telemachus, and thence to Agamemnon's own son Orestes. He's not here, so must presumably be still alive somewhere; but where? The audience, of course, know the story (still some years in the future at the time of this conversation); but Odysseus is even more out of the loop than Agamemnon, and is unable to give any reassurance. All this is preparing for the next encounter, where the *kleos* of living sons is a major concern.

(b) Achilles

Odysseus now presents us with a gallery of other heroes, of whom the one who emerges to speak is Achilles (with or without drinking the blood, which isn't mentioned again). For Odysseus at this stage of his journey, Achilles is still the model of what he wants to be: killed as a warrior, remembered as a hero, and retaining his honour in the afterlife as a result of his *kleos* on earth. But Achilles has a chilling response: life, any life, is better than the most glorious death.

There's much debate about how we should read these sentiments. Is it a complete rejection of the warrior ideal of the *Iliad*? Is it a measure of the difference between the perspectives of the living and the dead? Is it an encouragement to Odysseus to struggle on, whatever the cost? Or is it just an expression of Achilles' own restless, eternally discontented personality? Whatever the case, it's a very different perspective on the meaning of a heroic death to that seen not just in the *Iliad* but in such scenes as 5.299ff. in this poem. We'll return to both Agamemnon and Achilles in book 24, for a final verdict on the meaning of Odysseus' story for the issues they've each raised here; but for now, the worlds of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seem more in tension than in harmony.

Achilles' main concern, like Agamemnon's, is for news of his surviving family, and this time Odysseus is able to provide a partial update. As in the *Iliad*, Achilles was concerned for the Laertes-like figure of Peleus, defenceless now in his old age; but Odysseus of course has not been back to Greece, and can tell him nothing there. What he can relate is the career of Achilles' son Neoptolemus, hero of the last months of the war and worthy successor to his father's *kleos*. It's this, not Odysseus' clumsy opening praise of Achilles' own honour, that sends him away a happy ghost. For Odysseus, who also has an elderly father and a teenage son waiting, the point can hardly be lost.

The reference to "the bribing of a woman" is explained in Shewring's footnote: Eurypylus' mother played a similar role to that of Eriphyle above, sending a hero to his death for a bribe. Even in this tale of Iliadic glory, the female treachery that Agamemnon warned about is visible in the background.

(c) Ajax

The final encounter offers a brilliant twist on the expectations set up by the previous two. Where Agamemnon and Achilles have been eloquently communicative, Ajax is pointedly silent. According to the fuller version of the story in later tradition, Ajax committed suicide out of shame after the award of Achilles' divine armour to Odysseus rather than himself. (Sophocles' great tragedy *Ajax* expands this with the addition of Ajax's treachery and madness, but that seems his own elaboration.) Even in death, he refuses to be reconciled, despite all Odysseus' eloquence: a final painful lesson in the limitations of a world-view that prizes heroic *kleos* and its tokens above all else.

2. judgment

The final section of the book is the strangest, and has long been suspected as a later addition. Nowhere else in Homer is there any notion of judgment and punishment after death; and what happened to the trench and the blood? Not only do none of the remaining ghosts need to drink to regain their faculties, but we seem to be somewhere else entirely, wandering deep inside the land of the dead. But like the catalogue of heroines, this sequence does play a rather effective role here – showing the implications for death as well as life of the *Odyssey*'s dominant emphasis on moral choice, and allowing the book to end on a series of imaginative and compelling set pieces, culminating in the thematically crucial figure of Heracles himself.

(a) Minos

First comes Minos, king of Crete in life and now judge of the dead. He seems to be resolving disputes among the dead rather than assessing their lives, though the latter idea was developed in Plato's *Gorgias*. But the presence of mechanisms of justice among the dead is an important preliminary to the famous scenes of reward and punishment that follow.

(b) Orion

First comes Orion, whose story was told by Calypso at 5.121–4. Despite his tragic end, he spends his afterlife enjoying himself in a continuation of his earthly life as a hunter. It's a nice touch of fantasy that he's hunting the ghosts of the same wild animals he killed in life. He's significant here less in his own right than as an example of a kind of blessed and active afterlife that will be seen again at the end of the book in Heracles.

(c) the damned

The famous trio that follow stand in direct contrast to Orion, whose only offence was to accept the advances of a goddess. These are sinners who wilfully violated the boundaries between god and mortal, and are singled out for exemplary punishment in the afterlife.

Tityus First comes Tityus, who tried to rape a goddess, and is punished for it by the most gruesome fate of the three. This scene seems to have inspired the living torture that in later tradition is inflicted by Zeus on the Titan Prometheus, as famously dramatised in the *Prometheus Bound* attributed to Aeschylus.

Tantalus The other pair are more subtle, perhaps because their crimes (not specified here) were more subtle. According to later tradition, Tantalus entertained the gods at a feast where he rather overdid things by serving up his own son as one of the dishes. Appropriately, his torment is a neverending meal that he never quite gets to consume.

Sisyphus Sisyphus was a notorious trickster who according to later tradition duped even the gods, tricking his way twice out of his own death. Having wriggled his way out of the inevitable, now he spends eternity feeling what it's like to have the goal of your efforts repeatedly frustrated.

3. Heracles

But all this is preparing the ground for the climactic encounter with the greatest hero of all. Heracles is in an Orion-like state of constant activity, and monopolises the conversation with Odysseus, whom he recognises even though they've never met and belong to different generations. Odysseus conveys his own awe by lingering over the description of Heracles' baldric, which fascinates him with its detail and brings to mind Achilles' shield in *Iliad* 18. It's left to Heracles to point out the parallels between the two heroes, culminating in a descent to the underworld; but Heracles came out of it successfully with the help of Hermes and Athene, the very gods who are working for Odysseus. For Odysseus too, endurance and perseverance will pay off in the end.

Shewring's translation omits three notorious lines in the Greek (602–4). In full, the passage reads: "After him I saw heroic Heracles – an image (*eidolon*) of him; he himself takes his pleasure among the deathless gods at their banquets, and has fair-ankled Hebe as his wife, the daughter of great Zeus and golden-sandalled Hera." This looks like a clumsy attempt by a later poet to reconcile this scene with the incompatible tradition in which Heracles becomes a god after his death.

Odysseus' insatiable curiosity to interview more of the heroes of old is finally overcome by his fear; he's done well to hold out this long. The book closes swiftly with a condensed departure scene, and in five brisk lines we're back at sea and on our way back to Circe's island.

BOOK 12. THE CATTLE OF THE SUN

This book has a lot to do. It's the climax of Odysseus' flashback, drawing together the major threads of his narration as a whole:

- the Cyclops' curse and Teiresias' prophecy;
- Odysseus' escalating struggles against more than human opponents;
- the difficulties of trust and morale between Odysseus and his crew, with the figure of Eurylochus at the centre;
- the long-promised episode on Thrinacia, its consequences, and the arrival on Calypso's isle.

Yet for the first third of the book we're back on Circe's island, mopping up the loose ends from the previous book. When we set sail, it's for a final recapitulation of the pattern familiar from books 9–10 of two short episodes followed by a long, climactic one. But this time the individual episodes are tightly integrated in a sequence first mapped out by Circe, and plotted together as a whole, ending with one of the *Odyssey*'s most brilliant twists of plotting.

A. Departure from Aeaea

Before the final sailing, Odysseus and his men have unfinished business back on Circe's island. They know now that their route lies via Thrinacia, but not how to get there; and there's also the sad matter of Elpenor to be dealt with.

1. Elpenor's funeral

Elpenor comes first, in a short but touching replay of the heroic funerals familiar from the rites in *Iliad* 7, 23, and 24. Elpenor may have been the youngest and least heroic of Odysseus' men, but he's accorded full honours despite his unwarriorly end, and his wishes are carried out to the letter.

Circe isn't invited to participate, and discreetly restricts herself to providing a picnic banquet on the shore until the crew turn in for their last night's sleep on the island. Her instructions are for Odysseus alone – with good reason, as we'll see. She begins with a debriefing on Teiresias' instructions, which she then expands into a detailed navigational guide to the rest of the book and the perils to be faced. Once more Odysseus will be up against threats of divine rather than mortal nature, and as with Circe herself in book 10 he'll need the help and instructions of a god to guide him through them.

2. Circe's briefing

The way to Thrinacia leads past the Sirens, who aren't themselves described in detail here, though they soon became famous in art. Instead, Circe focusses on the image of their setting: a flowery meadow incongruously filled with the bleaching remains of men transfixed by their song. As with all three of the episodes to come, Circe presents Odysseus with a choice. Here, he has the option of listening to the Sirens himself, while his men plug their ears and keep him lashed to the mast; but he'll need to be able to trust his men with his life, even if it means doing the opposite of what he orders.

Next, a choice of routes from the Sirens' isle to Thrinacia. Both are perilous: one leads through the notorious Clashing Rocks of Argonautic legend, which will crush any ship that sails between, while the other leads between the twin terrors of Scylla and Charybdis. If Odysseus intends to attempt the first of these, he'd better be very confident in a god's help to get him through; if the second, he'll have to reconcile himself to the certain loss of at least six of his men.

The first is an obvious non-starter; far from having Hera on his side, Odysseus has Poseidon ranged against him, and certain destruction seems the only possible outcome. But Scylla and Charybdis seem little better, for both of these two offer certain death: Charybdis for the entire ship, Scylla for a minimum of six men. Circe's advice is to choose Scylla and accept the losses; but Odysseus is appalled, particularly after his clash with Eurylochus over his guilt for leading his men to a grisly death at the hands of the Cyclops. Isn't there a way of avoiding Charybdis and fighting off Scylla as well?

But this is Circe's point. Odysseus needs to learn that there's no way he, a mortal, can bend the rules of the gods. Despite her bizarre form, Scylla is of the race of the gods, and there's nothing that Odysseus' merely mortal warrior skills can do to protect him. On the contrary, if he tries, he'll just give Scylla an opportunity to strike a second time and double his losses.

And so to Thrinacia, where the sun-god Hyperion's shepherdess daughter-nymphs keep watch over his immortal herds. Here for the third time we hear the formulation of the Cyclops' curse, which can still be averted if they keep their hands off the animals: if not, the very best he can hope for is certain death for all his men and a late and troubled homecoming for Odysseus himself.

Odysseus is left to make his own choice: not only how to reach Thrinacia, but how to handle his men through this most terrifying stage of their adventures. He chooses to say nothing at all until they're already out at sea; and what he then sets out to his men is a carefully selective and edited version of Circe's original instructions.

Incidentally, one seemingly casual detail in Circe's description at 101–10 will turn out to save Odysseus' life. Keep an eye out for the real-life version in the narrative later on…

> You will see that the other cliff lies lower, no more than an arrow's flight away. On this there grows a great leafy fig-tree; under it, awesome Charybdis sucks the dark water down. Three times a day she belches it forth, three times in hideous fashion she swallows it down again. Pray not to be caught there when she swallows down; Poseidon himself could not save you from destruction then. No, keep closer to Scylla's cliff, and row past that as quickly as may be; far better to lose six men and keep your ship than to lose your men one and all.

3. Odysseus' edited version

Despite his opening claims of full disclosure, Odysseus briefs his men on the journey one stage at a time, and quietly suppresses all the choices offered by Circe. Circe allowed him the option of listening to the Sirens' song himself; but Odysseus gives the impression, without telling an outright lie, that it was a direct instruction. We'll see similar touches of discreet editing in the later stages of the briefing; but first they have to make it past the Sirens.

B. The Sirens

A famous sequence follows. As Circe anticipated, the wind drops and they have to row past the Sirens' island; this is the signal for Odysseus to make his preparations. (Notice the sidelong mention of Hyperion, foreshadowing the climax of the book. Shewring's translation "whose father is Hyperion" isn't an error: the Greek actually does say "of Helios [Sun], son of Hyperion". The explanation seems to be that "Hyperion", the commonest name for the sun-god Helios in the *Odyssey*, is strictly a title of the sun-god rather than his actual name – but confusingly *is* the name of Helios's father, at least according to Hesiod. It looks as thought there's been some understandable muddling of the two at some stage.)

The Sirens know Odysseus' name, an unsettling sign; but as they go on to explain, they know everything, and the song they promise seems to appeal as much to Odysseus' curiosity as to his musical appreciation. It's a very *bardic* conception of "song", as much a matter of storytelling as of music. But we get a nice glimpse of the sinister intention behind, with the grim double meaning "gone on his way a wiser man". There's no mention of the corpses described by Circe – perhaps because we're seeing through Odysseus' mesmerised eyes, which are unable or unwilling to notice.

There's an attractive touch of deadpan comedy in Odysseus' attempt to communicate with his men using the only part of his body he can move, his eyebrows. It's neat, too, to single out Eurylochus and Perimedes as the ones who tighten Odysseus' bonds: a reminder of these individuals among the crew, just ahead of the episode that will see one of them ruin them all.

C. Scylla & Charybdis

We hear nothing of the Clashing Rocks route at this point, and Odysseus has presumably already decided against that option. Instead, the spray and noise alerts Odysseus to the imminence of the next and deadliest challenge, Charybdis.

1. Odysseus' instructions

Now comes the greatest test of Odysseus' command. He can't tell the men what he knows, or that even on the best outcome six of them will die terribly within the next few minutes. All he says is to keep away from the far side of the strait, where the thing known as Charybdis advertises her presence. The comparison to the Cyclops episode is meant to be encouraging, but carries an overtone of which Odysseus can hardly be unconscious: on that occasion too he had knowingly to sacrifice six of his men to save the rest.

2. the approach

As they draw near, Odysseus makes a revealing error. Despite Circe's advice, he arms himself and prowls the deck in anticipation of Scylla's strike. Presumably he thinks he'll avoid the risk of a second strike by arming before they enter the strait rather than lingering to

do so under the cliff. What his men must think of this curious behaviour is left to our imagination. But as we'll see, it does him no good, as Circe predicted..

3. Charybdis and Scylla

Now comes one of the most brilliant bits of narrative artifice in Homer. As they enter the straight, Odysseus' narrative gaze is zipping between Scylla and Charybdis. But it's the noisy, visible Charybdis who draws the gaze as they approach, in a lingering description of the physical action heightened with a simile, a fascinated close-up of the naked ocean floor, a direct description of the crew's reaction, and a generous sprinkling of emotionally loaded language ("hideous", "fiendish", "hideously"). And just as Odysseus, his men, his audience, and we have become lost in the scene and forgotten all about the nearer menace, Scylla strikes – while everyone, even the narrator, is looking the other way.

We never get a good look at Scylla at all. All we see of her strike is six sets of dangling limbs disappearing into the sky, with cries of agony and calling of the name of Odysseus; followed by the distant glimpse and screams of a slow and horrible death. For Odysseus, watching then and remembering now, this is the most unbearable moment of all: having to watch the lingering deaths of the men he knowingly betrayed. The fisherman simile again uses a poignant comparison of human victims to animal for pathos; and Odysseus' final comment is the strongest emotional statement he makes at any point during his narrative.

D. The Cattle of the Sun

After this bravura narration of horrors, the still greater peril of the island of Thrinacia seems a welcoming refuge and idyll. The sound of the herds are particularly inviting to the crew, for whom a large meal of meat has been consistently the best restorative of spirits. How much can Odysseus afford to tell them?

1. the debate and landing

Again Odysseus presents a highly edited version of Teiresias' and Circe's instructions. Evidently sensing that they can't be trusted to leave the animals unharmed once on the island, he claims they were ordered to sail right past, and leaves the nature of the peril there carefully unspecified. But now Eurylochus for the second time speaks out openly against Odysseus' orders. They're physically exhausted, from rowing past both Sirens and Charybdis; their morale is at rock-bottom; and night's drawing in, with a storm brewing that will catch them at sea if they don't land now. His compromise proposal is that they land for one night, stay with the ship, and set out again immediately in the morning.

Odysseus sees he's in a minority of one and unable to win them around. Rightly or wrongly, he doesn't tell them the nature of the island or its herds, and merely extracts an oath from them all that they'll leave the native herds alone. Circe's provisioned them adequately, and Odysseus has to be content with their oath.

2. storm and famine

Now, however, the storm Eurylochus anticipated strikes. All they can do is drag the ship into the shelter of a cave and wait for better weather. Now Odysseus has no choice but to tell them what he knows, and why it's imperative to keep their hands from the herd animals.

So long as Circe's provisions hold out, the men are content to obey. But the winds confine them on the island for a whole month, long enough for their provisions to run out and the crew to be driven to living off fish and fowl. You'll remember that these aren't normally part of the heroic diet in Homer, despite turning up in similes – including the one we had just now in the Scylla episode. Menelaus had similarly to live off fish when he was marooned on the island of Pharos at 4.351ff.; and Odysseus similarly tries to redeem the situation by wandering off on his own in quest of divine assistance. It's not explained why he has to be alone for this, but it triggers uneasy memories of the bag of winds: another occasion when he allowed his supervision of his men to flag, and awoke to find his trust betrayed.

3. Eurylochus' revolt

In Odysseus' absence, Eurylochus takes the initiative. As Odysseus has been at pains to point out, Eurylochus knows exactly what he's doing, and the likely consequences. He knows he's probably just choosing one death over another. But he hopes to appease the sun-god by offering the cattle they kill in sacrifice, and by promising him a new cult temple on their return to Ithaca. As we'll see, this is a long way from adequate; but the rest of the crew agree, and they proceed with an impoverished version of normal sacrificial ritual using the closest available materials to approximate to the grain and wine (which of course are precisely the provisions they ran out of in the first place).

Odysseus returns to the terrible smell of roast meat, and knows at once what's happened. But as he approaches, the narrative cuts dramatically away…

4. Zeus grants vengeance

Circe had mentioned that the cattle were guarded by the sun-god's daughters, one of whom now alerts him to the crime. Hyperion immediately protests formally to Zeus, calling for requital if he's to carry on doing his cosmic job; and Zeus agrees to intervene in person. This is more serious than even Poseidon's curse: for the first time in either poem, Zeus prepares to use his supreme weapon, the thunderbolt, against living men.

Lines 389–90 have long attracted derision as a ham-fisted attempt by the poet to get himself out of a corner he's painted himself into. How does Odysseus know about private conversations between the gods on Olympus? Well, maybe Hermes witnessed it and mentioned it to Calypso, and then the subject came up at some point during the seven years of flagging conversation between goddess and hero on Ogygia. It's not that bad a shot, as it goes; clearly the poet badly wants to mark this pivotal moment by bringing Zeus himself directly into the action, and he has to find some way of doing it within Odysseus' own first-person narration.

5. the portents

All this seems to pass in an instant, because when we cut back to earth we're exactly where we left off. Odysseus reaches the scene, but too late; he can shout, but there's nothing to be done. And then, in a rare moment of horror-movie special effects, the remains of the slaughtered animals begin spookily to move, and to make sounds as if alive. Yet it doesn't seem to put them off finishing off the remains over the course of the week that follows, with only Odysseus himself abstaining. When the wind finally drops, they put out to sea; but the mention of Zeus is an ominous reminder of what's in store.

6. departure and shipwreck

The storm strikes swiftly, when they're out on the open sea. Ropes snap; the toppling mast kills the steersman; and a bolt of lightning makes driftwood of the hull. Odysseus' last sight of his men is another poignant animal simile; but Odysseus himself isn't out of resources. As the ship breaks up, he hastily lashes together an improvised raft from the remains, and tries to ride out the storm.

7. Charybdis again

But now the worst possible change of wind drives the helpless Odysseus to the last place on earth he'd want to revisit: the straits of Scylla and Charybdis. And this time there are no oars to propel him away from the ghastly maw of Charybdis. All he can do, with brilliant presence of mind, is leap from his raft to the fig-tree that Circe mentioned as growing out of the cliff immediately above. But there's no way up the cliff; Odysseus is trapped, with Charybdis yawning directly beneath him.

Now comes one of the greatest tests of Odysseus' skills of planning and endurance. What was that Circe said about Charybdis? "Three times a day she belches it forth, three times in hideous fashion she swallows it down again." If he waits a few hours, Charybdis' cycle should return what she just swallowed up. In a marvellously incongruous glimpse of an utterly different world, Odysseus reckons the time by the rhythm of primitive bureaucracy – and sure enough, there below him are the mast and keel of his ship, still lashed together.

Odysseus drops into the water and paddles for dear life, evading Charybdis and drifting without food or water for ten days until he's washed up on Calypso's island. There our story began; and there, at the end of this astonishing feat of survival, Odysseus' narrative finally comes to a close.

END AND BEGINNING...

This midpoint of the poem marks a decisive shift. The first part of the poem has been a dizzying showcase of Homer's narrative art at its most flamboyant, leaping around in time, space, and narrative voice, with multiple strands, long glimpses into past and future, and a fantastic gallery of exotic creatures and adventures in the long first-person narrative with which it culminates. Yet astonishingly all this is merely warming up; the main action of the *Odyssey* still lies ahead, and it's there that the lessons learned in the first half of the poem – not just by Odysseus, but by Telemachus and indeed the audience – will be finally and decisively put to the test. Now at last we're ready for the real adventure to get under way. Everything up until now has just been practice.

ODYSSEY 13–16: EUMAEUS' FARMSTEAD

These next eight books of the *Odyssey* are my favourite such stretch anywhere in Homer. I say this at the outset because it's not a view you'll hear a lot of in the standard secondary literature. Griffin is fairly typical in seeing the Ithacan books as padded-out ("the reader feels at times that bulk is being sought for its own sake"), and these books in particular tend to be viewed as a rather slow stretch of the story.

But that's *precisely* what makes them so effective. After the fireworks of books 9–12, we're wondering what could possibly follow; and the answer turns out to be a change of pace that allows the narrative to delve unprecedentedly deeper into the qualities of psychology and character interaction that are so vital to the *Odyssey*'s particular virtuosity. In particular, these books include dialogue scenes (or rather exchanges of speeches) of fantastic complexity, sometimes taking up a whole book or more, which are quite unlike anything else in Homer.

After the loose ends of the Phaeacian episode have been wrapped up at the start of book 13, the action shifts to Ithaca for the rest of the poem. We follow Odysseus from his awakening on the beach in Ithaca, as he cautiously explores the situation on the island while developing the beginnings of his master plan to restore order, and the beggar disguise that will make it possible. By book 15 the narrative is starting to weave the story of Telemachus back into the main plot, and the sequence culminates in the first of the poem's great emotional recognition scenes: the stunningly-told reunion of father and son.

These books introduce us to the Ithaca we're familiar with from the beginning of the poem, but seen now through the eyes of Odysseus himself. They're centred on a new location, the farm of the royal pig-manager Eumaeus, where Odysseus will lodge for a couple of days while gathering information, rehearsing his new identity, and carefully preparing for his encounter with the suitors. But we're also kept aware of events back at the palace, where all the characters' storylines will converge in book 17 for the next and decisive phase of the story.

It's in these books that we start to see the sustained application of the skills of storytelling and disguise Odysseus has been practising in the first half of the poem. In particular, we see the first of Odysseus' famous "Cretan tales", and the elaborate false identity into which he will settle for the following eight books.

Particular highlights of these books include:

- Odysseus' first face-to-face meeting with Athene
- the mind-games with Eumaeus
- Eumaeus' autobiography
- the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus.

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13. ODYSSEUS LANDS IN ITHACA

This is a book full of resonant transitions. It takes Odysseus from the end of his story in Scheria to the awakening in Ithaca and a look ahead to the strategy that will carry him through the rest of the poem. It's one of the most atmospheric and haunting books, with both the journey and the awakening touched with mystery and magic. But these are just preludes to the book's showpiece, the first of the great Ithacan dialogue scenes: the long-awaited meeting between Odysseus and his patron goddess Athene, with its subtle and affectionate depiction of the bond between them, and the first display of the psychological fencing between well-matched opponents we'll see again in the great scenes with Eumaeus and Penelope.

A. Scheria to Ithaca

The first part of the book has a lot of loose ends to tie up from the first half of the poem. Odysseus has to extract himself from Alcinous' hospitality and be delivered to Ithaca on a Phaeacian ship as promised. And what about Poseidon? How will he react to this final evasion of his wrath?

1. departure

Odysseus has been telling his story late into the night, and in the interlude at 11.333–84 his departure was promised for the following day. As it turns out, the ship won't actually launch until after sunset, and the journey will take place by night: not a time Greeks normally liked to sail, but we've seen that Phaeacian ships are self-steering, and the nocturnal voyage is one of a series of deliberately mysterious and evocative touches as we leave the world of fantasy behind for the very different world to which Odysseus will awaken on the beach in Ithaca.

(a) Alcinous' parting gifts

Once again, as at 11.333ff., there's an awed pause as Odysseus finally falls silent. Alcinous assures him that not only the tale but the experience of wandering is over, and that his protection will extend right up to the moment Odysseus is delivered home to Ithaca – an indication to the audience that there'll be no more interruptions to the homeward journey, and that the Ithacan phase of the action is now near at hand. He also levies a further round of gifts from the assembled nobles, apparently as a reward for the tale and/or a token of still higher respect for their guest in the light of it. (But the bit about recovering the value afterwards from the people is an interesting glimpse of the realities underpinning the heroic gift economy.) At last all retire, and in the morning the ship is loaded with the treasure under Alcinous' personal supervision.

(b) the last banquet

If Odysseus had been expecting an early sailing, he'd reckoned without Alcinous' characteristic expansion of the parting-meal phase of the hospitality sequence into a further day of full-scale feasting to Demodocus' song. But the narrative encourages us to share Odysseus' impatience, by showing no interest this time even in the subject of Demodocus' song. It's as if the whole feast has faded from focus in the background, as the narrative holds a close-up shot on Odysseus himself and gets under his skin with another of the *Odyssey*'s evocative emotional similes.

(c) farewells

The hospitality protocol requires the guest to initiate the formal farewells with his request to depart, and Odysseus deftly links the gifts, his good wishes, and his hopes and anxieties about his home in a concise, polished speech to Alcinous and a final gesture of regard and thanks to the queen as they pour the libation that accompanies the farewell prayers to Zeus. Both speeches have a happy-ever-after note of final closure – though in fact we're in for one more surprise visit to Scheria, unknown to the hero.

(d) shipboard and sleep

Because the voyage is nocturnal, the Phaeacians' passenger will naturally spend the time asleep. The choice of a night voyage hasn't been explicitly foreshadowed, but it serves a number of artful purposes here.

- This first demonstration of Phaeacan seamanship has a lot of expectations to live up to, and the element of magic and mystery in a night-time voyage is one way of delivering on those expectations without introducing more distracting elements of fantasy.
- At the same time, it allows the narrative to be vague about the geography of this voyage between an imaginary land and a real one, allowing the location of Scheria to remain a mystery.
- The image of Odysseus asleep at sea is one we haven't seen since his ill-timed snooze on the last, abortive approach to Ithaca, when his crew opened the bag of winds – and contrasts emphatically with the sleepless storm-swept nights that delivered him exhausted to Scheria in the first place. Now at last he feels secure enough of his homecoming to rest even in midst of Poseidon's ocean: a powerful sign that his wanderings, at least, are at an end.
- And of course the night voyage sets up the ingenious and dramatic situation that will follow when Odysseus wakes up to find himself once more alone on an unknown shore.

2. arrival

Odysseus is oblivious to the moment of arrival, which coincides with the dawn. But the narrator prepares us for the full irony of Odysseus' waking reaction by filling us in on the scene and location in detail.

(a) the cave

This is one of those moments when Ithacists, who credit Homer with detailed topographical knowledge of the real island of Ithaca, get into excitable punch-ups over the site of this cave on the island. In the Ithaca booklet I mentioned the discovery of a real "cave of the nymphs" near Polis Bay, with remains a treasure of twelve cauldrons like the twelve Odysseus brings from Scheria, but dating to a century or so before Homer's time. But it's better to look at this description as a piece of purely poetic topography whose details are determined by artistic considerations.

- Like Calypso's cave, it's a *locus amoenus*, a place of natural wonder; its sacredness is linked to its comparative isolation, and explains why no other ships use the harbour; and the famous detail of the double entrance makes it a particularly apt setting for the great scene of meeting between a god and a mortal that follows.
- At the same time, the cave serves the very practical purpose of giving the hero somewhere safe to stash his vast Phaeacian treasure – more, remember, than he gathered from *ten years* at Troy – while he goes off to play the very different part of a homeless vagrant.
- Finally, the very detail of the description builds up its significance as a location utterly distinctive, recognisable, and familiar to Odysseus – which makes his failure to recognise it on waking all the more ironic and poignant.

(b) unloading & departure

An eerie, wordless scene follows as the Phaeacians leave the sleeping Odysseus and his treasure on the beach before making a run for home, leaving no trace of their passing. Like the choice of an unused harbour, the effect is partly aimed at keeping the Phaeacians out of contact with any inhabitants of the real world. But there's something a little unsettling about their failure even to wake Odysseus up and say "Here you are, chum. One single fare to Ithaca, as promised. You all right from here?"

Notice the sly reintroduction of Athene here. If you've been flipping back to the start of the book to see where it said she was responsible for the bonus gifts, you'll have seen there was nothing said about this at the time. But she'll take full credit later on, as part of the process of revealing to Odysseus, and in some cases to us, her hidden hand behind much of the story so far.

3. Poseidon's revenge

We stay with the Phaeacian ship as it leaves, and in an effective *Jason and the Argonauts* transition we find ourself watching from the Olympian perspective of an infuriated Poseidon. This is the only time in the *Odyssey* we see Poseidon and Zeus interact, and it's a finely handled encounter that shows Zeus at his most diplomatic and managerial while allowing Poseidon a dignified final gesture before his effective disappearance from the poem.

(a) Poseidon appeals to Zeus

As in book 5, Poseidon is furious to see Odysseus transported homewards while he's been looking the other way. But now that Odysseus is out of Poseidon's domain and safely home on the dry land of Ithaca, there's nothing the god can do directly against him, and his anger turns instead against the Phaeacians who've conveyed him. Rather than resort again to unilateral punitive action, he consults with Zeus. It's a delicate speech, as Poseidon knows that Zeus supported Odysseus' homecoming against him, and he carefully couches it in terms of a slight to his divine honour by the Phaeacians.

Zeus agrees that Poseidon has the right to avenge a slight to his honour, but Poseidon is careful to run the proposed penalty past his brother for approval first. Poseidon's proposal is to fulfil Nausithous' prophecy from 8.564–71, to shatter the ship and seal off the harbour in Scheria. (My original scan of Shewring had him do this with a "messy mountain", but I don't

think installing a public eyesore was part of the intended punishment.) Zeus proposes a reduced penalty: turn the ship to stone, which will remind everyone of the prophecy while still leaving its fulfilment available as a further penalty if needed.

(b) the prophecy (part-)fulfilled

Poseidon goes ahead with the miracle, whose correct interpretation is provided by wise old Alcinous. The king recognises the warning, and what it signifies: that the Phaeacians have gone too far in their hospitality and seamanship, and if they are to continue to sail their beloved sea they must accept a further diminution in their contact with the human world. Odysseus will be the last stranger transported home by their miraculous ships. From here on, the Phaeacians and their amazing ships will fade from the memory of men.

Ancient geographers thought Scheria was based on the island of Corfu, which has a big rock sticking out of the sea just by the harbour mouth which local folklore claimed was the remains of the ship that had ferried Odysseus home.

B. Odysseus and Athene

With Alcinous, Poseidon, and the fate of the Phaeacians all tidied out of the way, the ground is clear for the great two-handed scene which will take up the rest of the book. It's a superb foretaste of the kind of thing that the books to come will be full of: richly ironic scenes of true and false identity, recognition, intrigue, conspiracy, and psychological mindgames.

1. awakening & soliloquy

With Poseidon otherwise engaged in Scheria and effectively retired from the narrative, Athene is free to take a more active role at last, and it's from the perspective of her plan that we witness Odysseus' awakening in familiar surroundings made suddenly unfamiliar. Notice how much foreshadowing of the action to come is packed into the synopsis of her plan: the concealment of Odysseus' identity from everyone, even Penelope; the punishment of the suitors, and the use of Odysseus' disguise as a means to that end. This is the first in a long and artful series of progressive revelations over the next ten books of the details of Odysseus' coming revenge, drip-feeding the audience with clues while tantalisingly postponing the key features of the plan.

Odysseus' reaction to his apparent betrayal is a soliloquy rich in touches of characterisation and irony. He opens with the now-familiar question (on which see the Civilisation & Savagery seminar): is this going to be another Scheria or another island of cannibals? On this occasion his anxiety is heightened by the mass of treasure that remains the only tangible proof that the whole Phaeacian episode was anything more than a dream. Out here on an unknown shore, he's worse off than ever: the treasure is useless, and the Phaeacians have abandoned him somewhere from Ithaca.

Odysseus' response to the Phaeacians' apparent treachery is a particularly telling combination. His first reaction is one of outraged piety, praying to Zeus as god of hospitality to punish this transgression of his codes. But his calculating, practical, materialistic side swiftly asserts itself in a quick inventory of the treasure to make sure at least he hasn't been robbed as well as marooned. With the discovery that all's present and correct, disappointment and the old longing kick in, in a return to the Odysseus we met on his first appearance in book 5: gazing glumly out to sea, wondering where among the empty waves is Ithaca.

2. encounter and Q&A

Now at last Athene makes her entrance. Most of the great scenes in the books to come are built around the fact that at least one character is in disguise; and here Athene falls back on a false identity similar to the one she used back in Scheria at 7.14ff., where she took the form of a local girl to guide Odysseus to Alcinous' palace. On that occasion, it was Odysseus who was shrouded in a mist of invisibility; but here it's the landscape around him that she's masked from recognition.

Odysseus greets the mystery youth's arrival with a rapid, condensed version of the suppliant routine he used on Nausicaa. He can't conceal the stupendous treasure he's standing beside, but he's careful to give nothing away about his identity or where he's come from. But

the unctuous comparisons to a god are closer to the truth than he suspects, and Athene chooses to string him along a little longer in her response.

Athene's speech is a multi-layered performance entirely characteristic of the Ithacan books. We know who she is, and that she knows who Odysseus really is, and what and why he needs to be told about his surroundings. But Odysseus knows none of this, and Athene can't help but enjoy his performance as he improvises a false identity and a story to explain his situation. She deliberately spins out the revelation of the name "Ithaca" until after a series of clues that progressively give the game away – particularly "no land for horses", which fits with Telemachus' explanation to Menelaus of why a chariot wouldn't be much use to take home. But the final reference to Troy is a mischievous tease of her own. Will Odysseus give himself away as he did to Alcinous?

At this point Odysseus must be tempted to fall on his knees and kiss the soil of Ithaca. Tellingly, he does nothing of the kind. Instead, his skills of improvisation go into overdrive, as he comes out with the first in the extraordinary series of imaginary autobiographies known as the "Cretan tales".

3. the first Cretan tale

Five times in the Ithacan books, Odysseus creates an elaborate false identity and history for himself. All five are different, but they have things in common: most claim an origin on the island of Crete, kingdom of the Iliadic hero Idomeneus, and all to varying degrees are recognisably stitched together out of bits of Odysseus' own experience. This is the shortest of the five – Odysseus is having to improvise on the spot – and is ironically undercut by the audience's knowledge that *his* audience knows it for a pack of lies. But like Athene, we enjoy seeing Odysseus' skills of fabrication in action; and the story itself repays close examination.

(a) murder and exile

Odysseus absorbs the bombshell about Ithaca without missing a beat, and launches straight into an impromptu explanation of how a well-dressed stranger might come to be on a deserted beach with a pile of treasure and not the slightest clue where he is. Why might a wealthy man arrive alone on a foreign shore? Well, one possible mechanism is that he might be a fugitive murderer, like the young Patroclus (*Iliad* 23.85–90) and a couple of other characters in the *Iliad* (Medon, *Iliad* 13.694–7; Lycophron, *Iliad* 15.430–2), as well as the important character of Theoclymenus coming up in *Odyssey* 15. Homeric kingdoms don't have extradition treaties, so it's possible to escape vengeance by blood-feud in the home community by taking up permanent residence somewhere else. Notice how he fleshes out the story with plausible-seeming touches of motive and characterisation (the feud with Idomeneus' family, the murderous ambush as a response to attempted robbery, the Trojan origins of the treasure) and dramatic narrative details (the atmospheric night setting of the ambush). Orsilochus is a completely fictional character, but Crete and Idomeneus are of course real – a good example of Odysseus' crafty use of seemingly authenticating details in an otherwise made-up story.

(b) storm and landfall

Up until now, the only element of the story with any resemblance to Odysseus' own experiences has been his presence at Troy and the treasure he took from the sack. But the story of his escape on a Phoenician ship is clearly woven out of his own experience of being blown off course in book 9 and his past night's adventure with the Phaeacians. We'll hear a lot about Phoenician traders and pirates in these books, where they're proverbially wide-ranging and slightly shady travellers in the central Mediterranean.

4. the goddess unmasks

Throughout this performance, Athene has been trying to keep a straight face, and at last drops the disguise – not for her true divine form, which is rarely seen even by mortals, but for a human form closer to her true nature. It's an important moment, because up until now she's been wary of revealing herself to Odysseus for fear of attracting the attention of his enemy and her uncle Poseidon – now at last no longer a threat. Some commentators rather oddly see an element of flirtation in her gesture and speech here – but though it's true Calypso uses the

same gesture at 5.180, so does Menelaus at 4.609, and we're clearly not meant to see it as having any kind of sexual import.

(a) her speech

It's very unusual for a god to pay compliment to a mortal in the way Athene does here, and it's an illuminating insight into the roots of her affection for Odysseus. She takes delight in seeing intelligence exercised, and recognises his delight in its practice. It's just as well she's the specialist goddess in this kind of thing, or even she might be taken in. As it is, it's Odysseus who for once in his life was fooled by perhaps the one trickster capable of outplaying him (though Penelope, as we'll see, is his match). Now at last she reveals that she's been on his case ever since his arrival in Scheria – note again the claim to have prompted even the parting gifts – and intends to guide him through the Ithacan phase. But he'll have to be patient, secretive, and strong, calling on all his powers of physical and emotional endurance: a further glimpse of the nature of the revenge plan and the special skills he'll need to carry it through.

(b) Odysseus' doubts

Odysseus is still catching up here. He doesn't take her up on the last point, but returns the compliment on her own cunning and asks why, if she's been so busy in his interest, he saw nothing of her between Troy and Scheria, and little enough there. (Interestingly, he reveals that he saw through her disguise in book 7, but makes no mention of the moment he caught a glimpse at 8.199.) What's more, he's still puzzled as to why he can't recognise his surroundings if this is indeed Ithaca. Is she still playing games, despite her protestations?

(c) Athene's response

Athene isn't offended by his scepticism; for her, this is just one more sign of his restless, ever-probing mind at work, and just the kind of quality he's going to need to recover his home. As she shrewdly points out, Odysseus has trained himself not to trust anyone, even Athene herself, and not even when she assures him of Penelope's fidelity. (Notice the subtle trailer here for a coming encounter between the disguised Odysseus and his queen.) In answer to his questions: she had to keep a low profile in his earlier wanderings because she couldn't stand openly up to Poseidon; and yes, this is Ithaca, and every element of the landscape around him is rich in personal memory and significance once she blows away the mist that masks its identity.

Odysseus' vivid display of deep emotion and connectedness to the landscape makes a pointed contrast with his earlier coolness. He immediately offers up a prayer to the local nymphs of the cave, though its sidelong reference to Athene shows that it's aimed at least as much at her. The same cave now does double duty as a handy hiding-place for the treasure (of which we hear nothing further in the poem), blocked off from casual discovery by a divinely-placed stone to seal the mouth.

5. the plan

Now at last the hero and his patron goddess can sit down and plan their strategy for the books to come. There are three parts to this. First, Odysseus needs to know the general situation; next, he has to plan his first move; and finally, he has to assume the identity he'll need to play.

(a) the suitors

Athene briefs him succinctly on the essentials of the situation in Ithaca: the suitors' three years of greed and pressure in the palace, and Penelope's increasingly desperate strategy of postponement. (You'll remember Odysseus actually heard about this from Teiresias in book 11, but that was seven years ago and he can be forgiven if it's slipped his mind.)

Odysseus instantly spots the analogy with Aegisthus, who ambushed and murdered Agamemnon on a similar homecoming. What they need, he sees at once, is a plan. He defers to Athene on the details, but vigorously confirms that he's looking forward to reviving their old partnership. As Telemachus will point out in book 16, the "three hundred foemen" aren't too far off the mark – but with the team of Odysseus and Athene reunited, the two of them are more than a match.

(b) Eumaeus and Telemachus

Athene's outline plan has three parts, whose connections we'll have to wait to see in detail – though she does confirm for the first time that the ultimate goal is the massacre of the suitors.

- Step one will be to disguise Odysseus' outward appearance, though the transformation will be skin-deep: complexion, hair, clothing, eyes, but the body will be left unchanged. (We'll see the reason for this at various points between books 18 and 22.)
- Step two will be to pay a visit to Eumaeus before venturing to the palace. Athene has only been able to brief him with the barest outline of the situation in the palace; Eumaeus can fill him in at length, and at the same time Odysseus will get to practice his beggar identity.
- Step three is Athene's business. While Odysseus is safely lodged with Eumaeus, she'll recall Telemachus from Sparta. Odysseus is alarmed at the news of his son's perilous journey, and Athene has to reassure him that this too was part of her plan, to build up Telemachus' *kleos* as part of his preparation for his work back in Ithaca. True, the suitors have laid an ambush and are planning his murder on the homeward journey – not an admission calculated to boost Odysseus' confidence. But Athene assures him it'll come to nothing, as indeed (rather anticlimatically) it does.

(c) Odysseus disguised

Step one is implemented at once. Odysseus is transformed as promised, and will retain this appearance until book 23. Extra descriptive attention is lavished on his clothing, which will hide the untransformed parts of his body under a particularly unappealing costume of three layers each more disgusting than the last, and a couple of classic coarse-acting props for good measure. This is going to be quite a performance; and as they part company on their respective missions, Odysseus prepares to give his new identity its first bravura workout.

14. IN EUMAEUS' HUT

This often-underrated book is one of the jewels of the *Odyssey*. On the face of it, hardly anything happens: Odysseus arrives at the homestead of the swineherd Eumaeus, and the two of them spend the rest of the book in conversation. But the long, brilliant exchange of speeches between the pair is a stunning showcase for Odysseus' skills of verbal and psychological mastery, as he probes and charms this thoughtful, complex man who will become the first recruit to his conspiracy, all the while he's gathering information about the situation in the palace and embroidering the false identity he's constructed for himself. I often think the episode at the end of this book is my single favourite scene in all of Homer.

A. Arrival and reception

The episode opens with a fascinating rustic version of the hospitality scene we've become so familiar with in more aristocratic contexts. Despite the unprepossessing appearance of his visitor as described at the end of the previous book, Eumaeus demonstrates an unhesitating grasp of the proper way to welcome strangers. His improvisation of the necessary elements out of a mountaintop pig farm is the clearest sign yet that the *Odyssey*'s moral code operates across all barriers of class and status. The poem's use of such a figure as a major character had an enormous influence on later literature, from Euripides' *Electra* to Callimachus' *Hecale*; and it marks a new, grittier realism in the *Odyssey* itself after the fantastic realms of imagination of earlier books.

1. the compound

The scene begins with an extended description of this important location, which will be the key setting for the next four books. Inevitably it makes us think of the last such description, when Odysseus approached the rather different setting of Alcinous' palace in book 7 under not so different circumstances. Notice, as well as the finely-observed touches of everyday practical detail, the way Eumaeus' personality is stamped on each element by the repeated reminders that everything here is his own handiwork. Before we've even met the owner, we get a picture of versatile practicality, strength and efficiency, and a capable mind for planning

and organisation. At the same time, we already see the tell-tale signs of the suitors' depredations; and the whole description is framed in such a way as to invite us to imagine we're seeing it through Odysseus' eyes and sizing it up as he does. The figure of Eumaeus himself is reserved for the end of the sequence, and we see him characteristically active and purposeful, as well as conveniently alone.

2. the dogs I

The quiet scene now erupts into action with the arrival of a stranger – giving a rather effective sense that the preceding description has occupied only a moment of Odysseus' time, in which he's taken the whole scene in at a glance before the dogs react to his arrival. These dogs will turn up again twice, to brilliant effect, in book 16, where they'll respond to two very different further arrivals in pointedly contrasting ways. On this occasion, Odysseus reacts at once in a way that shows both an astute understanding of canine behaviour and a shrewd sense of the character he's playing. Rather than defending himself with his stick, he adopts a non-aggressive pose towards them in keeping with his supposedly defenceless character, and lets Eumaeus shoo the dogs off with a shower of stones (a nice touch of everyday realistic detail).

3. Eumaeus on Odysseus

Eumaeus' first speech is one of apology to the stranger: if the dogs had injured his visitor, it would have been Eumaeus' responsibility and shame. In the first of a series of such moments of heavy irony, he's struck at some subconscious level by a likeness between the stranger and what his missing master may be suffering at this very moment. Even to a complete stranger, he makes no secret of his loyalties, or his unhappiness with the present regime. But his immediate obligation is to provide hospitality, which he promises at once in a concise outline of the sequence: entry to the home, food and wine, and then will come the time for conversation.

4. his hospitality

Like a good host, he leads his guest inside, and finds him a seat. Eumaeus' dwelling is much too humble for anything as grand as chairs, but with the practical sense we've already seen in the compound's design he rapidly makes him a comfortable space and padded mat out of the materials available in the cottage. Odysseus is impressed, and says so; but Eumaeus protests that it's his duty under Zeus to provide nothing less for all strangers. He's sorry not to be able to offer more, but his resources are limited in his master's absence. For a moment we get a glimpse of another world entirely, in which the war never happened, Odysseus was never away, and Eumaeus himself was rewarded with a different kind of life. Odysseus says nothing, but it must give him something to ponder as Eumaeus makes his guest a generous meal of farm-fresh pork kebabs, slaughtered and cooked on the spot.

5. Eumaeus on the suitors

The procedures of Homeric hospitality prevent Eumaeus from questioning his guest till after the meal, but there's nothing to inhibit him from making one-ended conversation about himself in the meantime. He begins by apologising for serving up less than full-grown animals, but explains that the prime porkers are reserved for the suitors. This is the first mention of the suitors between Eumaeus and the beggar, and he's too centred on indignation at their conduct and its impact on the local economy to explain more clearly who they're wooing and why. Instead, he gives a fascinating accounting of Odysseus' estates and where the pig-farm fits into the larger picture. As we saw in the Ithaca seminar, Odysseus' herds are too extensive for the island alone to accommodate, and the majority of his animals are pastured on the mainland: 12 herds each of cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats, plus one herd of pigs and eleven of goats on Ithaca itself. Evidently the larger animals aren't suited to the rocky terrain of Ithaca, Athene's mention of cattle notwithstanding (13.246).

Eumaeus' position is especially difficult, as proprietor of the sole pig-farm on the island, which has to supply a mature animal every day of the year to the suitors out of the 360 remaining animals available. (Unlike cattle, sheep, and goats, which can be pastured, pigs have to be penned in a farm.) The fifty sows and the unspecified number of immature hogs

are penned separately, but the effect is clearly that the suitors are consuming hogs as fast as Eumaeus can breed them.

B. The mindgames begin

Odysseus takes his time responding, using the cover of hospitality conventions to hide his thoughts until after the meal is over. But now he begins to play an active role in the conversation, and the book rapidly shifts into the most complex and extended dialogue yet seen in Homer.

1. the beggar's question

Odysseus' brooding silence, holding his peace while his thoughts and emotions race ahead, is the first of many such moments in the books to come. In a careful demonstration of respect for his host, he offers Eumaeus the wine to signal that he himself is sufficiently refreshed and conversation can now flow freely. But the gesture also has the effect of momentarily stopping Eumaeus' tirade and allowing Odysseus, not the swineherd, to ask the first questions and control the direction of the conversation. Playing his role carefully, Odysseus doesn't respond to the rant about the suitors or the flocks; instead, he asks innocently as a stranger might about the identity of this unnamed master. Odysseus is probing here for an opening to spin a story he can use as a passport to the palace; but now it turns out that others less scrupulous have had the same idea before him, and his challenge will be to surmount the wall of scepticism that confronts any such effort.

2. Eumaeus' reply

Eumaeus' answer is a superbly-judged mixture of tactful insight and warning. He sees at once what the beggar's about, and politely advises him not to think of trying it on. They've had twenty years now of charlatans turning up at the palace to trade what they claim news of Odysseus for a cloak and tunic. Even if Penelope is still a sucker for this kind of thing, Eumaeus has long since lost all illusions. Odysseus is dead, and Eumaeus' life is the worse for it. (We'll hear more about the poignant story of how Eumaeus lost his parents in the next book.) That's why it's so painful to speak his name, reserved for the climax of the speech: Odysseus.

3. the beggar's oath

Odysseus is undeterred, and seems to relish the challenge of breaking down the defences of such a hardened sceptic. (As we'll see, it's practice that will come in handy when he finds himself up against Penelope herself.) Far from backing down, he audaciously raises the stakes. Not only does he claim certain knowledge of Odysseus' return, but he'll swear an oath to it by all the things he knows Eumaeus holds sacred: Zeus, and the bonds and symbols of hospitality. (The reference to a table here is just an enthusiastic metaphor; of course Eumaeus doesn't have any furniture as such.) In a wry quotation of Achilles' words to Odysseus himself at *Iliad* 9.312–3, he deprecates any kind of falsehood; and to show he's not motivated by profit, he renounces any reward until such time as his story is proved true. And the bombshell is that the return, and revenge, is imminent. Just how imminent has been a matter of dispute about this passage since antiquity; the expression translated "within this same year" is very unclear, and the rest of the passage seems to imply something mere days away. At any rate it's clearly a forceful enough prediction to startle Eumaeus, who doesn't even notice the potentially tell-tale reference to a son he hasn't even mentioned.

4. Eumaeus changes the subject

Eumaeus doesn't seem to know what to make of this. Either his well-mannered guest is an outrageous blasphemer, or his own scepticism is misplaced. Neither of these is a conclusion he's comfortable drawing, and he hastily refuses to accept the oath and steers the conversation in another direction. First he fleshes out, as perhaps Odysseus intended him to, the casual reference to the master's son and his present whereabouts and peril; but this too takes an uncomfortable turn, and he changes the subject forcibly to a standard list of questions to his visitor.

- Who are you?
- Where have you come from?
- Where are your roots?
- Whose ship brought you here?

This last question is an opportunity to introduce the stranger to the local joke we heard from Telemachus to his guest in book 1: "No one journeys on foot to Ithaca!" Odysseus will get his fill of this thigh-slapper before many more books are out.

5. the second Cretan tale

Odysseus has had plenty of time to work on his story since its first, embryonic and improvised version to Athene. The tale he now spins is the longest and most elaborate of his Cretan tales, though woven out of the same basic materials and techniques, and rightly forms the centrepiece of this book. He begins with a prologue that reminds us of the introduction to his narrative in book 9: a sign not just that the story that now unfolds will be a long one, but also that Odysseus is aiming to replicate some of the same impact with an entirely fictional version of his tale.

(a) at home in Crete

In this version the beggar is not a scion of a rival aristocratic family to the ruling house of Idomeneus, but a bastard son in a rich man's house who had to make his own way in the world on talent alone. In this case his talent was for war, so that by the time of the outbreak of the Trojan war he was already a wealthy and respected local warlord.

(b) with Idomeneus to Troy, and home

But then comes a bigger war, in which we now learn that the Cretan contingent was actually co-commanded by Idomeneus and our hero – something certainly not recorded in the Catalogue of Ships. Both commanders return safely home in triumph at the end of the ten years; but the war has changed those who were lucky enough to survive it, and the taste for overseas adventure has sunk in too deep.

(c) the Egyptian expedition

So begins the ill-fated expedition to Egypt, which we'll gradually realise is a masterfully recomposed narrative built out of what we recognise as certain of Odysseus' own adventures on the homeward journey. The first leg of the journey, from Crete to Egypt, goes smoothly; and they anchor at the mouth of the Nile on what ought to be a disciplined and effective raiding expedition.

(i) the defeat (≈ the Cicones)

It's here that things start to go horribly wrong, in ways familiar to the audience of Odysseus' earlier wanderings. As Odysseus found repeatedly, shiploads of warriors fresh from the sack of Troy can't be so easily ordered and controlled, and soon we're in a replay of the Cicones episode as indiscipline and unchecked plunder trigger devastating retaliation from the locals. The Cretan army are slaughtered and enslaved to the last man, and their commander only escapes by supplicating the king to spare him. (We catch echoes of both Nausicaa and Alcinous here.)

(ii) years' royal hospitality (≈ Calypso)

Seven years pass, the same span of time that Odysseus spent with Calypso. Like Odysseus in Scheria (and even more like Menelaus in Egypt, though Odysseus isn't aware of that at this stage) he gets rich from the system of guest-gifts, to the point where he's ready to try his luck again overseas.

(iii) the Phoenician & shipwreck (≈ book 12)

First he travels to the Lebanon, where like Odysseus with Circe he stays a year with a host of dubious intentions. But just as the treacherous Phoenician is about to betray him into slavery at the end of their next voyage together, Zeus takes pre-emptive action and destroys the ship with a storm and thunderbolt. Like other episodes in this complex tale, it's a composite of two separate incidents in Odysseus' travels: the destruction of his ship in book 12, where he

escapes by clinging to the mast, and the wreck in book 5 where he similarly drifts for days before being washed up on a strange shore.

(iv) Thesprotis (≈ Scheria)

Now comes the climax of the story: the basis for the beggar's claim to be able to guarantee Odysseus' homecoming. Washed up on the west Greek mainland kingdom of Thesprotis like Odysseus in Scheria, he too is rescued by a child of the king and given clothing, escort, and an introduction to the king.

(v) signs of Odysseus

As it happens, Odysseus had recently passed that way, and intended to pass again: so much was evident from the treasure left with the king for safe keeping, and (as in Scheria) the ship that would carry him home was already prepared. And what of Odysseus himself? In one of the story's most artful touches, he's off consulting the local oracle in Dodona about what kind of a return to make: a hint to Eumaeus that when Odysseus does come home it might not be the open return in glory that everyone's expecting, and may in fact be deliberately concealed.

(vi) the crew's treachery (≈ book 13)

As it turns out, the story will move on before Odysseus himself makes an entrance, in a final twist that explains how the beggar fetched up on Ithaca from having so recently been an honoured guest of a king just across the strait. The Thesprotian king gives him passage on a local ship bound for the neighbouring island kingdom of Dulichium; but now the fate he escaped on the voyage to Africa overtakes him a second time, as the crew treacherously bind him with a view to selling him as a slave. In a hair-raising escape, he slips his bonds and escapes while they're beached in Ithaca for a meal, then lies low in the woods while they hunt for him in vain before giving up.

6. Eumaeus' scepticism

Eumaeus doesn't know what to make of this epic tale of adventure and surprises. He admits to being moved, but he also frankly refuses to believe that all of it is true. The part about Odysseus in Thesprotis, in particular, sounds all too much like a kind of tale that Ithacans have been hearing from a string of fraudsters over the years. Even the suitors lap it up, but Eumaeus is too hardened by lies to believe any more tales of this kind. Embarrassingly, Odysseus' careful fabrications all turn out to have been anticipated by others: the murder-and-exile story he told to Athene; the Cretan connection; the claim to have crossed the path of a returning Odysseus; the prediction of an imminent homecoming; the assurances of treasure. Once Eumaeus made the mistake of believing one of these; it's not a mistake he intends to make twice. His final words sum up his position well: he's taken the beggar in because he feels genuine sympathy and respects the rights of guests and strangers. To seek to buy his favour with this kind of fabrication is both unnecessary and offensive.

7. the beggar's challenge

But Odysseus isn't beaten yet. In a dazzling coup of bluff-calling, he challenges Eumaeus to a wager: a cloak, a tunic, and a passage to the next island if his prediction proves true, and Eumaeus can chuck him off a cliff if it doesn't. Either way, it'll put an end to the kind of phoney story Eumaeus finds so objectionable. How can he lose?

8. Eumaeus wriggles out

Eumaeus sees he's walked into a masterfully constructed trap. If he accepts it while maintaining his scepticism, he's agreeing to do an Aegisthus on his own guest, the most appalling crime he could imagine perpetrating. Yet if he rejects it, he's conceding the possibility that the story might be true. Eumaeus isn't falling for this one; he waves the suggestion away, and deftly changes the subject.

C. the evening meal and cloak tale

Now Eumaeus' four assistants return from their various missions around the island, and the scene opens up into an engagingly rusticised version of a Phaeacian-style heroic banquet. The

visitor provides an excuse to slaughter a first-class animal in his honour, which will double as a long-overdue gesture of defiance to the suitors.

1. sacrifice and meal

The scene of sacrifice is narrated in detail, and follows the familiar type-scene pattern based on the standard sequence of real-life ritual actions. We saw a similar but fuller scene in Pylos at 3.430ff., but this is a more modest domestic version, and leaves out such elements as the procession, the lustral water, and the ritual shriek that would be raised by any women present. There isn't an altar available, so the cottage hearth-fire does duty instead. Here's the sequence again, with the omitted steps italicised.

- *participants escort the victim in procession to the altar*
- *participants form a circle around the altar, together with any further victims (as in mass sacrifices such as hecatombs)*
- participants *wash hands in lustral water, and* take a handful of barley grains from a basket
- *the sacrificer sprinkles water on the victim to get it to make an involuntary head gesture taken to signify assent to its killing, and the participants throw their barley grains*
- the sacrificer cuts some hairs from the victim and throws them into the *altar* flame, at the same time speaking his prayer
- the sacrificer cuts the victim's throat, *women raise a ritual shriek,* and the animal's blood is poured on the altar
- the thighbones are wrapped in fat and burned in altar fire as the gods' portion
- the entrails are skewered, roasted, and shared among the participants
- the other meat is *boiled and* distributed.

Odysseus is impressed, especially by his host's award of the choicest cut to the stranger, and makes a point of saying so. This may not be the Phaeacian palace, but the quality of attention and respect is every bit as high as Alcinous'. At an aristocratic feast, this would be the point to bring on the bard; and in the absence of one, Odysseus himself will give what is possibly his most dazzling storytelling performance of all.

2. the cloak story

Odysseus proposes a little experiment to himself. He's going to see if he can get Eumaeus to give him his own bed-cloak for the wet, miserable night, without having to ask for it directly. To that end, he tells a story of his character's adventures back at Troy, where he commanded alongside Odysseus himself. At first his choice of subject seems baffling; Odysseus already knows that Eumaeus refuses to believe any stories told of Odysseus, and now his guest is boasting of first-hand acquaintance and even equal status as a contingent commander.

But the story goes off in an unexpected direction. Though introduced as a boast about his heroic youth and vigour, the character comes over as anything but heroic. On the contrary, he's a bumbling incompetent who can't even dress properly for a night ambush, and has to rely on his fellow commanders to extricate him from the consequences. The real hero of the story is Odysseus, who instantly comes up with a scheme: send a runner back to the ships for reinforcements, and he'll have to leave his cloak behind. (The Thoas who volunteers isn't the famous one from the *Iliad*, but an invented character to whom this common name meaning "swift" has been appropriately attached.) The final line of the speech is a wonderful punchline: "Ah yes, I was a real hero in those days…"

3. Eumaeus gets the message

Eumaeus and the company are entertained, and the swineherd gets the point – or as much of it as he's expected to. He recognises the story as a fairly preposterous piece of entertainment, whose real purpose is to amuse its audience, flatter the memory of Odysseus, and signal that he could do with some bedding. What he can't appreciate, but we can, is the extra level of irony: that Odysseus' stratagem in the story of telling a false tale to get a cloak is mirrored not just in the beggar's telling of *his* tale for the same purpose, but in Odysseus' own adoption of the beggar disguise in the first place – the biggest falsehood of all.

4. Eumaeus keeps watch

As a neat coda to the story, Eumaeus himself does a Thoas. Though he in fact turned out to have a spare cloak for the stranger to sleep in, he nevertheless takes his responsibilities too seriously to turn in with the others. Instead, he wraps up warm, arms himself with a spear, and goes out into this miserable night to keep what must seem like a thankless, sodden watch over his master's property. Only we and Odysseus know that his every move is being surreptitiously watched, and quietly approved, by the master himself, who already is sketching a role for this figure in his great plan of revenge.

15. TELEMACHUS RETURNS

In this important transitional book, the strands of the narrative at last begin to converge, as we return to Telemachus and his voyage home to Ithaca. His story is intercut with a further scene between Odysseus and Eumaeus back in Ithaca, which includes the moving story of Eumaeus' own origins and how he originally came to Ithaca. Finally we return to Telemachus and his own arrival in Ithaca, and the path that will take him to Eumaeus' hut and the most significant moment of his life.

A. Telemachus

There's a notorious chronological problem about the synchronisation of Odysseus' movements with Telemachus'. We last saw Telemachus agreeing to stay on in Sparta for "a dozen days". In fact, if we take the chronology at face value, he and Peisistratus have stayed for thirty. This is usually explained as a consequence of "Zielinski's first law" – the principle that Homer never narrates the same period of time twice, so that when two things ought to be happening simultaneously the relative chronology gets adjusted to make them happen successively. This means that Telemachus has spend a whole month in Sparta cooling his heels for no obvious reason while Odysseus makes his way from Ogygia to Scheria to Ithaca; it also means that Odysseus has to spend an extra day (or even two days) with Eumaeus while Telemachus makes an accelerated journey home from Sparta.

Obviously what *ought* to happen is that Telemachus stays a day or two in Sparta, then embarks on his homeward voyage about the time that Odysseus does, and the two meet at Eumaeus' cottage on the second day of Odysseus' stay. Instead, Athene doesn't go off to Sparta till after the meeting on the beach in Ithaca, when Odysseus is already on his way to Eumaeus. From time to time someone will pop their head over the parapet to try and argue that something like this is what Homer really intends. (The latest and best of these is Douglas Olson in chapter 5 of his book *Blood and Iron*.) But there's no getting away from the fact that the text as we have it clearly presents the two strands of the action as successive.

In the chronology I've followed the generally-accepted version, according to which Athene's appearance to Telemachus in Sparta occurs on the same morning as she leaves Odysseus in Ithaca. But it has to be admitted that such a chronology seems to break Zielinski's law by going back to the morning in book 15 when night has already fallen in book 14, and many scholars reluctantly favour a chronology in which Athene's journey to Sparta (which should be instantaneous) takes a whole day and night, and Odysseus spends yet another day and night with Eumaeus that isn't mentioned at all in the text. That would give something like this:

day	no.	events	reference	lines
34	1	Odysseus to Ithaca	xiii.18-92	75
35	1	Odysseus to Eumaeus	xiii.93-xiv.533	881
36	1	Telemachus to Pherae	xv.188	188
37	1	Telemachus to Ithaca	xv.189-494	306
38	1	Telemachus to Eumaeus	xv.495-xvi.481	544
39	1	Odysseus to palace	xvii.1-xx.90	1728
40	1	Massacre of suitors	xx.91-xxiii.346	1585
41	1	Laertes; suitors' kin	xxiii.347-xxiv.548	574

But if you look closely, you'll see that Shewring has translated the second line of book 15 with a pluperfect ("had travelled"), putting Athene's journey earlier than the preceding scene – so the translation, at least, sticks with the 40-day version. (The Greek can be taken either way, and the words "in the mean while" are Shewring's addition.)

If your head is starting to throb a bit at this point, welcome to the crazy world of Homeric chronology. The real danger sign is when you start finding this kind of thing fun. It's enough to conclude that the oddities of epic narrative convention have produced a bit of a glitch here which we probably shouldn't try to iron out.

1. leavetaking in Sparta

Athene appears to Telemachus much as she did to Nausicaa at the start of book 5, except that this time she doesn't seem to be exactly a dream. Telemachus is suffering from insomnia, and Athene articulates and plays on the worries that are keeping him awake. We're not told even that she adopts a human disguise, though of course he wouldn't be able to see her in the dark. Perhaps we're to understand that her new openness with Odysseus extends to Telemachus as well.

(a) Athene's dream

As with Nausicaa, she operates indirectly and psychologically, stirring the sleeper into action by working on his anxieties. Instead of saying, "Right, up with you – your dad's back in Ithaca and needs you", she opens with a calculated rebuke to his inertia in the light of his background preoccupations, embroidering the situation to evoke an artificial sense of urgency. So far as we know, Penelope's birth-family aren't pressuring her at all, Eurymachus isn't particularly emerging as a front-runner, and Athene's characterisation of Penelope here owes more to Telemachus' rather limited understanding of her complex personality than to anything we've seen in the poem. But Athene adroitly conjures up a worst-case scenario that dramatises all Telemachus' fears.

As for the suitors' ambush, that's easily avoided once Telemachus knows it's there. The trick is not to sail directly in up the western strait to the main harbour as expected, but to land on the opposite side and send the ship around the island the other way, while Telemachus himself makes his way overland, on foot, not to the palace but to Eumaeus' farm. Eumaeus can then go on to the palace to report Telemachus' safe return as a *fait accompli*, catching the suitors on the back foot. As with Nausicaa's laundry, Athene has of course a hidden agenda: both the stay with Eumaeus and Eumaeus' trip to the palace are part of a carefully-plotted master plan to get all three characters where they need to be at the right time.

(b) Telemachus and Peisistratus

A nice little comic vignette follows as Telemachus, urgent to depart, tries to nudge his woozy companion into leaving at once. As Peisistratus sleepily points out, (a) it's dark and (b) they can't decently forego the formalities of departure. Like Odysseus, Telemachus will need to practise the art of patience.

(c) morning: Menelaus' hospitality

Sure enough, the morning's action is built around an expanded version of the departure phase of the standard hospitality sequence. Telemachus makes the formal request to depart; Menelaus formally accepts the request, and begs leave to prepare a final meal and gather the parting gifts promised. He also offers an escort if wanted, though this will only be needed if Telemachus intends to travel further overland before retracing his steps to Pylos and back to Ithaca. Telemachus declines; his immediate need is to return to Ithaca to check on his property. This is a tactfully-edited version of his real anxieties, which of course he's not going to admit to his host.

(d) Menelaus' gift

The meal is prepared, and Menelaus and Helen each pick out a gift from the storeroom, with Menelaus' new-married son Megapenthes from book 4 bringing a bonus gift. As usual, the gift's preciousness is as much in its history as in its material and artistic value: Menelaus' bowl is not only the work of a god but was itself the gift of a high-ranking king, acquired on a visit in the course of Menelaus' long and eventful journey home from Troy.

(e) Helen's gift

Helen, meanwhile, picked out a more feminine gift, but one no less charged with symbolism. Women's work is weaving, so Helen's gift is a wedding-dress for Telemachus' eventual bride, woven by Helen herself, to be stored in Penelope's keeping until Telemachus marries and becomes a family head in his own right.

(f) the farewell meal

The meal itself is a fairly standard one, built from formulaic lines we're by now familiar with. There's no drink and conversation phase afterwards; instead, they go straight into the leavetaking, with an exchange of good wishes and a libation to speed them on their way.

(g) the omen & Helen's interpretation

But the scene is interrupted by a dramatic omen, the first since book 2 but one of a series of such signs in the books leading up to the climax. Like all such bird-omens, it requires a skilled augur to read it, like Halitherses in the Ithacan assembly. In Sparta, this becomes another opportunity for the half-divine Helen to display her more than human understanding of such things: the eagle is Odysseus, the goose is the suitors, and the seemingly unsettling omen in fact promises imminent return and revenge.

(h) Sparta to Pherae

The rest of the day is taken up with the journey to Pherae, where Telemachus and Peisistratus stopped over on their original journey from Pylos to Sparta in book 4. On the 40-day chronology, we've now caught up with the rainy night in Ithaca when Odysseus tells his cloak story; on the 41-day version, we've come to the end of an otherwise unnarrated first full day of Odysseus' stay on the pig farm.

2. Theoclymenus

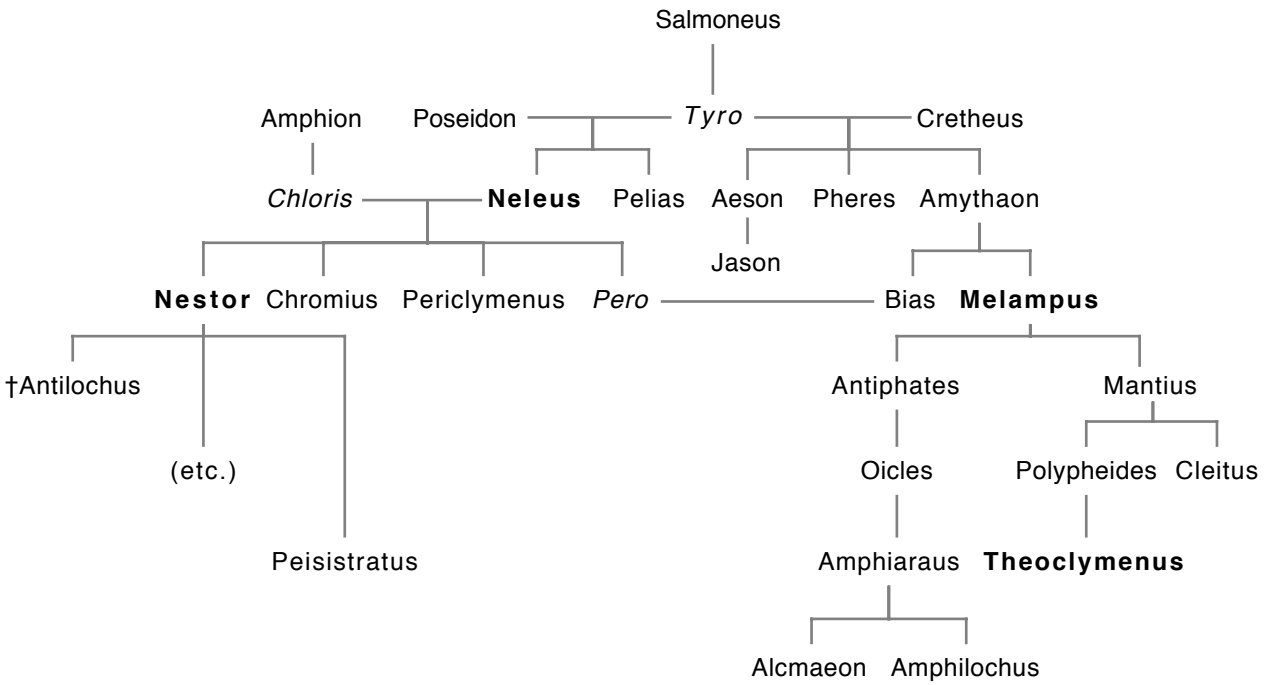
Now come two surprise developments that both present a challenge to Telemachus' sense of his responsibilities as a newly-fledged member of the international heroic community. The first is a forthright solution to a delicate problem of etiquette and timing: how to get Telemachus back to Ithaca by the following morning when his ship's still in Pylos and just exchanging greetings with Peisistratus' dad could take a day and a night in itself. The second is the unexpected introduction of an intriguing new character whose role will take several books to become fully apparent.

(a) bypassing Pylos

As Pylos looms ahead of them, Telemachus has a tough decision to make. He can't afford to waste time in Pylos, but is unhappy about offending Nestor by ducking out of a further round of welcome. His solution is to run his dilemma past his new friend Peisistratus, who can at least explain the situation to his father. Peisistratus hesitates, but agrees to help as far as he can, and within a couple of lines they're at Telemachus' ship. Peisistratus' advice is to cast off at once, before Nestor finds out that he's there and comes to fetch him, as he surely will once Peisistratus reports in. But as it turns out, Telemachus will have to deal with an unexpected and tricky new situation against the clock before he can leave.

(b) Theoclymenus' story

Theoclymenus is an offshoot of a story glimpsed in part in the pageant of heroines at 11.281–97. He's the great-grandson of the seer Melampus, whose story is probably the most confusingly-told in Homer. Part of it was told in book 11, part is told in more detail here, and some of the key details have to be filled in retrospectively from later sources because Homer doesn't mention them at all. There's also some fairly extreme genealogy to get your head around, but I'll try and summarise it as comprehensibly as I can.



Melampus was originally from Pylos, a second cousin of Nestor. His elder brother Bias isn't named in Homer, but it was Bias who fell in love with Nestor's sister Pero, for whom her father Neleus set a dangerous bride-price: the cattle of Iphiclus son of Phylacus, ruler of Phylace in Thessaly. Melampus the seer, who could understand the speech of animals (another detail not spelled out in Homer), undertook the task for his brother, but was caught and thrown into jail in Phylace. There, according to later sources, he was able to hear the woodworms discussing the imminent collapse of the palace, whose roof was worm-eaten through. He warned the king, who released him as a reward, and did a deal with him that allowed him to drive the cattle home for his brother, before emigrating from Pylos to settle in Argos.

It's from Argos that Melampus' great-grandson Theoclymenus has fled, for reasons we've already seen in the stories of fugitives told in the last two books. Theoclymenus has killed a man in Argos, and to escape the revenge of his victim's kin he's fled towards his ancestral home of Pylos. But he's inherited his great-grandfather's gift, and is introduced to the story here in preparation for a stunning display of his prophetic skills on the eve of the showdown in book 20. Though he's often seen by analyst critics as a late addition to the *Odyssey*, his inclusion pays off in a couple of great scenes in later books, as well as presenting an intriguing set of challenges to Telemachus.

(c) the suppliant accepted

Theoclymenus comes on Telemachus as he's making the preparatory sacrifice before departure to ensure a good voyage. Such a ceremony clearly advertises him as a man of piety, and Theoclymenus appeals to this in asking his identity and destination, then claiming suppliant status. Though it's far from convenient to him, Telemachus unhesitatingly accepts this new responsibility; but his cagey closing words indicate that he's already worried about how he'll be able to look after his charge once they get back to an unknown and volatile situation in Ithaca.

(d) the voyage homewards

They board and raise sail, and are out to sea before Nestor can catch them. There are textual as well as geographical problems with the description of their route, but it's fairly clear that Cruni, Chalcis, and Pheae are coastal settlements on the western Peloponnese sailing north from Messenia past the coast of Elis. The Jagged Islands will then be one or more of the groups of small islands west of the mouth of the gulf of Corinth, from which the normal route to Ithaca would then be west and up the strait between Ithaca and Same (Cephallonia). But as

night falls Telemachus is going to hug the coast instead, and approach Ithaca from the east. Will he evade the ambush this way? We'll have to wait till the end of the book to find out.

B. Odysseus

On this cliffhanger, we return to Odysseus, who's come to the end of a second (or possibly third) day with Eumaeus and his team. Odysseus has evidently reached a point in his planning where he feels ready to move on to the palace itself, and a confrontation with the suitors; but he's interested in Eumaeus' reaction to his announcement.

1. the beggar's intentions

The beggar's speech is another down-to-earth version of an element of the standard hospitality sequence, the guest's announcement of his intention to depart. Odysseus takes the opportunity to expand on his character, presenting himself as a willing worker who still hasn't quite grasped how far the suitors fall short of normal expectations of behaviour.

2. Eumaeus' protest

Eumaeus, of course, is appalled at the suggestion – particularly the closing image of the beggar actually waiting on the suitors at table. The suitors aren't going to employ a vagrant for such purposes, and Eumaeus insists that the beggar stay at the farm until Telemachus returns. Again his assumption is that what the beggar really wants is the standard deal of a cloak, a tunic, and a passage to his next destination, none of which he stands a chance of getting from the suitors. He can't know that what his guest wants from the suitors is something very different, and that he has his own reasons for wanting to sample their conduct at first hand.

3. the beggar's questions

Odysseus lets the matter go for now – conceding the extra day's stay with Eumaeus that, unknown to either of them, will make possible the dramatic meeting with Telemachus. He turns the evening's conversation instead to more personal matters: we've heard about Penelope and Telemachus, but what of the rest of the royal family? Odysseus in fact knows of his mother's death and is principally curious about Laertes, but he's careful to ask the question from a stranger's point of view.

4. Eumaeus tells of Odysseus' family

Eumaeus confirms that Laertes is still alive, though now doubly bereaved: as well as the grief for Odysseus described by Anticleia's ghost at 11.150ff., he's of course lost his wife as well. All this is further preparation for the Laertes episode which is being held in reserve for the poem's emotional finale, though the signs are that we shouldn't expect a scene with Laertes till after the showdown with the suitors. But Eumaeus uses Anticleia's death to reflect on his own connections with the royal family: raised as a member of the royal household with Odysseus' little sister, and owing his present position to the queen mother's patronage. That makes the changes in the palace all the more galling for Eumaeus, as he remembers the closeness that the servants used to feel to the family.

5. the beggar asks for Eumaeus' story

Odysseus seems to sense that Eumaeus is starting to trust him with some quite painful personal memories. Seizing the chance, he asks about Eumaeus' own origins. Some of this should be known to him already, as Eumaeus is clearly over twenty (though not yet past his prime) and we're about to learn he arrived in Ithaca as a small child, so he must have been bought by Laertes before Odysseus sailed for Troy. But the *Odyssey* never does anything with this possibility, so we seem to be expected to disregard it.

We've already seen glimpses of the Homeric people-trafficking industry in the beggar's own autobiography in the previous book, where he claimed narrowly to have escaped being sold as a slave on two separate occasions. Odysseus poses his question in terms of two common mechanisms of enslavement: capture of his home city in war, or individual capture

by pirates in a raid. But Eumaeus' remarkable story will turn out to be different, and more poignant, than either of these.

6. Eumaeus' autobiography

The long and affecting story that follows is advertised as such by a reflective prologue of the kind that prefaced Odysseus' own stories at 9.1ff. and 14.191ff. Indeed, there's a sense that Eumaeus is paying the stranger back for his own tale with the story of his own misfortunes, cementing the bond between them in a common experience of suffering and displacement.

(a) the prince of Syros

Eumaeus was born a king's son. The location of his lost home island has been disputed since antiquity. Shewring's translation "Syros" follows the identification with the island west of Delos, which was known as Ortygia in later antiquity (but inconveniently not in Homer). There was also an Ortygia in the bay of Syracuse in Sicily, but again this isn't mentioned in Homer, and is an even less likely candidate. The Greek actually says "Syria", and some twentieth-century Homerists argued that there's a memory here of the Mycenaean settlements found on islands at the mouth of the Orontes river. Any of these would fall on Phoenician trade-routes.

(b) the Phoenician and the nurse

One of the most effective storytelling devices in what follows is the use of a child's narrative perspective, contrasted with with the same character's adult understanding in hindsight. Obviously little prince Eumaeus didn't understand what was going on at the time; he'd have had to piece it together from what he learned afterwards and from long reflection on events.

As in Odysseus' story, the villains are Phoenician sailors for whom people-trafficking is part of their treacherous living. But the story is complicated by the presence in king Ctesius' household of a Phoenician nurse to the young prince, herself originally an aristocratic abductee enslaved and sold by pirates: none other than the mysterious Taphians, familiar figures in Ithaca and the very people from whom Eumaeus bought his own slave Mesaulius (14.452–6). It was their leader Mentes that Athene impersonated on her original visit to Telemachus in book 1, so there's a certain irony in their involvement here.

Though Eumaeus understandably shows little sympathy for her, the nurse is as much a victim as a villain. She's motivated by a combination of seductive persuasion with a longing to return to her own country that chimes with the themes of the poem. Her treachery towards the family she serves is viewed by Eumaeus as an inexcusable betrayal of trust, but is no more than a turning of the tables on Eumaeus' father for trafficking in freeborn slaves in the first place. Nevertheless, her speech does nothing to endear her to us, with its casual combination of conspiracy, robbery, and child abduction.

(c) the kidnap

Despite the nurse's hopes of a quick getaway, a full year passes before the operation is ready to roll. The next bit of the narrative is especially finely handled, with its adult action viewed through an ingenuous child's eyes, but told with the bitter wisdom of adult hindsight, as the little prince watches as she stuffs three drinking-vessels opportunistically into her clothing, then follows her trustingly into a life of slavery.

(d) slavery in Ithaca

But in a twist at once moralistic and poignant, the nurse dies on shipboard and is casually cast over the side, leaving only the desolate child she betrayed for a home she never lived to see. Eumaeus is sold to Laertes, and never sees Syros again.

7. the beggar's response

It's a powerful story, as Odysseus acknowledges, and unlike anything else in Homer. Slaves aren't elsewhere given such rich and emotionally involving histories, and it's a further sign that the world of the Ithacan *Odyssey* especially is interested in ta wider range of human experience than heroic epic's aristocratic focus normally allows. Odysseus's consoling words on Eumaeus' present situation remind him that at least, unlike the beggar, he has a

comfortable and settled life. But it's hard not to hear his final sentence as referring as much to the real Odysseus as to the character he's playing, and contrasting Eumaeus' lot with his own in truth.

C. Telemachus

The night that follows is quickly narrated, and dawn sees Telemachus' ship coming in to land, having sailed through the night and (we immediately realise) successfully given the ambushing suitors the slip.

1. approaching Ithaca

The sails are stowed, and as planned Telemachus lands his crew for a meal on shore before sending them off under oar to the town harbour. He doesn't specify his own destination, but lets it be known that he'll be back at the palace by nightfall. That may or may not be his true intention, but his startling discovery at Eumaeus' farm will in any case modify his plan back to that outlined by Athene at the start of the book, according which Eumaeus is sent on ahead to announce his arrival. Telemachus himself will spend the night at Eumaeus', and won't arrive home till the following morning.

2. the Theoclymenus problem

But the presence of Theoclymenus creates a problem for him. He's promised to look after the seer, but can hardly do so on a trek through remote farms. The obvious thing to do is to send him on with the crew to the town – but then what? He won't be there to receive him, and Penelope can't be expected to either if she's hiding out from the suitors as usual in the women's quarters. It's unclear, and continues to be disputed, whether the suggestion of Eurymachus as host is serious or ironic – but Telemachus' shift from commendation to curse suggests he's thinking aloud, and that if Eurymachus was ever momentarily a serious candidate he's certainly not by the end of the speech. Of course the main job of the speech is to set up the omen that follows in response to it, and Theoclymenus' first demonstration of the seersmanship that will be used in more charged circumstances in the palace books.

3. the omen & its reading

This second bird-omen in the book has the same structure as the eagle/goose one read by Helen. A predator bird flies over with another bird as prey in its clutches; and this time there's no ambiguity over the application of the omen to Telemachus, as the feathers land right in front of him. Theoclymenus astutely calls Telemachus aside to speak his interpretation in private; as we saw with Halitherses in book 2, it can be risky to declare such a politically-charged omen in public, and Telemachus' crew, though apparently loyal, has been drawn widely from the town.

4. Theoclymenus to Peiraeus

Telemachus appreciates the interpretation, and his decision crystallises on the most trusted of his companions on the Pylos voyage, one Peiraeus. Telemachus' plan is to lodge his guest temporarily with Peiraeus, then transfer him to the palace on his return. It looks like a good plan, but as we'll see in book 17, having a fourth-generation seer on the premises is a bit of a double-edged sword if you want to keep things secret.

5. Telemachus to Eumaeus

So Peiraeus and Theoclymenus embark with the rest and strike off for the harbour, and Telemachus makes off inland to Eumaeus' cottage. Everything seems to be going according to Athene's plan – and of course it is, in ways that an unsuspecting Telemachus is dramatically about to discover.

16. ODYSSEUS MEETS HIS SON

Now at last comes the first of the poem's great recognitions, and a masterly sequence of scenes that prepare for the move to the palace in the next book. Though the emotional reunion of father and son dominates the first half of the book, the later part moves into a new gear as plans start to be laid; and in an anticipation of the next phase of the story we get a first glimpse of events back at the palace, as first Penelope and then the suitors react in their very different ways to the news of the prince's unexpected return.

A. Telemachus arrives

As the seconds tick down to the long-awaited convergence of the poem's two main storylines, we dramatically switch viewpoints from Telemachus outside to Odysseus inside as the sound of approaching footsteps is heard. It's important to the scene that follows that we view it from Odysseus' perspective rather than Telemachus', because it's Odysseus who understands the full significance of the encounter, and Odysseus' emotions that will have to be carefully controlled until Eumaeus is off the scene. But as we'll see in a moment, the most brilliant touch in the telling of this scene is the way the narrative camera cuts away from Odysseus to Eumaeus at the moment of highest drama, leaving the full turmoil of Odysseus' emotions implied rather than directly narrated.

1. the dogs II: Telemachus

The narrator unobtrusively notes that the other herdsmen have once again already left; we don't want them cluttering up this intensely personal scene, and even Eumaeus will need shuttling out of the picture for the recognition to go ahead.

Telemachus' approach is a masterly piece of Odyssean microplotting. Like Odysseus at 14.29–36, the first thing Telemachus encounters is Eumaeus' dogs. But where they earlier reacted to the arrival of a stranger, here they recognise a familiar visitor, and greet him with tail-wagging noises instead. Odysseus' busy mind at once draws the obvious conclusion, and alerts Eumaeus. Does he even already suspect who the visitor is? If so, the narrative is carefully reticent, as it will be throughout the scene that follows.

2. Telemachus and Eumaeus (and Odysseus)

Now comes one of the *Odyssey*'s defining moments. We're still looking out through Odysseus' eyes as the newcomer appears, but as this crucial juncture Odysseus suddenly recedes from narrative view and we watch through his silent eyes as Eumaeus is the one to react with shock, recognition, and delight. It's Eumaeus who goes through the whole embracing and weeping routine, with a magnificent simile that uses Odysseus' own situation as the point of comparison for Eumaeus' emotions at this moment. If there was any doubt over the identity of the newcomer, it's dispelled by Eumaeus' joyful speech of welcome. All this, of course, can only be a pale shadow of what Odysseus is going through; yet throughout the scene, the beggar draws so little attention to himself as to be all but forgotten in the background. Telemachus doesn't even seem to register the presence of a third figure in the room; his first question is only about the latest news of Penelope, his anxieties about whom were mischievously stoked up by Athene at the start of the previous book. Without a word being said about Odysseus' reaction and feelings, we get a powerful sense both of the emotions he's struggling with and the imperturbable outward face he's somehow managing to maintain.

3. Telemachus and the beggar

Now comes a further hospitality routine, with Telemachus surrendering his spear as he enters and being found a seat. There's a delicate bit of interaction as Odysseus wordlessly offers to give up his seat, and Telemachus graciously declines: his first, ironically unsuspecting, words to his father, but the interaction has already given them a favourable glimpse of one another's manners. A meal is served, as per protocol, and the beggar joins in; but because this is now a formal visitor's welcome rather than the breakfast Eumaeus was preparing for his lodger, conversation must wait until all have been satisfied. It's Telemachus who finally breaks the

suspense, not by questioning the stranger directly, but by addressing himself to Eumaeus about the identity of the third man.

(a) the Cretan identified

Eumaeus reports the stranger's story in summary, distancing himself slightly from any claims to the truthfulness or otherwise of the tale. The beggar has already made it clear he intends to move on to the palace, and it was Eumaeus who advised him to wait until Telemachus' return; so Eumaeus sees it as an obvious move to transfer him formally to Telemachus' protection now that he's home.

(b) Telemachus' dilemma

But this is the last thing Telemachus needs to hear. He's already got one fugitive on his hands, and doesn't feel able to guarantee a guest's safety in the palace. As he reiterates here, he's not even sure how long he can rely on Penelope. He suggests two possibilities: Telemachus gives the beggar cloak, tunic, and passage without the need for him to come to the palace; or the beggar stays with Eumaeus at Telemachus' expense. Both of these are generous offers, and knock a hole in Odysseus' original pretext for visiting the palace; he'll need to come up with something else.

(c) the beggar's response

Odysseus cannily ignores Telemachus' actual proposals, and instead fastens on his remarks about his powerlessness in the face of the suitors. Like Nestor at 3.214–5, he asks about the public mood, though he's careful to add a question in character about whether Telemachus has any other family he could call on for support. But the masks slips a little as he lets a glimpse of his rage and indignation show in the second half of his speech – though it's artfully camouflaged by being presented as what the beggar would feel if, hypothetically, he were Odysseus, which is itself only presented in the third in a series of hypotheticals. There's more than a hint of rebuke in the second scenario ("or indeed were a son of great Odysseus"): were he in Telemachus' shoes, Odysseus seems to claim he'd rather die than tolerate such abuse. His closing words nearly give the game away with their confident assertion of the suitors' ultimate come-uppance: this is Odysseus talking, not the beggar, who has no reason to issue any such assurance. But it passes unnoticed.

(d) Telemachus' view

Telemachus responds frankly, unoffended by the hint of reproach. As he explains, to understand the family you have to understand that he's the third in a line of only sons, which has made the kingship especially vulnerable to challenge – not just from within Ithaca, but from the other islands that seem to fall under Odysseus' rule. (We looked at the geographical and political implications of this passage back in the seminar on Ithaca.) As Telemachus explains, part of the suitors' strategy has been to apply pressure by eating away at Telemachus' own inheritance; and with unnerving frankness he predicts that they'll make further attempts on his life until one of them succeeds. If Telemachus has been growing in confidence as a result of his travels, this moment at least seems to show him reverting to his old fatalistic self.

Now Telemachus turns from the beggar to Eumaeus, and charges him with the mission suggested by Athene. Eumaeus is to make a special trip to the palace to notify Penelope, and Penelope alone, of Telemachus' safe return. If we're sharp, we now realise the point of this part of Athene's plan: to get Eumaeus out of the way and leave Telemachus and Odysseus alone together in the cottage.

(e) Eumaeus' mission

Eumaeus takes the opportunity to fill us in on the figure of Laertes, who's being held in reserve for the final book but is carefully kept in our minds in the meantime, though in a way that makes it clear we shouldn't expect him to be involved in the showdown itself. Eumaeus asks whether he should extend his journey as far as Laertes' farm; but Telemachus suggests using Penelope's "housekeeper" (a term variously applied to Eurycleia and Eurynome, but more probably the latter) to relay the message to Laertes.

4. exit Eumaeus

Eumaeus duly sets off for the town and palace, where we'll pick up his story later in the book. It's unclear what Telemachus was planning to do on the farm in his absence, but Athene's manoeuvring of the characters has finally got father and son alone together, ready for the momentous scene of Odysseus' unmasking.

B. Father & son

Now comes the first of the poem's famous recognition scenes, as Odysseus reveals his identity to Telemachus: the first of his select band of co-conspirators in plotting and eventually implementing the suitors' doom.

1. the dogs III: Athene

Athene now dramatically re-enters the narrative, taking the same appearance she used in her scene with Odysseus at the cave of the nymphs, but making herself visible only to Odysseus (presumably through the open doorway). Nevertheless, the dogs can sense her presence, and in a brilliant touch respond to the arrival of a supernatural being in a different way again to their reactions to stranger and friend.

2. the retransformation

At her private signal, Odysseus quietly goes out to confer, and gets permission to reveal his identity to his son –along with the first clear statement that the showdown with the suitors will take the form of an actual battle. Now at last Athene makes clear her reason for wanting to stage this meeting on a deserted farm: it's to allow father and son to discuss their strategy before the move to the palace, and also has the advantage that Athene can temporarily revert Odysseus to his true form without fear of observation. But Athene seems to back away from involvement, or at any rate isn't mentioned as present, in the recognition scene itself: this moment of intense intimacy is to be a private one between Odysseus and Telemachus alone.

3. the recognition

Telemachus' first reaction to the transformation is that the beggar is a god in disguise: not an unreasonable assumption for one who in books 2–3 spent two days in the company of a god before realising. In a moment of high irony, he babbles out a prayer for mercy and good fortune – only to be told that the figure in front of him is something even more extraordinary and unexpected. But in a telling moment of characterisation, Telemachus' long-practised pessimism finds the fulfilment of his hopes too much to credit, and he reasonably points out that even Odysseus doesn't have the power of shape-shifting. He'll stick with the god theory: this is a trick, and he's not falling for it.

Odysseus has wrily to reassure him that this really is it, and to admit that Athene did have a hand in his miraculous transformation: a first direct demonstration to Telemachus of their goddess's power in action. Telemachus' defences crumble, and the intense display that follows is the subject of one of the most famous of the poem's complex emotional similes. As with the great simile at 8.521ff., the situation in the simile presents the dominant emotion as one of irreparable loss and bereavement – prompting us to see the scene itself as one of grief for the lost years as much as of joy at being reunited.

It's Telemachus who recovers first, to the point where he can ask the familiar question about how the newcomer got here, complete with local joke. We, of course, know the answer, but it's important that Telemachus be brought up to speed before the conspiring proper gets under way.

4. Odysseus' story

Odysseus gives a highly condensed summary of his Phaeacian adventures and his Ithacan experiences to date, before quickly moving the discussion on to their present challenge. The nine years from Troy to landfall in Scheria aren't even mentioned – presumably on the pretext that they fall outside the scope of Telemachus' question, though evidently the real reason is that a long recap here would ruin the momentum of the scene.

5. the conspiracy

Now the scene moves from emotion to calculation, and from recognition to conspiracy. The plan, Odysseus makes clear with a baldness that takes Telemachus aback, is to kill the suitors with Telemachus' help (which he takes for granted, though he still seems wary of trusting him with the location of his Phaeacian treasure). The first thing he needs to know is the actual numbers, of which as yet he (and we) have no clear idea – so much so that Odysseus can still be contemplating taking on the whole mob with just the two of them.

(a) Telemachus states the problem

Telemachus' news isn't good: there are 108 plus six attendants and four palace staff (of whom Medon and Phemius are in fact loyal to Odysseus, and will be spared). Telemachus is no shirker, but 118 to 2 doesn't sound like odds they can beat. It's enough to undermine all Telemachus has heard about his father's strategic sense: a remark which seems to sting Odysseus, to judge from his reply. The tone of Telemachus' response at 262–5 is harder to gauge: it can be taken at face value as acknowledgment of Odysseus' point, but some see it as sceptical and ironic, or tentative and only part-convinced.

Whatever the case, the audience is clearly meant to find these numbers alarming. The tally of suitors and islands is another famous passage we looked at in the Ithaca seminar. The implication, clearly, is that these four islands constitute a single kingdom, and that Ithaca itself is the least populous of the four. The reason for giving these figures now is that the poem is entering a phase where an appreciation of the numbers is important to our understanding of the scale of the physical challenge.

(b) Odysseus' plan

Odysseus expresses confidence that the gods will back them, perhaps even fight alongside them, and on that understanding outlines the first draft of his plan. A number of details remain to be worked out here, and several points will be modified as the palace books unfold; but this is our first sight of how Odysseus' strategy is taking shape in detail around the outline suggested by Athene in book 13.

(i) Odysseus will go to the palace in his beggar disguise. Odysseus has fleshed out the details here: Telemachus and he need to arrive separately so as not to invite suspicion, so he proposes that Telemachus go first thing in the morning while Odysseus follows later in the day with Eumaeus.

(ii) As Athene hinted at 13.310, the beggar will undoubtedly suffer abuse from the suitors, which both he and Telemachus must be ready to bear for as long as is needed. Telemachus can go as far as protesting – the suitors need to be given a chance to repent – but he mustn't intervene.

(iii) Odysseus sees that there's one thing they can do that will drastically reduce the odds against them: if they ensure that they're armed and the suitors aren't. If the suitors are feasting in the palace, they'll have left their weapons at the entrance: that already recommends the megaron itself as the place where the suitors can be caught all together and unarmed. There's one problem: the hall itself has weapons adorning the wall, so Odysseus and Telemachus will need to find a reason to have moved them out of the hall beforehand. That means at least one night in the hall after the suitors have gone home, and a plausible cover story for Telemachus to tell the suitors the next day. Odysseus carefully scripts this part for him: these are lines Telemachus must deliver convincingly.

(iv) The next phase is the one that still needs some work. We have the suitors trapped and unarmed, but the best Odysseus can come up with for the slaughter itself is to leave a set of arms each for himself and Telemachus, and to hope that they can grab them before the suitors do. What happens next, he admits, will depend on Athene and Zeus. It's not much of a plan yet; something more will be needed. But what?

(v) The whole plan has to be a secret from everyone, even Penelope and Eumaeus, at least until Odysseus and Telemachus have probed the loyalties of the palace staff, maids as well as male servants.

(c) Telemachus' modifications

Telemachus is keen to prove himself a worthy partner and son in this plan, but suggests some small amendments. He understands Odysseus' last suggestion, perhaps correctly, as implying they should test the loyalties of all Odysseus' staff on the other outlying farms. They don't have time for that; they have to focus their efforts on the palace. Despite his earlier scepticism, Telemachus is starting to join in with suggestions of his own; and on this note the narrative now leaves the two of them refining their plans, as we rejoin Eumaeus' mission to the town and palace.

C. The suitors: aftermath of the ambush

In a neat piece of timing, three strands of the action converge here: Telemachus' ship, Eumaeus' mission, and the aftermath of the failed ambush. First, Telemachus' ship arrives in the main harbour of Ithaca. Menelaus' gifts are unloaded and sent with Peiraeus for safekeeping to the house of his father Clytius (along with Theoclymenus, though this isn't mentioned here as such).

1. Penelope hears of Telemachus' return

A messenger is sent up to Penelope to notify her and the palace staff that Telemachus himself is safe and on his way. His arrival coincides with the Eumaeus' arrival from the farm with his own message of confirmation for Penelope's private ear. But the messenger from the ship has already let the cat out of the bag, and the suitors now know that Telemachus has survived their ambush and is known to be on his way back to the palace.

2. Eurymachus reacts to the news

The news is sufficiently momentous for the suitors to feel the need to withdraw from the palace to discuss it without being overheard. In the absence of their ringleader Antinous (who led the crew of the ambush ship), it's the smooth, unprincipled Eurymachus who speaks first: whatever they do next, the ambush has failed, and Antinous' ship will need to be recalled.

3. the ship returns

A potentially unwieldy delay in the plot is avoided here by the small finesse of having the ambush ship return as they speak. A couple of explanations for this tidy timing are suggested in a short speech that marks the first appearance of Amphinomus, the lone suitor with a conscience, whose voice and fate will be an important strand in the final phase of the suitors' story. He's brought in here to position him in the discussion in preparation for his more significant role at 393ff. below.

4. Antinous' proposal

Antinous disembarks, reports on their failure, and chillingly explains the implications. The suitors have staked high, and lost. Their murder plot has played into Telemachus' hands, giving him the case against the suitors he needs to swing the assembly behind him on his next attempt. Any remaining support for the suitors will evaporate on exposure of their crime; they can expect retaliation and probable exile. Having reached this point, they have only two choices:

- kill Telemachus before he reaches town, seize his estates and divide them up among themselves;
- do what Telemachus challenged them to do in the original assembly, and abandon their whole strategy of exercising pressure by imposing themselves on the palace's hospitality.

5. Amphinomus speaks against

Even the suitors seem chilled by Antinous' cold-blooded analysis. It's Amphinomus, the suitors' voice of conscience, who now speaks up against Antinous' plan, and we learn a bit about his own background. Unlike Antinous and Eurymachus, he's not one of the twelve Ithacan suitors; he's the leader of the huge contingent of 58 from Dulichium, the big island of Odysseus' archipelago kingdom. A thoughtful but fatally equivocating figure, he doesn't

reject Antinous' murder proposal outright, but is reluctant to go ahead without a sign of divine approval. His counsel carries, and the suitors go back to the palace as though nothing has changed. But Antinous was right: the situation has now moved beyond Amphinomus' kind of prevarication or compromise, and their choice now is a stark one. Their failure to make that choice will damn them all.

6. Penelope and Eurymachus

The suitors held this discussion outside the palace for fear of detection by parties loyal to Odysseus. But apparently they're still unaware that the page Medon, whom even Telemachus numbered in with the suitors in his tally to Odysseus earlier, is actually Penelope's agent, and was passing her information about their plot against Telemachus at 4.15–714.

As soon as Penelope hears this latest outrage, she storms into the megaron to confront the suitors directly with their plan, singling Antinous out for specially stinging treatment. It's here that we learn Antinous' family history: how his father was nearly lynched after throwing in his lot with the dubious Taphians in a raid on a trusted mainland ally, and had his life and his son's inheritance saved by Odysseus' personal intervention. As Penelope forcefully points out, Antinous is plotting against the family of the man to whom he owes his own family's survival.

Antinous is left literally speechless, but smooth-talking Eurymachus responds with a speech of staggering hypocrisy, in which he reveals that he too has been privileged by Odysseus himself as a child. The massive gap between what Eurymachus says and his true intention is for once put beyond any possibility of ambiguity by a rare intervention by the narrator – spelling out that, for all his promises to defend Telemachus with his life, Eurymachus' intentions are exactly the opposite.

D. Back at the cottage

With the suitors' threat to Telemachus uneasily neutralised for now, we return one more time to the farm, as Eumaeus arrives home for the evening meal with no inkling of the momentous developments in his absence.

1. Odysseus retransformed

Odysseus is back in his beggar disguise, and allows himself to fade quietly into the background while Telemachus plays his part to Eumaeus.

2. Eumaeus returns

Telemachus is all innocence: not a word about the beggar, but a perfectly natural request for news of the suitors' ambush.

3. the news from town

Eumaeus reports to the best of his information, prompting Telemachus to flash Odysseus a secret smile of satisfaction. Things are moving their way; and as they turn in for the night, they know that the coming day the advantage will be theirs, as the suitors' doom is finally set in motion.

CONCLUSION

These four books have seen Odysseus' story transformed. At the start of book 13, he was still marooned in the strange, distant land of the Phaeacians. Now, he's back on Ithaca laying detailed plans with his son and readying himself for the fateful encounter with the suitors. But it's not just Odysseus' situation that's moved on, but the whole character and texture of the poem itself. The expansive, varied, multi-stranded, often fantastic action of the first twelve books is giving way to a tighter, denser, more focussed and psychologically-driven human action. Little by little the Ithacan action is coming to a point, as characters and storylines converge on the palace as the location where all scores will finally be settled. With the return of both Telemachus and Antinous to Ithaca, the key pieces are in place; all that's missing is Odysseus' own return to the palace for his first direct encounter with the suitors.

ODYSSEY 17–20: THE PALACE

This is another section of the poem that rarely seems to be appreciated as it deserves. As Odysseus finally makes his move from Eumaeus' cabin to the town and palace, four very strong books draw the threads of the action and the cast of characters together in a single location, the great feast-hall or megaron where the whole poem began. By degrees too subtle for the suitors to realise what's going on, the beggar will establish himself firmly in the palace against all the suitors' efforts to the contrary; will sabotage their pleasure in the feast; and will gradually take control of the palace, preparing the ground for the devastating trap he'll spring the following day. It's also in these books especially that Penelope emerges as a fully complex character in her own right, at times upstaging even the hero in the subtleties of her mind.

These four books form what in effect is a single continuous episode: the arrival of the disguised Odysseus in his own palace, and the extraordinary day and night he spends there on the eve of the crisis. The first two books track Odysseus' interaction with the suitors, over the course of a long and eventful afternoon's entertainment when his skills of self-mastery, manipulation, and intrigue will be put to their severest test. But the most dramatic scene comes after dark, when for the first time in twenty years Odysseus will come face-to-face with Penelope in another long two-handed dialogue book (19), perhaps the greatest conversation scene in Homer. Throughout these books Odysseus is formulating his plan of revenge, but knows that key elements of the plan still elude him; and his identity is constantly at risk of exposure before the pieces of the plan are in place. Nevertheless, the new day that dawns and the feast that begins in book 20 will end in a long-awaited reckoning, signalled at the end of that book by the most extraordinary moment of visionary fantasy in all of Homer.

Highlights of these books include:

- Odysseus' poignant encounter with his old dog, Argos;
- his conversation with Penelope, and the nailbiting episode of the scar;
- the night and morning;
- Theoclymenus' vision.

BOOK 17. ODYSSEUS GOES TO TOWN

This longest book in the second half of the poem is a pivotal one in the plot. After twenty years away, Odysseus finally returns to his palace, and comes face to face with the suitors after four books of planning and rehearsal. Now at last the cast of the Ithacan story is coming together for the finale.

The general outline of the book was established in Odysseus' sketch of his plan to Telemachus in the previous book (16.266ff.). Telemachus is to continue to the palace alone, while Odysseus follows later in the company of Eumaeus. Both will have to play their parts well: the beggar is certain to be abused by the suitors, and Telemachus will have to resist the urge to intervene. This process will continue through the next book, and culminate in Odysseus' first sight of Penelope in twenty years.

A. Telemachus and the beggar play their roles for Eumaeus

The short opening scene gives us a taste of what's to come, in a continuation of the close of the previous book that for the first time shows Odysseus and Telemachus working on their act in front of an audience. At first light, Telemachus announces his intention of heading off to the palace, using Penelope's distress as an excuse for not hanging around till the beggar and Eumaeus are ready to leave. His instructions to Eumaeus take a deliberately cool view of the beggar, referring to him only in the third person and pretending to be too preoccupied to look after him properly.

Odysseus responds with an even more practised performance, taking no offence, and offering a plausible reason for wanting to wait till the day's warmed up a bit before being on his way. He's even careful to slip in a reminder that he's supposed to be a stranger here –

remarking that he only knows about the distance to town because Telemachus has told him so.

B. Telemachus' homecoming

Telemachus arrives at the palace before the suitors move in for the day, making room for a series of effective encounters before the day's main action gets under way.

1. Telemachus, Eurycleia & Penelope

First is Eurycleia, as usual up and busy early. She was the last to see him go, and is now naturally the first to welcome him back, as the slaves would be the only ones in the megaron at this hour. (The chair-covers, of course, are in anticipation of the suitors' feast: a little touch to prepare us for the big scene with which the book will culminate.)

Next comes a characteristic scene between Telemachus and Penelope. As usual, Telemachus gives the impression of being uncomfortable and insensitive around his mother; he refuses to be drawn into a big emotional scene, and dodges her question about Odysseus (which has heavy irony for the audience, of course) with a brusque instruction to busy herself with a sacrifice instead while he deals with his guest. Apparently he's not yet up to the challenge of looking her in the eye with an evasive or misleading answer – something even Odysseus will find tough. Penelope complies, but as we'll soon see she's far from happy about his behaviour.

Telemachus' next move is to show himself conspicuously in town, by striding brazenly into the busy area around the assembly space in full view of the gathering suitors, whose feigned delight at his return he pointedly snubs for the company of the loyal old-timers from book 2. (This Antiphus, who doesn't appear in Shewring's index, may be a slip for his father Aegyptius, as we learned at 2.19–20 that Antiphus went with Odysseus to Troy and was eaten by the Cyclops on his return. Think of it as the *Odyssey*'s counterpart to those moments in the *Iliad* where the same warriors get killed in two different books.)

2. Peiraeus brings Theoclymenus

Now for the difficult problem of Theoclymenus, whom Telemachus had lodged for the night with his comrade Peiraeus pending his own return to the palace to take care of him. Peiraeus shows up in the market with Theoclymenus, and reminds the prince that he's also got Menelaus' treasure in his house. But Telemachus shrewdly sees that it might be politic not to wave all that in front of the suitors, and for the time being leaves it with Peiraeus for safekeeping. As with Odysseus' Phaeacian treasure in book 13, this is really to write it out of the story so we don't have to worry about it again, and indeed this'll be the last we hear of it.

3. Telemachus, Theoclymenus, & Penelope

Telemachus now formally escorts Theoclymenus to the hospitality of his palace, where he treats him to a bath and a meal. In the conversation zone that opens up afterwards, Penelope suddenly appears; has she been gritting her teeth in silence all through their meal? In a finely observed touch of tension, she pointedly announces that she's off to indulge her continuing depression, which Telemachus still hasn't seen fit to relieve by answering her original question.

(a) Telemachus' story

Telemachus now gives his carefully edited account of his travels and enquiries for Penelope's ear. There are no actual untruths, but he leaves out almost everything that matters: the role of Athene, the omens of Odysseus' return in Sparta and Ithaca, and of course his sensational discovery of the previous day. Most of his account is edited down from Menelaus' words, so that the only discussion of Odysseus and the suitors is a wish from the lips of someone else, and the latest news of Odysseus himself is several years old. It's not much for Penelope to cling to. Evidently Telemachus is taking very seriously his father's instructions not to let Penelope in on the truth.

(b) Theoclymenus' prophecy

But Telemachus is less practised at this kind of thing than Odysseus, and has forgotten that sitting beside him is someone who picks up on his apparent amnesia. Telemachus has failed to mention the dramatic omen that Theoclymenus interpreted for him on the beach of Ithaca the previous morning. Now, he not only blurts it all out to Penelope, but goes even further: Odysseus is *already in Ithaca*, planning his revenge on the suitors, and Theoclymenus will swear a mighty oath to the truth of it.

Telemachus' reaction to this revelation is entertainingly left to our imagination. Fortunately, the notion that Odysseus is already home seems so far-fetched to Penelope that she merely acknowledges it with a polite "If only", and lets the matter drop.

C. The cast converge

This concludes the series of private scenes associated with Telemachus' return, and the stage is clear for the book's main action to get under way, as all the key characters gather at last in the megaron of the palace for the long-awaited encounter of Odysseus with the suitors.

1. The suitors gather

First come the suitors, who as in book 1 have been loitering outside the palace playing games while they wait for dinnertime to come round. An interesting touch here is the role of Medon the page, whose role is to liaise between the palace and the suitors. Though Telemachus counted him in with the suitors at 16.240ff., we saw at 4.675ff. and 16.409ff. that Medon is actually reporting to Penelope as her spy on the suitors. When the crunch comes, Telemachus will save him from Odysseus' sword for his loyalty.

2. Eumaeus & the beggar set out

As the meal gets under way in the palace, we cut back to the pig-farm, where Odysseus and Eumaeus are at this moment preparing to set out. Eumaeus is still uncomfortable about exposing the beggar to the suitors, and makes it clear that he's only doing it because Telemachus insists. Odysseus, for his part, hams up his role brilliantly. He reminds his host that he's a stranger and will have to be shown every step of the way, and plays up his pretended feebleness by asking for a stick to use as a prop. He gets into costume, and off they go.

Outside the town proper is a local landmark, the fountain that supplies the townspeople with their principal water source. We get glimpses here of some local history: Ithacus is the first settler of Ithaca, from whom the island takes its name; Neritus is commemorated in the name of the principal peak Mt Neriton; and the name Polyctor appears in the family of the suitor Peisander (18.299 and 22.243). Ancient commentators fleshed all this out with details from post-Homeric sources no doubt derived from this passage. What matters here is that the location is steeped in local tradition and history as well as cult, and speaks deeply to Odysseus' sense of place. What happens next is a rude awakening to the new Ithaca that has sprung up in his absence.

(a) enter Melanthius

Here we meet an important figure in these climactic books, Melanthius the goatherd: the only one of Odysseus' male servants to throw in his lot with the suitors. We'll later meet his sister Melantho, mistress to Eurymachus and ringleader of the disloyal servants inside the palace, and their father Dolius, who remains old Laertes' trusted servant and lives with him on a remote estate with his other six sons (who like Dolius remain loyal).

Melanthius is an important figure in the palace economy. Though goats rank below cattle, sheep, and pigs in the heroic diet and economy, they're the one animal farmed extensively on the island of Ithaca itself as opposed to the mainland. Eumaeus explained at 14.103 that the island supports eleven flocks of goats (as opposed to Eumaeus' one solitary pig-farm, and no sheep or cattle herds at all) – nearly half of Odysseus' total holding. It's unclear whether Melanthius is in overall charge of the individual herds and herdsmen, or whether he and his underlings here all manage one of the eleven flocks; but it still makes him Eumaeus' main local rival as supplier, in this case willing, of meat to the suitors.

This is the first occurrence of a kind of scene we'll see repeatedly in books to come, where the disguised Odysseus has to check his impulse to retaliate in the face of verbal and physical abuse from the suitors and their sympathisers. For Odysseus, it's a grim foretaste of things to come. He hasn't even set foot in town, and already he's being abused and beaten up by the suitors' men.

(i) the first taunt

Melanthius begins with verbal abuse, expressing vehement contempt for the rights of beggars and strangers, with some side-swipes at the hated Eumaeus for good measure. As elsewhere, one of the standard insults to aim against beggars is that they're parasites who should be put to work to earn their sustenance: a view we're meant to see as crudely mercantile, with no regard for the delicate codes, obligations, and protocols that make society something more than just a primitive economy. But the most ominous bit of his speech is the prediction of how the suitors will deal with the beggar if he dares to show his face among them. As it turns out, the flying footstools will be all too close to the mark.

(ii) the first blow

Melanthius follows verbal abuse with physical violence. It's quite a shocking moment, and the narrative lingers on Odysseus' response: a moment of decision where he weighs up two ways of meeting violence with instant heroic force, and in a tooth-gritting moment forces himself to reject both. This is an important step in Odysseus' rehearsal of his beggar character: to learn, against all his heroic conditioning, to curb his urge to retaliate and accept the blows without complaint.

(iii) Eumaeus' curse

Eumaeus is outraged on the beggar's behalf, but even he knows better than to risk the suitors' wrath by striking back at Melanthius directly. Characteristically, he puts his faith in divine punishment – appealing to the nymphs of this cult site to fulfil his prayer for Odysseus' homecoming and vengeance. Only we catch the heavy irony of such a prayer's being uttered in front of Odysseus himself. Melanthius' punishment is more certain than Eumaeus can know.

(iv) Melanthius' response and departure

Melanthius now turns on Eumaeus directly, and vows to use his influence with the suitors to do away with Eumaeus altogether once the new regime is in place. Homer veterans will recognise the formulation of his rash claim about Odysseus from such passages as *Iliad* 13.809 and *Odyssey* 9.522–5 (Odysseus' fatal boast to the Cyclops). "If only I knew X would happen as surely as I know Y will never happen" is invariably a guarantee that Y will happen and X will not.

Melanthius goes on to the palace ahead, and is treated by the suitors to a formal welcome they pointedly fail to offer to Eumaeus. We learn that Eurymachus is Melanthius' particular patron, a fact no doubt connected with the fact we'll learn in the next book that he's sleeping with Melanthius' sister.

(b) outside the palace

Now at last Odysseus and Eumaeus approach the palace itself. As often at moments (such as the first sight of Telemachus) where Odysseus is presumably overcome with emotion, the narrator leaves it to us to imagine, and merely treats us to the outward performance he puts on to mask the turmoil inside.

(i) pause for discussion

Odysseus plays the role of a stranger carefully, but it's hard not to feel that his description of the palace here is charged with recognition and emotion beneath the surface of his words, and that he's talking in part to try and cover his reaction. It's a masterly stroke to describe the palace, for the first time in such detail, as it strikes the eyes of Odysseus himself on his first sight in twenty years. We immediately see that all his senses, and the intellect that drives them, are operating on full power: he hears the lyre, smells the meat, and deduces the activity of a banquet. But we also perhaps get the impression he's sizing up the palace architecture for a role in his plan. From the outside, the impenetrable wall and doors look like their main use

would be to keep enemies out. But Odysseus perhaps already sense that they can also be used to seal his victims in.

(ii) Argos

Now comes one of the poem's most famous episodes, as Odysseus' disguise is suddenly threatened with exposure at this delicate moment by the astonishing appearance of an unexpected survival from his past. As well as being a masterpiece of pathos, it's a crucial test of Odysseus' powers of improvisation, misdirection, and emotional self-restraint before the even greater challenge of maintaining his disguise in front of the suitors. It's also a powerful symbol of the state of the kingdom in the twenty years of Odysseus' absence, and an absolutely brilliant piece of plotting. Odysseus' skills of deception can fool all the humans he likes, but he can't fool the senses of a dog.

his story Argos' history is the history of Ithaca in a nutshell: young and vigorous when Odysseus left for Troy, and now abandoned to a maggoty fate on a dungheap. The only thing that saves Odysseus' cover is that the poor old pooch is too decrepit to do more than prick ears, lift head, and wag tail feebly in recognition, and luckily Eumaeus doesn't notice the strange behaviour. But Odysseus sees, and is deeply moved; he nearly gives himself away, and has to distract Eumaeus from his tears with a question that directs his attention at the dog instead of the beggar.

the beggar to Eumaeus Odysseus is careful to keep up his cover, and frames his question from the perspective of a stranger who's never seen this animal before in his life. But we can tell that his remarks about Argos' looks and speed spring from a vivid memory of the younger version: a poignant symbol of the lost years.

Eumaeus' response Eumaeus notices nothing, and delivers himself of a characteristically gloomy and sententious answer. As he glumly points outs, there you see the condition of Ithaca in a nutshell: masterless, neglected, and enfeebled, a pitiful shadow of its old vigorous self.

the end You couldn't do much better than the understated coda for a specimen of the less-is-more emotional power of the Homeric narrator's minimalist technique. Unseen by Eumaeus, old Argos drops down dead, having beaten the odds long enough to see his old master home again, but no more. But Odysseus was left outside while Eumaeus went ahead, and we may be meant to infer that he witnesses the end for himself. Either way, the whole episode has been a little self-contained gem, an encapsulation in miniature of the larger Ithacan situation and what it means for Odysseus himself, as for the first time in twenty years he approaches the threshold into his palace, and the ultimate test that will face him within.

(c) into the megaron

Now at last all the key characters are gathered together in the palace, most of them in a single room. The dramatic encounter of Odysseus and the suitors will be built up to through a series of preliminary scenes, in which Telemachus and the beggar will make contact and settle into the roles they each have to play in the highly-charged scene that follows.

(i) Telemachus receives Eumaeus

In a further echo of the first book, the suitors show not the slightest heed of the new arrival, and it's left to Telemachus to take responsibility for the visitors' welcome. Telemachus has to play his role carefully here, because he has two different covers to maintain in front of Eumaeus (who knows about his prior acquaintance with the beggar) and the suitors (who don't, and he's not inclined to disabuse them). Eumaeus enters first, and is provided by Telemachus with the formal welcome the suitors laid on for Melanthius – a telling demonstration of how the factions are lining up.

(ii) the beggar at the door

Now it's Odysseus' turn. He's hung back outside during Eumaeus' initial reception, but now makes his appearance at the threshold, without presuming to enter the megaron uninvited. Telemachus, who has been alert for this moment, takes advantage of Eumaeus' presence to

use him as a go-between without drawing the suitors' attention to the newcomer or revealing their earlier acquaintance.

(iii) Eumaeus delivers Telemachus' invitation

Eumaeus is unaware that he's the stooge in a charade between Telemachus and Odysseus, and passes on the message without realising, as we do, the hidden meanings encoded in it. Telemachus is sending Odysseus the signal to move his plan into the next phase; Odysseus' prayer for Telemachus' dreams to come true carries ironic overtones to which Eumaeus himself is oblivious.

D. The beggar at the feast

Now comes the book's dramatic climax, as Odysseus steps forward to face the hundred-odd suitors alone and defenceless, armed with nothing but his wits. It's the first in a tremendous series of such sequences in this and the following books. From this point on, Odysseus will gradually take control of the meal away from the suitors, in a series of steps sufficiently subtle that none of them can quite see how he's doing it, until by the end of the next book the whole evening has been soured for them and the stranger has somehow established himself as a fixture in the megaron despite all their efforts to the contrary.

1. doing the rounds

Odysseus waits till Phemius is performing at the end of the banquet proper – a sign that everyone has finished with food as far as their own appetites are concerned. He bides his time, finishing his own meal, while he waits for Phemius to finish and the conversation to start; it's Athene who prompts him with a sense of the right moment to make his move, in a sudden small reminder of her watchful presence at this climactic moment.

Odysseus' act isn't just about getting closer to the suitors. As always, he's seeking information and making moral judgments. Despite all he and we have heard, Odysseus isn't going to slaughter each of these men in cold blood without verifying that each individual one of them has earned it. As we're told here, each one of them will fail the test; but Odysseus will find one, at least, who deserves and is given his chance.

2. Antinous, Eumaeus, & Telemachus

As the beggar quietly works the room, attention focuses on this rogue element at the feast, and he becomes the focus of puzzled conversation. Now individual suitors begin to get drawn in, and the scene starts to take its first ugly turn.

(a) Melanthius and Antinous

Melanthius blows the whistle on the stranger. He knows him from their meeting on the road, of course, and is able to reveal that Eumaeus was escorting him. This is the trigger for a highly-charged three-way clash between Antinous, Eumaeus, and Antinous.

(b) Antinous and Eumaeus

Antinous rounds forcefully on Eumaeus for introducing this parasite in their midst. But Eumaeus stands up impressively to his attack, openly rebuking Antinous, declaring his loyalties, and artfully deflecting the accusation of having brought the beggar there on purpose while carefully neither confirming nor denying the charge.

(c) Telemachus and Antinous

Before the exchange can escalate, Telemachus steps in. In a neat piece of misdirection, he initially seems to rebuke Eumaeus for talking to Antinous; but this turns out to be an oblique swipe at Antinous' provocative abuse.

Turning to Antinous, he changes his tone to one of easy sarcasm, before gently reminding him whose hall this is and whose meat. By giving Antinous permission publicly to make a gift of Telemachus' meat to the beggar, he deftly manoeuvres Antinous into an impossible position. Either he gives the beggar the meat, acknowledging Telemachus' authority in the hall, or he refuses, confirming himself in front of everyone as the real parasite.

Caught, Antinous can only terminate the discussion gruffly with a crude threat of violence (which soon enough will be fulfilled). He thinks he's being witty, but we spot the same perversion of the language of gift-giving that the Cyclops tried to use against Odysseus: the first of many reminiscences of the Cyclops' downfall in the suitors'.

3. Antinous and the beggar

Odysseus has left Antinous to last, and only now as he completes his round does he confront Antinous directly. We now get a demonstration of how Odysseus has been using his beggar persona to test the suitors one by one, as he presents a version of his character's story to bring out the best or the worst in his host's nature.

(a) the third [Cretan] tale

This third and shortest iteration of the "Cretan tale" is the only one not actually to mention Crete at all. It's basically a topped and tailed reworking of the second of his earlier versions, the long one told to Eumaeus at 14.199–359. But instead of beginning with his origins and family, he substitutes a more pointed preamble: I was born a wealthy man, and treated guests generously; now that I'm on the other side of the situation, I look to those more fortunate to do the same, and all the more so if (like Antinous) they seem first among their peers.

(i) the Egyptian expedition

Along with the Cretan background, the Trojan episode has been dropped from this version of the story; Odysseus has no intention of presenting himself to the suitors as a war veteran. Instead, we cut straight to the ill-fated Egyptian expedition, the account of which is quoted directly from his earlier version as far as the defeat by the Egyptian army.

(ii) slavery in Cyprus

But now Odysseus steers the tale off to a different and much less expansive sequel. In place of the royal pardon and subsequent Egyptian, Phoenician, and Thesprotian adventures, he substitutes a new ending in which he was enslaved with the rest of the army and sold on to a Cypriot Greek. How he got from slavery in Cyprus to beggary in Ithaca isn't explained, but his listener can easily imagine a chain of events of the kind told in full to Eumaeus.

(b) the first stool-throwing

All through this tale, we've been imagining Antinous' blood slowly coming to the boil. Now at last he erupts, and the threat of violence made earlier aside to Telemachus is put into action, with consequences that will reverberate through the rest of the book.

(i) Antinous' tirade

Antinous begins with a verbal rant in which he not only refuses the beggar charity and sneers at his story, but orders him away and threatens him with renewed enslavement. In view of Telemachus' earlier permission to distribute the palace's food to the beggar, Antinous' pretext of concern for others' goods falls particularly hollow.

(ii) the beggar's response

But those who try to use irony against Odysseus invariably find themselves outplayed by the master. Instead of backing down, he provokes Antinous further. If you want to look the part of a king, you have to act like a king. Instead, Antinous has demonstrated just who the freeloading parasite is here.

(iii) Antinous strikes

This is too much for Antinous, and he flings the stool as threatened. This is the first of three such moments, and like the scenes with Eumaeus' dogs they assemble into a sequence whose significance emerges from the very different results each time. This time the blow connects, full-on: the second time Odysseus has been struck today, and the second time he has to control his urge to respond.

(iv) Odysseus' response

This time there's no moment of hesitation; Odysseus simply takes the blow squarely, keeps his thoughts of vengeance to himself, and gathers everyone's attention by resuming his original place on the threshold of the megaron.

(v) the beggar's speech

With all eyes on him, he speaks out past Antinous to the entire gathering. With chilling calm and clarity, he denounce Antinous' deed, damns his wedding plans, and calls down a death-curse on his head. Blows exchanged between warriors are one thing; to attack an unarmed beggar in the middle of a feast brings shame on them all.

(vi) Antinous' support ebbs

To raise the stakes in this way is a bold and unexpected move, but it has exactly the effect Odysseus wants. Even Antinous seems to see he's gone too far, lost face, and soured the whole feast. He mutters a threat of further manhandling, but this only repels the rest of the company, who now criticise him openly. We've already seen the idea of gods testing hospitality by visiting human halls in mortal disguise, first in Athene's Mentes act in book 1 and later in Alcinous' suggestion in book 7 that the stranger may be a god travelling incognito. Ironically, the suitors are closer to the truth than they imagine: their visitor is indeed an avenging spirit in disguise, judging them all by their actions and weighing up the moment for retribution.

(vii) Telemachus' reaction

Telemachus, of course, has been watching this whole scene, and only now do we get a brief glimpse of his reaction. Like Odysseus, he has to control his emotion, not even letting his anger show; but it's a nice touch that both respond with the same touch of body language, a small shake of the head as each silently vows revenge. Here as so often a formulaic line manages nevertheless to conjure a striking and significant resonance between the contexts in which it's used.

E. Penelope's summons

We haven't heard anything of Penelope since her debriefing with Telemachus and Theoclymenus. Her normal routine is to retire upstairs to the women's quarters when the suitors arrive, and only to come down when she needs to confront them on a matter such as the upsetting subject of Phemius' song in book 1. But obviously we're eager to see how and when she'll encounter the disguised Odysseus, and what will happen when she does. The final section of the book traces the first delicate rounds of arm's-length interaction between the two of them, in an intricate sequence of communications and narrative cuts that will eventually lead to the great face-to-face encounter of book 19.

1. the women react to the violence

Word of Antinous' offensive act now spreads (presumably via the servants) to the women's quarters, where Penelope is attended by her housekeeper and confidante Eurynome. We haven't met her before, but we'll see more of her in books to come; don't confuse her with Eurycleia the nurse, who (just to make things difficult) is also occasionally described by the title "housekeeper".

Penelope and Eurynome each echo the beggar's prayer in terms that will find more direct fulfilment than they can imagine. The suitors will in fact see one more dawn, but they won't live to see a second; and their deaths will not only come by the bow, but fall on Apollo's own festival day. Alcinous, as Penelope grimly notes, is the worst of them all; and as she broods on the victim of his latest misdeed, an idea seems to come to her.

Notice the unusually light transition to Penelope in conversation with her maids, before the camera pulls back at 505 to reveal the setting. From here to the end of the book the scene will move back and forth rapidly between the women's quarters and the hall, giving an almost split-screen view of the different parts of the palace interacting.

2. Penelope and Eumaeus

One effect of Antinous' violence has been to bring the beggar's arrival to Penelope's attention. Her interest piqued, she seeks a meeting; but Odysseus is not yet ready to face his queen, and has to find a diplomatic way to postpone this highly-charged encounter till after the suitors have left for the night.

"He looks like one who has wandered far" is a rare Shewring mistranslation; it should be "He seems…", as Penelope hasn't in fact so far laid eyes on the stranger.

(a) a summons to the beggar

The first step is to transmit a message to the beggar, if possible without entering the megaron herself. The obvious intermediary is Eumaeus, so he has to be summoned first, and then sent back to the hall with the queen's summons. As Eumaeus predicted, her interest is primarily in news of Odysseus; and here Eumaeus can fill her in a little on what the stranger's already told him in book 14.

(b) Eumaeus on the beggar

In private with Penelope, Eumaeus takes a rather more enthusiastic view of the beggar's tale than he did at the time, and suggests there's more to the story than even he has heard. The comparison of Odysseus to a bard is especially striking to an audience who remembers Alcinous' similar compliment at 11.368. Whether or not one believes the stranger's story 100%, it's a spellbinding performance. Eumaeus gives a bare outline of the long version he had from the beggar's lips in book 14: the Cretan origins, a lot of intervening adventures, and then news of Odysseus from the Thesprotian kingdom on the mainland, on his way home as they speak.

(c) Penelope's invitation

This is more than enough for Penelope, and she instructs Eumaeus to return to the hall and invite the stranger to come to her private quarters. The rest of her speech goes off on a kind of pensive tangent peculiar to Penelope. By a series of associative links, her thoughts turn from the beggar to the other suitors left in the hall to the whole situation and from there to what Odysseus would do about it if he did indeed return. We'll see this kind of structure used to great effect in the climactic encounter between the two of them in book 19.

(d) Telemachus' sneeze

Sneezes were regarded as good omens in Greek culture, so the sudden explosive sound from the megaron seems to confirm the gods' approval of Telemachus' prospective role in Odysseus' homecoming and revenge. This is the second omen Penelope has had today, if we count Theoclymenus' report of the previous day's eagle omen, and for the first time in the poem she smiles. As an afterthought to Eumaeus, she promises the beggar a cloak and tunic if his story pans out: exactly as Eumaeus predicted in book 14.

3. back in the megaron

The narrative stays with Eumaeus as he returns to the megaron to relay the invitation. How will Odysseus react to this opportunity to meet face to face at last with the wife he's spent twenty years trying to return to? Not in the way we might expect…

(a) Eumaeus delivers the message

Eumaeus duly passes on Penelope's words, including the bit about the cloak and tunic. From the way he presents it, this is clearly meant to sound like a privilege not to be sniffed at, which makes the stranger's reaction all the more astonishing.

Notice the subtle touch in Eumaeus' reference to Penelope as the prince's mother rather than Odysseus' queen. He still can't break the habit of thinking of Odysseus as dead.

(b) the beggar puts the interview off

But Odysseus has his own ideas about how he wants that scene to be played, and the time isn't yet right. For an excuse, he points to Antinous' conduct: he's not crossing that hall again till the suitors are safely out of the way. Instead, he sets his own terms for the meeting: after dark, here in the hall, by the fire.

Why does Odysseus postpone the interview with Penelope, and insist on these curious conditions? It's not that he's simply playing hard to get. There are several tactical considerations here:

- to flaunt her patronage in front of the suitors would only invite their further hostility;

- he wants an excuse to stay in the palace overnight;
- he needs darkness to minimise the chances of recognition;
- and he seems genuinely uneasy about such an encounter in his present identity, in view of the discomfort he shows with some aspects of the scene in book 19.

However we weight these and other factors, this exchange is a signal to the audience that a big scene between the two of them *is* coming – but not immediately.

4. Penelope and Eumaeus again

Eumaeus relays the message back to a surprised Penelope, who is initially put out. But Eumaeus explains the reasons as the stranger gave them, and she admits there's considerable sense in what he says. This stranger seems a shrewd character; he's getting more interesting by the moment.

5. Eumaeus quits the palace

His messages all delivered, we track Eumaeus on yet another journey back between the women's quarters and the megaron, where he snatches a word with Telemachus. Much as he'd like to be of further help, Eumaeus has a routine to get back to, and excuses himself with a final conspiratorial warning to Telemachus to be on his guard against the suitors. Telemachus, still acting his part, grants him leave to go, and father and son are left alone in the hall with the party still going strong. Where, we wonder, do we go from here? From their different vantage-points in the hall, Telemachus and Odysseus must be pondering the same question.

BOOK 18. THE BEGGAR IN THE PALACE

This long and eventful day continues with three further episodes before the suitors go home for the last night's sleep of their lives. We now know that the day will culminate in the long-awaited meeting of Odysseus and Penelope, but that space has been made between now and then for additional business between the suitors and the beggars. Up until now, Odysseus' experience of the suitors has been limited to their feast; now, he gets to see how they interact with others from both outside and within the palace household, what Penelope means to them, and the differing loyalties of other palace staff. Meanwhile, as he continues his probing of the suitors' characters in a further escalation of the previous book's tensions, Odysseus encounters the strikingly contrasting figures of Eurymachus and Amphinomus, known to us from earlier books but not yet to him.

A. Irus

The unexpected arrival of a new character sets the action on a new course. Antinous mentioned in the previous book that Ithaca already had its share of lazy, parasitic beggars: now we get to meet one in person, and to see the contrast between the thoughtful, civilised beggar Odysseus is playing and the Thersitean figure of Irus. Irus is driven by greed, not need; is aggressive and shameless, not pious and self- effacing; barks loud but bites with the gums, rather than avoiding confrontation and showing his mettle only when provoked. Though the tone of the episode is grimly comic, his fate is the first dramatic demonstration of the consequences of unprovoked violence, unexcused parasitism, and contempt for the codes of hospitality.

1. Irus provokes the beggar

Irus' introduction is full of telling details.

- There's been a lot about appearance and reality in the previous book: Odysseus looks feeble, but is powerful underneath; Antinous looks like a king, but acts like a thug; Irus' muscular appearance is all show, with no real strength to back it up.
- Arnaeus' loss of name (the nickname "Irus" is a made-up male form of the name of the messenger-goddess Iris) is a unique degradation in a narrative world where identities are so closely guarded.

- His eagerness to please is one of several echoes of the Iliadic Thersites – along with cowardice, blustering, coarse sarcasm, quarreling with betters, and his treatment at Odysseus' hands.
- His bluster and threats of violence bracket him from the start with Melanthius and Antinous: figures from opposite ends of the social spectrum but equally worthless within. As the *Odyssey* is constantly at pains to remind us, it's not birth but moral character that determines a man's worth. Irus's spiritual brother is the aristocratic Antinous, not his beggar image Odysseus. Strip away Antinous' noble façade, and you find a Thersites underneath.

2. the response

To Irus' outrage at finding someone else begging on his pitch, Odysseus points out that beggars have no rights of exclusivity, or indeed any rights at all except what's left them by heaven. In his warning to Irus to back down from his threat of force, we recognise the familiar Odyssean pattern of the victim given his last chance to choose the right path before punishment strikes. The naming of Odysseus, with formal patronym, is provocative as well as heavily ironic: as far as the beggar's concerned, this is still Odysseus' house, not that of Irus' patrons the suitors.

3. Irus' challenge

This is far too sophisticated for Irus, who like Antinous is outraged to have his threats met with such smooth talk. He renews the challenge, with touches of crude wit in the two folksy mini-similes that make a pointed contrast with the refinement of Odysseus' cool irony and thoughtfulness.

Shewring's footnote follows ancient commentators in explaining the rather baffling bit about sow's teeth as a reference to an old Cypriot law that allowed farmers to pull out the teeth of pigs caught attacking their crops. It's unclear whether Homer's audience knew this particular law, or whether the law derived from older tradition.

4. the terms of the fight

It's predictably the brutal Antinous who sees the impending violence as potential cabaret entertainment. The whole episode is turning into a travesty of book 8, with Laodamas' challenge to the stranger to compete in the games replayed as a degenerate gladiatorial spectacle between two tramps: what nowadays, in a startling demonstration of the continuity of Homer's world with ours, would be called a bumfight.

(a) the prize

But it's not just book 8 that's being travestied here, but the genuinely heroic games of *Iliad* 23. In setting up the appropriately beggarly prize of a prize haggis, Antinous is playing Achilles with Odysseus's property. Yet in taking on this role, he's unwittingly playing further into Odysseus' hands, because the privilege of exclusive begging rights he attaches to the prize will give his enemy a secure position in the palace: a major boost to Odysseus' strategy of infiltration.

(b) the oath

Odysseus sees the implications and opportunity here, and that they repay the risk of revealing some of his concealed strength. But as usual he thinks ahead, and carefully commits the company to an oath of non-interference, all the while hamming up the part of the underdog no-hoper. Telemachus, catching on, offers himself as guarantor, and adroitly manoeuvres Antinous and Eurymachus into sharing the responsibility despite the obvious barb of irony in his final words.

5. squaring up; Antinous' threat to Irus

This oath and truce between opposing factions has the effect of turning the match into a travesty of a heroic duel. Sure enough, we now go into a parody of the type-scene sequence familiar from the formal duels in *Iliad* 3 and 7:

- arming (= Odysseus' girding)
- comment from the spectators
- combatants square up, making any mismatch all too apparent
- loser strikes ineffectually
- winner strikes successfully
- anatomically gruesome and circumstantial description of blow
- body dragged out.

Odysseus' body, we remember, has been left largely undisguised under his rags, and Athene enhances it further with one of her discreet makeovers – her intervention invisible and momentary, but reminding us once again of her continuing background presence. Antinous' brutal violence and bluster now turns on his favourite, his threat proving the wisdom of Odysseus' insistence on binding them with an oath. Ironically, the fate described here is that which will eventually be doled out to Irus' counterpart and Antinous' other favourite Melanthius.

6. Irus dispatched

Odysseus' only difficulty is to decide how hard to hit the hapless Irus. Weighing up his options, he reluctantly decides to cripple rather than kill, purely on grounds of concealing his full strength and capability from the suitors. The travesty of an Iliadic duel reaches a crescendo with the slow-motion narrative of the blow and fall to the dust. Irus suffers the fate he originally threatened to Odysseus: dragged out of the hall by the leg, in an action that seems comic now but will be grimly echoed with the bodies of the suitors after the slaughter in book 22. This whole contest, though seemingly a mere cabaret interlude, foreshadows the later, grimmer contest of the princes' archery; and its outcome is an integral part of the suitors' final warning. They may be dying of laughter now, but they'll be dying of something else soon enough.

7. omen and prize

On his return to the megaron to claim his prize, Odysseus is acclaimed by the suitors in terms that inadvertently wish him the fulfilment of his revenge: another in the series of omens that are coming thick and fast in these books as the end approaches. And in commending the eviction of one parasite, they fail to see the implications for their own situation.

8. Amphinomus given his chance

Antinous, as sponsor of the contest, awards the haggis prize; but much more genuine warmth comes from Amphinomus, whom Odysseus instantly spots as the one suitor who can be redeemed if any can. Without blowing his cover, Odysseus can only speak of principles and possibilities, but he comes as close as he can with the references to Amphinomus' father and home island, and (for the first time to a suitor) to Odysseus' own imminent return. At the same time, he's careful to slip in a bit of Cretan misdirection with the reference to brothers; Odysseus himself, of course, had none, which is how this situation has been able to arise. Even the moralising part of his speech isn't just platitudes; Odysseus' point is that personal inexperience of misfortune, particularly among the young, blinkers awareness of human fragility – a vice inevitably widespread in a postwar generation, whose moral senses haven't been sharpened by education in suffering.

The shape of the speech is one we'll see a lot of in the beggar's performances to the suitors. It begins disarmingly enough, with what seem for most of the speech like compliments and platitudes, before the steely barbs emerge from the softness at the end. The moment of silent ritual and physical contact at the end intensifies the bond between them, and the impression made on Amphinomus is a deep one. Yet in the end, he resumes his seat with the suitors, and will be back there the following day to die alongside them. For all his thoughtfulness and moral sense, in the end he makes the wrong choice when he's given it.

B. Penelope before the suitors

The central episode of the book is a surprising one, and as Shewring notes the analyst critics have long had the knives out for it. The arguments for its being a later addition are actually fairly weak: a few late linguistic forms, some oddities in the chronology, and apparent inconsistencies in Penelope's motivation and behaviour. But recent criticism has tended to be more appreciative, and it's certainly a highly effective scene in context, moving the plot unexpectedly on towards important developments in the next book.

The line about "winning more esteem from son and husband" has probably generated more barmy nonsense than any other line in Homer. If this is part of Penelope's plan, the argument goes, then she already knows that the stranger is her husband! How can this be, when in the poem as we have it she hasn't even clapped eyes on him? Analyst and neoanalyst critics argue that we have a trace here of an alternate version in which Penelope is in on the conspiracy from an early stage, and then go on to try and find further traces of this hypothetical alternative *Odyssey* throughout the following books. Unitarians argue for an equally fantastic psychological reading, according to which Penelope *unconsciously senses* that the stranger is Odysseus without being able to rationalise her feeling or even realise what she's picking up – and that that's why she makes a series of strange but momentous decisions, culminating in the contest of the bow to decide her fate.

The irony in all this is that, as the sane majority of Homerists has been pointing out till they're blue in the face, there isn't any problem in the first place. The syntax of the Greek sentence makes it clear enough that what's being described here is *Athene's* intention, not Penelope's. But somehow the ideas of lost alternate *Odyssey*s and secret Penelopean motives have taken on a life of their own. If ever you see this stuff coming, cross the road.

1. Penelope and Eurynome

Again the narrative cut from the megaron to Penelope's rooms is light and abrupt, as Penelope feels what initially seems a bizarre impulse to confront the suitors herself. Unaware that it comes from Athene as part of a larger plan, even she finds the impulse inexplicable, and her speech to Eurynome is a psychologically fascinating study in trying to rationalise the irrational. Her forced laugh is the first in a series of unsettling moments of uneasy laughter in the books that follow: another sign of the disruption of established behaviour introduced to the palace by the beggar's unsettling presence.

As in the previous book, Eurynome again acts as confidante. It's not clear what's going on between them in the discussion of Telemachus and makeup, but it's tempting to see them as obliquely alluding to the possibility of marriage. (As we'll see in a moment, Odysseus' instructions are that Penelope should remarry when Telemachus "grows to bearded manhood".) That might explain some intriguing features of the scene that plays out.

2. Athene's makeover

There's an odd chronological hiatus here, as Penelope snoozes off while Athene performs another of her celestial beauty treatments. (We're told the aim is to impress the suitors, but of course this will also be Odysseus' first sight of his wife in twenty years…) But it's clearly quite a short nap, covering only the time needed for Eurynome to summon the maids requested, and their arrival to wake her up again with their chatter. Part of Penelope's characterisation is a strange affinity for the world of sleep and dreams – something we'll see put to brilliant use in the next two books.

3. Penelope makes her entrance

Penelope now reprises her début appearance in the poem, in a passage recycled from 14.199–359. But thanks to Athene's makeover, the effect on the suitors is spectacularly more dramatic, sending them into a rather unnerving sexual frenzy and what certainly strike us as distinctly unsuitorly exclamations. But of course the real point of the scene isn't about the suitors at all. Not a word is said in all this about what Odysseus must be feeling; as with his first sight of Telemachus at 16.11ff., the narrative camera pans off him entirely to describe the reaction to the new arrival from someone else entirely, but leaving us to imagine the effect on Odysseus himself and the restraint he must be having to exercise to conceal it.

4. Penelope and Telemachus

As if completely oblivious to her effect on the suitors, Penelope ignores them entirely for Telemachus, whom she addresses as if the suitors weren't there. But her awareness of them is all too clear from the way she recasts the message she told Eurynome she was going to deliver to him (to beware of the suitors) in the more oblique and coded form of a rebuke for the suitors' brutal treatment of the beggar.

If Telemachus gets this rather veiled meaning, he in turn codes his reply well. Penelope was probably referring to the stool episode, but Telemachus takes this opportunity to draw an encouraging lesson from the subsequent Irus incident. The beggar more than made up for the stool episode by making such short work of Irus; and with their three divine allies as well as Odysseus on the case, the suitors are going to follow before Penelope's concern for Telemachus can be realised. It's provocative stuff for the suitors to hear, but he knows they won't dare to speak against him in Penelope's presence.

5. Penelope's response to Eurymachus

Eurymachus now speaks up for the first time this day, in his usual role as the most unctuous and hypocritically ingratiating of the suitors. His compliment to Penelope is a sidelong answer to Telemachus' challenge: the reason the suitors are there is that they're all besotted. But this is one of those matches of amateur against veteran that the *Odyssey* so delights in, and she squelches him utterly by

(i) rejecting the compliment;

(ii) turning it back on Eurymachus, by redefining her *kleos* (the word translated "repute" in Shewring) as inextricably coupled to her marriage to Odysseus, and only to be restored by his return;

(iii) insisting that if she does remarry it'll be on Odysseus' terms and instructions, and against her own desire.

(a) Odysseus' parting words

The role of Telemachus in all this is now revealed as crucial. Penelope herself has just admitted that Telemachus has now grown up. It looks as though she's conceding, or pretending to concede, that the crisis is imminent and the process of choice is under way. This is perhaps the single most discussed problem in Penelope's characterisation: is she, in fact, signalling a major and irreversible commitment at last, or is she (as Odysseus, at least, believes) stringing them along further? Certainly in the next book she seems to be making an irrevocable decision to settle the matter once and for all the next day. But this kind of elusiveness and ambiguity are an essential part of Penelope's characterisation, and what makes her the poem's most complex and intriguing personality.

(b) courting gifts

Penelope now springs her trap on the suitors: if you want to play the game of wooing by the rules, now is the time to prove it and cough up. Now at last we glimpse Odysseus, watching, admiring, and seeing all that the suitors fail to see about Penelope's real game here. As he sees, she's actually committed herself to nothing, while extracting the maximum from them and at a stroke neutralising their strategy of aggressive consumption.

One thing this scene has brought across is the non-political dimension to the suitors' motivation. It's not just what Penelope signifies, but the woman herself they want. Even Antinous softens his tone, while recognising that they've been at least temporarily outplayed. He admits the suitors' parasitic behaviour is simply a way of keeping up pressure, but acknowledges her right to courting-gifts. But if they produce, then she needs to play her end of the game, and take their courtship seriously. Until she does, they'll keep the pressure up.

gifts for Penelope

In another chronological oddity, the gifts are produced far more quickly than natural time would require. We're reminded of the Phaeacians' gifts at the start of book 13, perhaps a subtle sign that Penelope is about to embark on the final leg of her own journey home. But the most effective touch is that she then just pockets the treasure and retires to her quarters,

apparently without so much as a thank-you. The suitors have lost heavily in this round; but Odysseus, silently observing, has had not just an extended opportunity to admire Penelope in action, but an instructive demonstration of the formidable intelligence he'll be facing in the next book.

C. Evening

The rest of the book is taken up with the tail end of this eventful day's feasting as the day turns to evening and the hour of Odysseus' appointment with Penelope looms nearer. The fall of dark is a chance for Odysseus to make a further move to strengthen his position in the palace, by volunteering to take over from the maids the responsibility of tending the fire. As well as allowing him to keep a closer watch on the suitors, it's a chance for him to interact directly with the palace staff: part of the process of testing and judging he's been surreptitiously pursuing throughout these books.

1. Melantho

The maids are disconcerted at being so instructed by a tramp, and look to one another for a decision. Their spokeswoman is the important minor character of Melantho: sister to Melanthius, mistress to Eurymachus, and ringleader of the dissident faction among the palace maids who've thrown in their lot with the suitors. Like Eumaeus, she's actually had a privileged upbringing as a member of the royal household; but unlike Eumaeus, she's betrayed that upbringing by turning against Penelope and her family. Indignant both at being bossed around and at the stranger's presumptuous intention to spend the night in the palace, she threatens him with violence at hands unspecified but clearly alluding to her sponsors among the suitors.

Odysseus doesn't even argue; he calls her bluff directly, threatening to report her words to Telemachus. The calculated brutality of his final words is enough to cow her and drive the maids swiftly out of the hall, leaving Odysseus in control of yet another small but highly significant part of his domain. But he doesn't spare the maids any more thought than they deserve; these are small fry, and he has bigger fish in his sights.

2. Eurymachus and Odysseus

Now it's the turn of Melantho's lover Eurymachus. We've seen Odysseus spar successfully with Antinous, but how will he fare against this more sophisticated and smooth-talking villain?

(a) the exchange of words

With Penelope out of the way, the real Eurymachus shows himself, descending to crude sarcasm, abuse of the less fortunate, and foolish recourse to violence. Eurymachus's first gibe is actually quite witty, an evocative visual pun observing and exploiting the beggar's new job in an irreverent parody of the tradition alluded to earlier that strangers may be gods in disguise. Then he rapidly switches tack to taunt the beggar with his place in the social hierarchy, where beggars stand even lower than the landless labourers Achilles used in book 11 as his example of the lowest of all free men.

Again, however, the laughter turns to unease, as Odysseus's reply moves from quiet restraint to overt challenge. Odysseus again proposes a test of worth based on nature, not birth: which of us, the beggar or the prince, would be better at actually doing a labourer's work – of which he casually reveals deep knowledge, and none of Eurymachus's contempt. Or suppose the competition were in the work of (a new term in the hierarchy, at once upending it) a *warrior*?

Finally the mask of politeness drops, and he lets the steel behind it show. Eurymachus's whole picture of the social ranking is based on a fatally limited range of experience, especially of heroes. Confronted with just one such, the princeling Eurymachus would (and soon will) become members of the same series as Irus and Melantho. The name of Odysseus is a calculated provocation: the first time the beggar has pronounced the name, and the moment when he declares himself publicly for Odysseus' faction. And notice, too, that

Odysseus' imagination is already staging a showdown in the hall, with the doors as the only route out.

(b) the second stool-throwing

Eurymachus' smooth mask of self-assurance crumbles in rage. This second manifestation of violence is the more disturbing for coming after the suitors' oath sworn prior to the Irus combat, the condemnation of Antinous' act by the other suitors, and the patronage they granted the beggar as part of his prize. In contrast, Odysseus is now much more firmly in control. He anticipates and ducks the blow, whose only effect is instead to disrupt the feast irreparably. As the suitors realise, the evening is ruined, and somehow it's all the result of the beggar's arrival; but they recognise that the disruptive acts are all their own.

(c) the end of the feast

This is Telemachus' opportunity to exploit the change of mood to bring the evening to a close with a few well-chosen words, getting rid of the suitors and preempting any further escalation.

(i) Telemachus speaks up

With neat irony, Telemachus turns Eurymachus' charge of drunkenness back on him, and tactfully draws the corollary that the reason they're ruining their party is that they're continuing beyond its natural limit. At the same time, he's careful to soften the dismissal with genial (and ironic) professions of limitless hospitality.

(ii) Amphinomus responds

As in book 16, it's Amphinomus who plays peacemaker, in a speech which neatly ties tying up the many strands of this book. The feast comes to an end, as does the violence; the hall is emptied of the suitors, but the beggar is allowed to remain; and Telemachus and Odysseus are acknowledged as retaining title to the palace, at least for now.

(iii) the suitors depart

So the evening ends for the suitors in a formal ritual of closure, with Amphinomus' own servant taking charge of the libation. For the last time, the suitors retire unscathed to their lodgings in the town. Yet for Odysseus, Telemachus, Penelope, and the household, the most remarkable night in the *Odyssey* is only beginning.

BOOK 19. THE QUEEN AND THE BEGGAR

This magnificent book is the climax to Odysseus' first day in the palace, to his performance as the beggar, and to the emerging role and character of Penelope. The two preceding books have spun a varied, dramatic series of short episodes and encounters from a large cast of characters, but now there's a change of pace and a deepening of psychological focus. Like book 14, it's dominated by a single long two-handed conversation scene: the long-promised interview between Penelope and the beggar, in which Odysseus' skills of disguise, planning, and self-control will be put to their greatest test yet, as for the first time he finds himself playing his mindgames against an opponent every bit as subtle and skilful as he is.

A great article on this scene is Chris Emlyn-Jones, "The Reunion of Penelope and Odysseus", in *Greece and Rome* 31 (1984) 1–18.

A. Evening in the palace

With both the suitors and the maids out of the way, Odysseus has a window of opportunity alone in the hall with Telemachus ahead of his interview with Penelope, and loses no time in moving forward the next part of the plan outlined at 16.266–307.

1. removing the weapons

So far, events in the palace have gone pretty much on the lines Odysseus planned. The beggar has successfully braved the suitors' insults, and neither he nor Telemachus has given the game away; while the process of testing the loyalties of the servants is already under way. To

go ahead with the removal of the arms is the clearest sign yet that Odysseus is ready to take on the suitors as early as the following day.

(a) Odysseus & Telemachus plan

Most of Odysseus' speech is quoted from his longer version at 16.266ff., but there are a few significant modifications to the plan. Analyst critics like Page pounce on the discrepancies between the original version and what actually happens here, but the changes are partly a result of unpredictable developments since that provisional version that have made some of the original details irrelevant. Thus:

- Their presence together in the hall alone gives them a chance to remove the arms together, rather than Telemachus having to do it on his own, and also eliminates the need for a covert signal.
- The cover stories to explain the arms' removal won't in the event be needed with the suitors, who show no curiosity on the matter – but Telemachus will be able to use the first of them on Eurycleia.
- It's harder to explain why Odysseus and Telemachus don't keep a couple of sets of arms back for themselves as originally planned; but developments in the course of this book will present Odysseus with an alternative strategy that in large part supersedes his original plan. Even Telemachus noted that the first version was conspicuously vague about how exactly the suitors would be killed, and it's this part of the plan that Odysseus is working on throughout this book and the next.

(b) Telemachus & Eurycleia

On his own initiative, Telemachus enlists the help of Eurycleia to deal with a detail Odysseus hasn't covered: keeping the maids out of the hall so as to delay the moment when the arms are missed. Even in broad daylight, the suitors don't even notice till 22.24f., so if the women don't actually witness the removal now they're hardly likely to notice in the dark.

One consequence of this scene is to bring Eurycleia back on stage for the vital role she'll play later in the book. Already her shrewdness comes through when she points out that the maids will be needed to light Telemachus' way; but he improvises a neat solution, using the fact that the beggar has already taken over the maids' functions at the hearth to suggest he also carries the lamp. In fact, though, Homer has a more dramatic option still in store, as we'll see in a moment.

(c) the removal; Athene's lamp

Eurycleia closes the barrier into the women's section of the ground floor. Like the storeroom to which Odysseus and Telemachus now transfer the arms, the doors to the women's rooms are an important bit of narrative topography. The next time Eurycleia does this, in book 22, it will be literally to seal the suitors' fate in the hall.

An unusual and mysterious scene follows, in which the glow from the invisible Athene's lamp is all that the mortal characters see of her presence. Telemachus suspects the presence of a god, but Odysseus silences and dismisses him to bed. Perhaps he's reluctant to have Athene's presence spoken of aloud, or perhaps he senses (as in book 16) that her business is with him alone. Telemachus duly goes off to bed: the first night back in his own bed after seven weeks away, putting the final seal on his eventful homecoming.

2. Penelope emerges

For the second time, the narrative holds on the solitary figure of Odysseus, brooding on his plans; and then Penelope makes her long-awaited entry. As usual at such highly-charged moments, Odysseus drops from view, his feelings at the sight left for us to imagine; but the brief moment inside his head at 51–2 subtly encourages us to imagine the scene from his point of view. The chair is an important prop, a sign that Penelope is settling down for a long discussion; she'll spend the rest of the book in this chair.

Odysseus, and apparently also Penelope, is none to keen to have this conversation in front of an audience; but Penelope's maids have legitimate business in the hall, clearing up after the feast and relieving the beggar of the task of tending the fire.

3. Melantho II

Naturally enough, the work at the hearth brings Melantho once again into confrontation with the beggar, this time with no Telemachus to protect him; and she reverts to her old aggression and threats. In front of Penelope, Odysseus doesn't repeat the scare tactics of their previous encounter. Instead, he treats her to a diplomatic but pointed reworking of his warning to Amphinomus in the previous book. It's another Cretan tale in minature, but this time brilliantly framed to avoid telling any actual lies whatever (which as we'll see he's uncomfortable doing in Penelope's hearing): the house and servants referred to are of course ironically these very ones here. Part of the reason for this is that Penelope is listening, and the speech is at least as much for her benefit as Melantho's; these are in fact Odysseus's first words in Penelope's presence for 20 years, and artfully introduce the beggar as a man of patience, former glory, royalist sympathies, sense of old-fashioned propriety, optimism about Odysseus's return, and respect for Telemachus: all qualities calculated to win Penelope's sympathy and interest, while withholding enough actual detail to get Penelope interested in hearing his whole story in full.

Penelope takes the hint, from the beggar's sidelong reference to the mistress, to interpose her own authority and discipline Melantho. (As with "subtle Odysseus", the formula "wise Penelope" is often a cue to the audience to spot something clever going on between the lines.) Her response is equally for the stranger's benefit as much as Melantho's, allowing him to overhear a summary of her mood and the purpose of the interview before she comes to address him directly.

B. The interview

Turning pointedly from Melantho to the faithful Eurynome, she has a similar chair brought for her guest: a mark of respect even Telemachus didn't offer, as well as a signal that both are in for a long and complex dialogue scene. Last time two characters sat down like this together, Odysseus and Eumaeus spent a whole book in conversation, so we can look forward to a round of mindgames that surpass even book 14. Sure enough, Penelope's "I will begin" confirms that there'll be several rounds to the exchange. But her opening questions are leaner than Nestor's or Alcinous, and difficult to wriggle around; each requires a lie if Odysseus' cover is to stay intact.

1. Penelope's question declined

Odysseus seems uncomfortable lying to Penelope, and particularly about giving a false name; this will be the only time he does so, and only under direct pressure. For this first attempt, he tries to fob her off with an apology, on the grounds that melancholy in so great a queen's house would breach his responsibilities as a guest. But for a non-answer to her question, it's surprisingly informative promising a feast of woe, unsparing frankness, and staunchly royalist political sentiments. (The simile here is the poem's single most forthright endorsement of the institution of monarchy.) But there's also an undercurrent of concealed emotion in the heartfelt praise of her *kleos*.

2. Penelope's predicament: the weaving

Penelope's remarkable reply is a transformation of her speech to the suitors in the previous book, beginning with the same six lines. As often with Penelope, she seems to drift off in pursuit of a loose thread of personal preoccupations, but the seemingly artlessness actually traces a subtle but compelling line of argument and a powerfully manipulative psychological strategy. Once again she deprecates the attempted compliment, on the grounds that her *kleos* is inextricably linked to the absent Odysseus, and will remain so until he returns.

Next she turns to her present situation, and the limitations of her power to hold off the suitors. To our surprise, she frankly acknowledges the trick of the shroud that the suitors complained of to the assembly in book 2: a clever use of one of the few activities freely permitted to aristocratic married women. But that trick, as we have heard, has failed, and Penelope admits she's running out of ideas. Even Telemachus is feeling the pressure, though she pointedly refrains from accusing him of chivvying her in the way that apparently her parents have been.

All this is startlingly frank stuff to confide in a complete stranger – though he's already signalled himself an appropriate confidant, and she that she never intended a one-way interview. But now her purpose becomes clear, as she catches him offguard by suddenly repeating her original question. The gift of confidences has been in part an emotional tactic to pressurise him into repaying. That's my story, she says, as honestly as I can tell it; now you owe me yours.

3. the last Cretan tale

Despite the buildup, this last Cretan tale omits all personal history of woe, confining itself instead to Penelope's questions about the beggar's identity and background, and giving much more space to her unasked question about Odysseus. It's quite unlike the other Cretan tales, dealing only with events before the war; and even there some key details have been modified since the version told to Eumaeus and summarised by him to the queen. Evidently the inconsistency with the Eumaeus version doesn't trouble Odysseus because he isn't planning on remaining incognito long enough for Eumaeus and Penelope to compare notes.

(a) Aethon, brother of Idomeneus

This version uniquely kicks off with some detailed Cretan ethnography for added background verisimilitude. Odysseus has modified his character's ancestry from the bastard son of a Cretan noble to a member of the royal family itself, as Idomeneus' fictional kid brother Aethon. The change is probably motivated by the need to add in an early encounter with Odysseus in Crete, because if Odysseus was to be entertained in Crete it would be by the royal family. He's also quietly deleted his claim to have been at Troy, which would imply much more extended acquaintance with Odysseus, and invite all kind of inconvenient cross-examination by Penelope; and he avoids all mention of the Thesprotian rumour till his third speech, suggesting he isn't at this stage planning to use it. It seems to be Penelope's despair of his return that prompts his further improvisation.

(b) Odysseus in Crete

Aethon's main claim is that he entertained Odysseus en route to Troy. For all we know, this episode could actually have happened; certainly it's full of circumstantial detail, place-names and all, though the narrator dismisses it as lies in line 203. But of course the story is no use at all to Penelope, who knows that Odysseus went to Troy; what she needs to hear is that he's on his way home at last. After all Eumaeus' buildup, it seems as though the stranger's news of her husband is twenty years out of date.

4. the test of truth

Nevertheless, the mere mention of Odysseus is enough to trigger a flood of tears and another magnificent emotional simile. But even in this state, Penelope has the presence of mind to do what no previous audience of Odysseus' stories has done: to test the accuracy of his story under cross-examination.

(a) Penelope's tears and challenge

Though the simile is ostensibly just about the wetness of Penelope's tears, it carries a rich load of secondary associations: the yielding of coldness, the height and aloof immobility of the mountains, the vastness of the natural forces involved, the cycle of seasonal external forces at whose mercy the subject sits. There's also an implicit contrast with Odysseus, who remains hard and cold; note the contrastingly minimalist simile comparing his own eyes to horn and iron.

Yet despite the surge of emotion, she hasn't forsaken her scepticism and probing intelligence. If the stranger had Odysseus in his sights for twelve days, he should be able to remember what he was wearing. She remembers vividly, of course, not just because (like Arete in book 7) she wove the clothes in the first place but because it was what Odysseus was wearing when she saw him last.

(b) the beggar's evidence

Of course the one impostor who can pass this test is Odysseus himself, who can remember what he was wearing, and more. But he puts on a great performance, hedging and hesitant,

and doing his paradoxical best to make his truths sound like lies: it was such a long time ago, and he may have picked up the outfit en route… But his actual description is devastatingly accurate, culminating in the triple clinchers of the brooch, the tunic, and apparent afterthought of the comrade Eurybates – a poignant memory for both of them, as this closest of companions must now be long dead with all the others.

5. Odysseus' return promised

The stranger's evidence is enough to win Penelope round to the truth of his story, but as yet he's said nothing about Odysseus' return – perhaps because he's been forewarned by Eumaeus, who noted the similarity of his own Thesprotian claims to a pack of lies served up by an earlier visitor. But Penelope's reaction to his first tale is so intense as to persuade him, whether from sympathy, guilt, or something more complex still, to try the tale on her in a judiciously modified form.

(a) Penelope's despair

Penelope accepts the stranger into her affections, and asks no further questions. In a way, the sheer negativity of the stranger's news confirms her gloomy suspicions: that the last reliable news of Odysseus is twenty years old, and the chances of his return are nil. She shows no sign of remembering Eumaeus' reference to the stranger's more recent news from the mainland, and doesn't obviously seem to be fishing for more; perhaps she assumes Eumaeus was confusing his tale with another's.

(b) the Thesprotian tale

But the stranger has encouraging news after all. In this recomposed version of his Thesprotian tale, lines and details taken verbatim from his earlier version are interspersed with genuine fragments of Odysseus' real adventures, including the Thrinacian and Phaeacian episodes. In merging the two shipwrecks together, he discreetly snips Calypso out of the story entirely – unnecessarily, since unknown to him Telemachus has already mentioned her to Penelope in book 17. This creates a seven-year gap in the chronology, which then has to be filled in by some fictitious extra years' wandering in the post-Phaeacian phase. But he gives Odysseus's Thesprotian visit a context and a motive, and is even more emphatic in promising his imminent return; "quite near at hand" is a new touch of heavy irony, apparent only to the audience, but he does use the oracle story to hint to her as he did to Eumaeus that when Odysseus does return it may be incognito.

6. Penelope's response

Penelope's pessimism, like Eumaeus', is too strong to be overcome even by this virtuoso performance, but she's more tactful than Eumaeus on the matter of beggar's oath and possible ulterior motive. Instead, she slyly makes his reward of a passage home conditional on the fulfilment of his oath. If Odysseus were to return, the stranger would have all he desires; but if she's to speak frankly, she doesn't believe he ever will.

(a) Penelope's hospitality

With that, Penelope signals a close to the interview – though, as we'll see, the most dramatic part is still to come. Her instructions to the maids bring the wider scene back into focus, ending the intimacy that's grown around the two of them in the firelight; and the arrangements proposed for bath, bed, and further hospitality imply that she has no particular plan to meet with him again. She wraps up her speech with some comfortably bland moralising on the *kleos* theme.

(b) the beggar declines bath & bed

But Odysseus is far from keen to carry out her programme for him. A bath threatens further interaction with and bodily inspection by the maids, which he's keen to avoid, and in any case a well scrubbed and refreshed appearance is not at all the image he's cultivating; while sending Odysseus off to a comfy bed would fatally blunt the narrative drive and tension. As diplomatically as he can, he declines both bath and bed, making the refusal look like an impressive display of frugality. But he does make the concession that he'll accept a footbath

only – and that only from someone old, rather than young and attractive. It's unclear whether he has Eurycleia in mind, though she's been in shot at the start of the book; until now she's been more associated with Telemachus, and this is the first we've heard of her being Odysseus's nurse as well. Whatever the case, he's about to realise too late that in allowing this scene he's quite literally put his foot in it.

(c) Penelope delegates Eurycleia

Penelope approves his modesty, and knows just the woman for the job. The name of Eurycleia is built up to by degrees, beginning with the detail (immediately recognisable to Odysseus) that she served as Odysseus' own nurse from birth. Her remark about a possible likeness to Odysseus' own feet isn't just a piece of thumping irony; it inadvertently plants the seed of recognition in Eurycleia's mind, and gets her thinking dangerously about the stranger's odd resemblance to her lost master.

C. Eurycleia and the scar

Now comes one of the most famous scenes in the *Odyssey*, and the single most daring narrative *coup* in Homer. Odysseus realises too late that Eurycleia is about to recognise the one tell-tale bodily clue that's slipped through Athene's disguise, and there's not a thing he can do about it; and on this sensational cliffhanger the narrative stops dead for a long and fascinating flashback, leaving the moment frozen in time.

1. the nurse and the beggar

The ironies continue with Eurycleia unnervingly launching into what sounds at first like an address to the beggar as Odysseus, but turns out to be a false alarm: it's just a rhetorical device, and she shifts back halfway through her speech to discussing the absent Odysseus in the third person. But in doing so her attention is drawn to her guest with Odysseus in her head, and she naturally pursues the thought of the likeness between them: their shared experience of shameless slaves like Melantho's gang, and the curious physical resemblance she notices in all the things that Athene hasn't troubled to disguise. His voice, his physique, and the feet she's about to wash are still recognisably Odysseus'. Seeing no danger yet in this, he deflects her interest with another false truth, pretending that the resemblance is well known and has been remarked on by others.

2. the scar recognised

Penelope has now vanishes quietly from attention, as the washing gets under way and the narrative goes into a kind of slow-motion closeup as the preparations are itemised: basin; cold water; hot; and contact. But suddenly Odysseus gives a start of realisation, for reasons we still don't know; this is the first mention of the scar that seems to mean so much to him, and all we understand is that it means the end of his disguise, and Penelope and (more alarmingly, because some of them side with the suitors) the maids will know who he is. The narrative takes us as far as the moment where the scar is recognised, and then freezes the scene with a stab of the pause button, leaving Odysseus and Eurycleia frozen in mid-action. Before the scene can resume, we need to know what the characters know – and what it means to them.

3. flashback: the story behind the scar

This is actually a flashback with another flashback inside it – one of the rare instances in the *Odyssey* of a "ring composition" narrative structure. Appropriately for a scene with Eurycleia, we're travelling deeper into Odysseus' past here than anywhere else in the poem: first to his teens, and the rite of passage that makes him a man, and then right back to his earliest infancy when he acquired his name and its meaning. At this moment of recognition, we're travelling deep into the roots of Odysseus' very identity.

Because it's a big, complex story, the tale of the scar is prefaced with a quick one-sentence summary of the main story, and then the explanation of who Autolycus is leads neatly into the story of his first involvement in Odysseus' life. As the description here suggests, Autolycus is a pretty shady character, renowned in later legend as the trickster par excellence, and clearly where Odysseus gets his flair for economy with the truth. ("Subtlety

of oaths", as Shewring elegantly translates, is evidently the kind of careful choice of words that manages to deceive without telling actual lies.) But Autolycus is also divinely favoured and, like Odysseus, genuinely devoted to his patron god.

(a) Odysseus' naming

It's on Autolycus' first visit to his Ithacan grandson that Odysseus gets his peculiar name. Ancient commentators were puzzled by Eurycleia's role here, instead of one of the actual parents – though clearly it's part of the connection to the outer scene. It's been plausibly suggested that what's happening here is that Eurycleia is hinting that the parents would like the child to be named Polyaretus, "Much prayed for", but that Autolycus plays one of his tricks and bestows a name with less banal connotations. We've seen this wordplay between the name Odysseus and the (etymologically unrelated) Greek word meaning "to be at odds with" at the very start of the poem, 1.62. Autolycus means this child to take after himself, and bids him come visit his grandfather near Delphi when he comes of age.

(b) the visit and feast

Now the main narrative of the flashback resumes, as we cut to Odysseus' teens and the return visit to his grandfather on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. The episode begins with a standard hospitality sequence in summary form (reception, meal, and bed), before the dawn-formula signals a transition to the fullest mode of Homeric narration.

(c) the hunt and wound

The second day of Odysseus' visit is a boar-hunt in the company of his uncles in the forests of the lower slopes of Parnassus. It's a kind of scene we're familiar with from similes, but which has never been part of Homer's main narrative until now. There's a nice technique of intercutting between the boar's lair (described in vivid detail) and the approaching hunters, which always reminds me of the dramatic editing in nature documentaries where predator and prey are (supposedly) meeting. The actual kill is described in an adaptation of Iliadic combat narrative (exchange of blows, first striker wounds, second kills, victim falls to earth), with a typical Iliadic slow-motion effect describing the wound itself. Then the narrative speeds up to tell the sequel more briskly, before the flashback ends (rather neatly) with the first telling of the story we've just heard. De Jong attractively suggests that what we're being treated to is a tour of the memories that flash into Eurycleia's head as she sees the scar, and that's why she's given prominence in the naming and the story closes with Odysseus telling her the whole tale back in Ithaca.

4. Eurycleia silenced

This long-delayed resumption of the main narrative is one of the top ten Homeric moments, as the action suddenly unfreezes and all hell breaks loose. Eurycleia drops the foot in shock with a CRASH, and water goes everywhere; Eurycleia tenderly touches Odysseus' face, and before he can stop her she's blurted out his identity in Penelope's hearing and turned to the queen to bring her into the scene.

But in the split second all this takes to happen, Odysseus improvises a determined plan of response. Thanks again to the subtle background activity of Athene, Penelope is brooding, and doesn't immediately notice the commotion; and in the window of opportunity, Odysseus is able to shoot out a hand and silence Eurycleia with a well-placed grip to the throat, giving time to enlist her in the conspiracy, with ferocious threats of retribution if she betrays his secret.

Eurycleia is only too keen, particularly if it also involves the punishment of the turncoat hussies among the younger slave women whose conduct so outrages her. But Odysseus retains control, refusing to delegate her a role just yet, and the episode closes with fresh water and the careful concealment of the scar from any other eyes.

D. The interview resumes & concludes

We may have thought Penelope had finished with her guest, but this delicate and mysterious closing scene takes their curious bond, and her ever-elusive character, an unexpected step further. As Odysseus moves back to the fire to dry, he finds himself once more next to the

queen, whom we last saw brooding deeply in the firelight. Now she breaks the silence to ask an unusual service of him, and follows it up with a startling revelation that marks a turning-point in both their lives, as well as in the plotting of the *Odyssey*.

1. Penelope's prospects

Penelope's speech is another of her seemingly stream-of-consciousness rambles on tangents to tangents. Though she announces in her first line that she has something to ask him, the mention of bedtime seems to send her off on another of her meandering associative tours of her preoccupations. Bedtime makes her think of her own sleepless nights, and the options she turns endlessly over in the long hours brooding alone. Her shapeless list of pros and cons (all by now familiar) reflects her inability to settle on the right thing to do; and the breathtaking psychological simile is one of the finest in the poem.

The myth of the nightingale here is very obliquely told, and later versions modified it considerably. Homer's version seems to be that the Cretan king Pandareus' daughter Aedon bore her husband Zethus an only child, Itylus (more usually Itys), and in jealousy of her sister-in-law Niobe's large brood tried to kill Niobe's eldest son by night. But she got the wrong child in the dark, and killed Itylus instead; whereupon Zeus turned her into a nightingale, and now she endlessly laments her son's death in the form of the nightingale's song. We'll hear more of the myth of this peculiarly luckless family from Penelope in the next book.

The primary point of comparison in the simile, almost as buried as the nightingale in the dense foliage, is the shifting quality of Penelope's thoughts and the birdsong. But there's a rich penumbra of secondary associatons: the lament, the bower, and above all the murder of family through doing the wrong thing in ignorance. And as usual, we find ourself suspecting that the appearance of irrelevance and meandering is at least in part a mask for something more purposeful: that she's telling the beggar of her indecision because she's secretly made her decision already. As for whether she really thinks that Telemachus wishes her gone, it's possible that she understands her son no better than he understands her; but it's also possible that she's putting it on as part of her misdirection.

2. the dream and interpretation

And so at last to the mysterious service she wants to ask of him: to interpret one of her dreams for her. Since the dream is self-interpreting, there isn't much for the stranger to do, and she seems rather to be using him as a sounding-board for the echo of her own thoughts. For all we know she could even be making the whole thing up to test the beggar's reaction; it's certainly unlike any other Homeric dream in its allegorical correspondence to a real-life situation. (The usual Homeric dream is a visitation by a dream-figure, normally divine, who gives advice.) Commentators also note the strange identification of the detested suitors with the beloved geese: an odd emotional ambiguity that psychological critics have tended to go a bit mad over.

Odysseus seems a bit nonplussed himself by all this, and merely affirms that the dream has interpreted itself correctly. Certainly for him it's another powerfully encouraging omen. But in a famous passage, Penelope declares herself less convinced. Just because a dream tells you it's a "waking vision" (Greek *hupar*) rather than an empty dream (*onar*) doesn't mean you should believe it. Though the omens are starting to crowd in on Penelope and all seem to point to a single conclusion, her curse is that she's far too intelligent to allow herself to believe them.

3. the contest of the bow

Only now does it turn out that this hasn't been a conversation about dreams and their interpretation at all. Almost as an afterthought, she reveals that she's come to a decision about the suitors: the famous contest of the bow and axes, with Penelope herself as the prize. This startling new turn in her strategy is presented not as a sudden decision but as one she's taken some time back – presumably in the last 24 hours, but still in her mind throughout her earlier speech. Yet it's not a complete non sequitur after the account of the dream. The implication is that the only way to determine the dream's significance is to test it by forcing the gods to show their hand, to put their practical support behind their omens.

Odysseus shows no sign of being fazed by this revelation; perhaps he sees that this is part of the divinely-engineered crisis he seeks, though his eventual plan hasn't yet taken shape since he speaks of Odysseus preventing the contest.

Penelope says nothing at all to this suggestion, elusive to the last, and we're left with the curious impression she's been talking to herself all along under the pretence of holding a conversation. With a final goodnight she goes off at last to bed, taking her maids with her and leaving Odysseus as he began the scene, alone in the megaron with the firelight, his thoughts, and the night. Despite her fears of sleeplessness, she does eventually sleep; but not for long, as a remarkable if restless night unfolds for both.

BOOK 20. PRELUDE TO THE CRISIS

The short but rich twentieth book takes us through the night and morning that usher in the day of Odysseus' revenge. Unusually for a Homeric night, there's no pause in the narrative; we alternate between the fitful sleep of Odysseus and Penelope until dawn comes, and the unsuspecting palace wakes up for a momentous day. As the familiar routine gets under way and the suitors arrive for their last feast, the warning patterns of the previous day's banquet find themselves replayed one last time, culminating in Homer's most extraordinary sequence of visionary weirdness.

A. Odysseus' night

For the first part of the night, we remain with Odysseus while Penelope sleeps. When he eventually sleeps, the narrative will return to Penelope, intertwining their sleep and waking at the same time as they also intertwine in one another's dreams.

1. insomnia

Odysseus makes his bed in the entrance-hall, the traditional bunking-space for guests; Telemachus and Peisistratus did the same in Sparta. It has the advantage for him of being a commanding position for monitoring the movements of the household during the night; and sure enough, as soon as their mistress is off to bed, Melantho and her treacherous maids file past him giggling on their way to the suitors' lodgings in the town. This physical abandonment of the palace seems the final betrayal; but Odysseus once more wrestles successfully with his instinct for immediate revenge, in a moment of significant personal struggle marked by a striking soliloquy prefaced by a fine simile. The puppies are Odysseus' palace, possessions and family, but his own growl is only inward - unlike his readiness to fight, which will be only too real.

The hero's address to his own "heart" (Greek *thumos*, the organ of impulse and decision) is quite a regular Homeric notion, but it's particularly effective here as Odysseus wrests control of and reasons with his instincts. As Odysseus himself sees, in a self-address recalling his speech to his crew before Charybdis, the Cyclops episode posed a similar test of patience and planning, and under far more desperate circumstances. I've always liked to think that this moment gives us a glimpse of the Cyclops experience helping to shape Odysseus' plan against the suitors. If he can trap them in the megaron as the Cyclops trapped his party in the cave, then perhaps he can pick them off as the Cyclops picked off his men. All he needs is to work out the means to do so.

As the giggles fade into the distance, Odysseus lies down, but his thoughts are too active for sleep. His tossing and turning is compared, in a quirky but neat simile, to a haggis like the one he received as prize for the bumfight with Irus. Though the main subject of the simile is the movement, we readily see that Odysseus' plan, like the haggis, is cooking, but not quite ready to serve…

2. Athene

Now at last Athene can make her first full appearance since book 16, in one of her manifestations as a non-quite-dream like the form she appeared in to Telemachus in Sparta. In answer to her question about what's keeping him awake, Odysseus spells out the two questions to which he still hasn't come up with a clear answer:

(i) How can he kill a hundred suitors single-handed?
(ii) Even if he can, how can he make that the end of the matter?

The second question, in particular, is the clearest sign yet that something more awaits us beyond his revenge on the suitors. But in fact Athene deliberately answers neither question, stoking up the suspense for us while reassuring Odysseus that the only thing he needs to know is that she'll be there at his side. Such is his faith in her that this assurance does indeed still his racing thoughts, and he drops off to sleep leaving us none the wiser how these tantalising questions will be resolved.

B. Penelope's night

But just as Odysseus finally nods off, Penelope wakes from her early sleep and a restless soliloquy of her own. This fateful night is the only one in Homer that the narrative takes us through from dusk to dawn without a pause, thanks to the ingenious device of turning the spotlight on whichever insomniac happens to be awake at the time.

• her lament

As in her similar if-only wish in book 18, Penelope sighs for the release of a gentle death, or failing that a miraculous disappearance. This curious alternative is a bridge to another strange myth of Pandareus' daughters, for which again we have to rely on later commentators to flesh out the cryptically abbreviated version here. (The curse on Pandareus' family is said to have been set off by his theft of a golden dog, made by Hephaestus like the ones outside Alcinous' gates, from the temple of Zeus in Crete. It's not clear whether Aedon, mother of Itylus, was one of the daughters carried off by the Harpies, or where her story fits in the larger family saga.) It's a complex, multi-angled emotional allegory of Penelope's life and prospects: early happiness thwarted by the gods, with the moment of marriage bringing sudden separation and doom (= her husband snatched away to Troy and an unknown destiny beyond). Yet even so, the Pandarids' fate seems preferable to the new marriage that she seems committed to bind herself to the next day.

Only at the end of her lament do we learn what has prompted this intense outburst: a dream of Odysseus himself, lying beside her as he was twenty years ago. For a brief moment, Penelope was able to believe that it was all a dream, that Odysseus never left for Troy; and then she woke up. Her final line echoes the line that Odysseus delivered to her in the earlier dream she recounted to him before bed. But this time, the waking truth is that the dream was just a dream. No wonder Penelope was so reluctant to believe in a dream Odysseus.

C. Morning in Ithaca

As dawn comes up, we return to Odysseus as he emerges to wakefulness again. A lovely sequence follows, as through Odysseus' eyes we watch the palace waking up and starting its morning routine. But in all this colourful routine, we're aware that this is the day of the showdown, and that as the previous day's cast assemble one more time in the megaron, the net is closing around them.

1. omens for Odysseus

As Odysseus rises, the day begins with a series of signs from the gods themselves that this is indeed the day of vengeance, and that he will succeed. As well as bolstering Odysseus' own spirits, it builds up our own sense of events accelerating towards a resolution, as the seemingly everyday details of palace routine take on a significance of which only we and Odysseus are fully aware.

(a) Odysseus' waking & prayer

As dawn breaks, we move back from Penelope to Odysseus, in a marvellous transition full of suggestive ambiguities Is he asleep or awake? Is he woken by the light or by the distant sound of Penelope's lament? Is his strange, almost telepathic echo of Penelope's dream of himself a response in his sleep to the sound of her voice, or is it a heaven-sent omen?

Whatever the case, it seems to give Odysseus an idea. He can't be sure whether Penelope's voice and his dream of her should be read as an omen, but the idea of overheard words is a useful one. He prays to Zeus for one clear sign: a double omen, bringing together the signs of earth and heaven.

(b) the thunder and the slave's response

The little vignette that follows is another of the poem's small gems. Zeus's thunder from a clear sky is the more traditional and spectacular omen, but it's utterly eclipsed by the poignant source of the human words of omen. We see now that, while Odysseus and Penelope have had a fitful night, there's one forgotten member of the household who hasn't slept at all: the mill-slave grinding her quota of corn for the suitors, lowest and last and least regarded in all of the palace hierarchy. But Odysseus notices, as she notices the thunder that everyone else is sleeping through; and her prayer for this to be the suitors' last day is also the omen that confirms to him that it will be. It's a terrific example of the *Odyssey*'s interest in the whole spectrum of human experience, and the unity of its world even across the seemingly unbridgeable boundaries between kings, beggars, and slaves.

2. Telemachus & Eurycleia

Now the rest of the palace wakes up and goes about its morning routine, beginning with the loyal maids who've remained in the palace overnight. (We never hear about the return from town of the dirty dozen who've spent the night with the suitors.) Eurycleia, of course, is already up when Telemachus rises early to check on his guest. It's a richly ironic scene, since Telemachus and Eurycleia now know the beggar's true identity, but *neither knows the other knows*, so that they dance comically around one another and the truth. Telemachus cloaks his concern for the guest as his usual mistrust (and misjudgment) of Penelope; while his nurse gives an account that entirely leaves out both the interview and the washing, and freely makes up other details of her own (the wine, the offer of food and its rejection, and her own role in the blanket scene).

The unwitting co-conspirators go their separate ways – Telemachus taking himself offstage for a bit, while Eurycleia directs the maids with what we sense is more than her usual zest. For the first time we hear that it's a festival day – of Apollo, we'll later learn. Ancient scholars identified it as a new-moon festival marking the turning of the month, apparently alluded to in the beggar's predictions of Odysseus' return "as the old moon wanes and the new moon rises". This is what's referred to in the strangest title of any book on the *Odyssey*, Norman Austin's *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* – actually not at all a bad book, though it's always sounded to me as though the moon is the target.

3. the herdsmen arrive

As the palace servants go about their morning tasks, we turn to the arrival of characters from farther afield: the rival local herdsmen Eumaeus and Melanthius, and from the neighbouring island the new character of the cattle- and goatherd Philoetius.

(a) Eumaeus

Entering the yard, Eumaeus runs into the beggar, and anxiously asks how he got on with the suitors after he left. Odysseus spares him the long story and uncomfortable details – the flying stools, the bumfight, the exchanges of abuse – but it's clear from his grim reply that he's seen some action.

(b) Melanthius

Melanthius is close behind, and the sight of his rival conferring with the beggar and Telemachus nowhere to be seen prompts a renewed threat of violence. Like his sister Melantho, who similarly returned to the attack once Telemachus was off the scene, he hasn't learned his lesson. This time, perhaps mindful of the fate of Irus, he refrains from dealing a blow on the spot; and his words carry a double meaning of which Melanthius is fatally unaware, adding one more omen of vengeance to the day's rising total.

(c) + Philoetius

The introduction of a third herdsman at this point is a bit of a surprise, but Philoetius is no mere twin to Eumaeus. He's an interesting and different character in his own right, whose introduction at this late juncture is a further omen and opportunity, will fill a useful niche in Odysseus's plan, and perhaps encourages the enlistment of Eumaeus himself among the growing band of conspirators.

(i) his greeting and story

Like 24 of the suitors, Philoetius comes not from Ithaca but from the larger neighbouring island of Cephallenia or Same, which is also part of Odysseus' archipelago kingdom. Ithaca, as we've seen, is unsuitable for cattle and sheep, so that Odysseus' herds have to be maintained on neighbouring islands and the mainland. The logistics of this are glimpsed in the reference to ferry traffic between the islands and the mainland.

Philoetius' sympathies come out strongly in his opening words to Eumaeus: clearly an old friend and colleague, perceptive enough to see the man beneath the rags, and sympathetic to the misfortunes that have brought him to this state. Less fatalistic than Eumaeus, he's more upbeat about the possibility of Odysseus' return, and indeed that hope is what keeps him in the islands. Lacking Eumaeus' personal bond to Telemachus, he has nothing else particularly to tie him to an increasingly disillusioning role in furnishing Odysseus' meat to the suitors. He's also more struck than Eumaeus was by the beggar's similarity (of situation, at least) to Odysseus.

(ii) the beggar's response

Odysseus sees a potential ally here, and ventures a still stronger version of the oath he swore to Eumaeus. This time, he promises that Odysseus will return before Philoetius even leaves the island, and that he'll have the opportunity to witness the suitors' deaths with his own eyes.

Philoetius doesn't share Eumaeus's scepticism, and responds with a more positive pledge of help. Even the gloomy Eumaeus is drawn into this new optimism; the team is coming together, even if not all them yet realise the fact.

4. the suitors' omen

With the herdsmen's arrival, we've caught up with the point at which we came in on the palace routine on the previous day, so the account of the suitors' arrival is briskly dealt with. A very short scene in the town square is so pared down to its essentials that it's barely comprehensible without the fuller version in book 16 - where the suitors' debate broke up with Amphinomus' suggestion they must wait for signs of Zeus's preference. Here the sign actually arrives, and they abort their plan on Amphinomus's advice. But Amphinomus has fatally misread the omen. The warning is not against the murder of Telemachus, but against their own return to the palace, where the eagle of Penelope's dream awaits.

D. The last banquet

With the suitors' entry to the palace, the cast are all in place; even the herdsmen stay on as dinner servants; and the fateful feast gets rapidly under way.

1. Telemachus & Antinous clash over the beggar

Almost immediately, tensions flare. Telemachus is more assertive now in his patronage of the beggar, who now gets his own table and goblet as an equal member of the company. (Note the careful positioning at the entrance: away from the company of the suitors, but also in a commanding position to seal and control the doorway.) Antinous responds with his usual brutal sarcasm, bluntly admitting the murder plot, and daring Telemachus to match deeds to his words. But Telemachus astutely and infuriatingly ignores him.

Apollo's feast begins with a brief glimpse of the wider celebrations outside in the town, and a reminder of his role as archer-god: a subtle pointer to things to come, as the narrative closes its own doors on the outside world, and turns again to the scene unfolding within the hall.

2. Ctesippus' missile

But the feast doesn't take long to turn ugly. The scene that follows may seem like a bit of a replay of the previous day's stool-throwings, but we need some renewal of violence to make Odysseus' imminent revenge seem adequately provoked.

And in fact there are plenty of new twists in the episode that now unfolds. For one thing, we've hardly seen anything of the individual suitors other than Antinous, Eurymachus, and Amphinomus; this is a chance to introduce two more representatives, whose fates we'll also be able to track in book 22. Ctesippus is the first suitor we've met from the middle-sized neighbouring island of Same (Cephallenia) – the same island on which Philoetius keeps his herds. And in a moment he'll be contrasted with Agelaus, who's going to play an important role in the great battle of book 22.

(a) the taunt

Ctesippus' crude wit isn't up to the standard of Eurymachus' the previous evening; it recalls the similarly heavy-handed and perverted gift-humour of Polyphemus the Cyclops. There too the language of hospitality and guest-gifts was contemptuously twisted to refer to an act of violence; and there too Odysseus was more than a match for his enemy's clumsy attempt at a trick. Notice how this time the violence is entirely unprovoked; Antinous and Eurymachus threw their missiles in anger, but Ctesippus is gratuitously showing off.

(b) the throw and miss

This third missile is an effective variation on the stools of the previous day. The use of food itself as a weapon again recalls the Cyclops' perverted dinner habits; the throw misses completely, the most resounding failure yet; and Odysseus and Telemachus both respond with markedly greater confidence and defiance, with Odysseus even venturing a smile.

(c) Telemachus' challenge

As for Telemachus, he uses the miss to rub Ctesippus' nose in his failure while also threatening instant death to anyone thinking of trying something similar. The fact that he tolerates the suitors' feasting to the extent that he does is merely an acknowledgment of their superior force; but anyone who wants to commit acts of violence in his palace will do so over his dead body.

(d) Agelaus' response

This is the strongest statement yet from Telemachus, and Agelaus picks up on this in his reply, whose conciliatory tone is belied by its renewal of Antinous' challenge to Telemachus in the assembly in book 2. If Telemachus is in charge, he should declare Odysseus dead and press Penelope to a decision on remarriage.

(e) Telemachus' reply

Telemachus gives a brusquer version of his original response; they've been round this in book 2, and he hasn't anything to add. But unknown to Agelaus, the situation has changed spectacularly since then; and Telemachus' casual acceptance that Odysseus will never return is now part of an act.

E. Weird scenes

Now comes one of the strangest and most brilliant sequences in Homer as, without warning, the narrative takes an eerie, hallucinatory turn. It's here that the figure of Theoclymenus more than justifies his place in the poem, in a sensational prophetic vision marking the moment when the suitors' doom is sealed.

1. the suitors come over all funny

The suitors start to laugh, apparently at Telemachus' last remark; but the laughter goes on, out of control, and turns to horror as even the suitors get a momentary sense of something ghastly about the feast. As the climax approaches, there's been a series of moments of uneasy laughter, but nothing quite like this.

2. Theoclymenus' vision

Now suddenly comes the voice of Theoclymenus, a character we'd forgotten all about. His deeper prophetic vision can see the full horror of which the suitors are only catching a glimpse: a premonition of the slaughter, in which the men about to die are seen enveloped in darkness and death. This very hall is a place of death, and the only way out leads straight to hell.

The extraordinary tone of this speech seems to shock the suitors back to their normal senses, and they revert to their normal jeering laughter. Eurymachus, always the best at slyly defusing difficult moments, makes a joke of it by pretending to take Theoclymenus literally, and offers an escort out into the daylight. But Theoclymenus ignores the sarcasm, and with dignity refuses the offer just as if it were seriously meant. His parting shot is to spell out their fate in terms nobody could possibly misunderstand; and with that, he leaves the palace, the only one of the company to get out while the possibility remains. The suitors treat all this with hilarity: Telemachus certainly knows how to pick his guests.

3. the end approaches

Telemachus says nothing, but the book ends with a potent series of silent looks and listening. Telemachus watches Odysseus, and upstairs Penelope has moved her chair to a position where she can monitor the megaron unobserved. An unusually bold narratorial intervention extends and amplifies the imagery of the feast perverted that was prominent in both the Ctesippus and Theoclymenus scenes; restates the suitors' guilt, and pronounces their sentence. Everyone is now in position, and the next move will determine the fates of each one of them.

ODYSSEY 21–24: THE SHOWDOWN

The end of the *Odyssey* is probably the most famous, and certainly the most influential, ending in literature – a four-course banquet that's been twenty books in preparation. It's here that the intricate plotting of story, character, and world-picture come together in a massive payoff that rolls together big Iliadic action with intimate Odyssean mind-wrestling. The ambitious final book is a strange and notoriously problematic mixture that gets shorter critical shrift than the three great books preceding, but is a crucial part of the ending and has some tremendous moments in its own right – including, in Odysseus' great speech of self-revelation to his father, what may be the single most moving speech in the poem.

The shape of the *Odyssey*'s ending is strikingly similar to the *Iliad*'s, with a big action climax in the 22nd book followed by a more thoughtful and stable resolution in the final book. But really each of these final four books deals with an essential element of the resolution: the dramatic end to Odysseus' disguise (21), the fate of the suitors (22), the climactic reunion with Penelope (23), and the establishment of a stable and permanent settlement (24). And as in the *Iliad*, the final book ties up the loose ends left by its predecessors with a twist or two in the tail. Books 21–3 are a single continuous sequence in the palace, but 24 opens up to take us beyond the private business of revenge and reunion to the tricky political aftermath and the long-awaited introduction of Odysseus' father Laertes, two strands that interweave in the poem's final climax and resolution.

Highlights of these books include:

- stringing the bow
- the suitors' last stand
- Penelope's final test of the stranger's identity
- Odysseus' proof of his identity to Laertes.

BOOK 21. THE CONTEST OF THE BOW

This tightly-focussed book is devoted in its entirety to the famous episode Penelope tipped us off about in advance the previous evening. Some of the practical details of the contest have baffled commentators since antiquity, and it's more than anyone's sanity is worth to try and make sense of all the details. The key thing is to appreciate how the bow contest functions within the story, which it does in two main ways:

- It furnishes an objective test of entitlement to Penelope and all that she represents, which will be only be met by someone who can match Odysseus in the handling of his other heroic property. From the opening scene, the bow of Odysseus becomes a powerful symbol of all the things that Penelope's husband was and needs to be again.
- It equips Odysseus with the means to carry out his revenge – but only, paradoxically, if he can keep the suitors from realising who he is, up to and beyond the very moment he passes the test that proves it. As the book reaches its climax, we'll see how he juggles this contradictory need to establish his identity at the same time as he conceals it.

A. Penelope and the bow

This powerful sequence has two important functions.

- It brings Penelope into the story for the last time before the slaughter, as she sets in motion the plan announced to the beggar the previous evening. In an affecting juxtaposition, we see her first in a moment of private vulnerability alone with her memories, before she pulls herself together to play the queen one last time in a final confrontation with the suitors.
- It introduces the bow which will play such a crucial role in this book and the next. We get to see not just its history but what it means for Penelope and for Odysseus himself; and we also get the first of an increasingly bold series of direct foreshadowings in the narrator's voice of how events are about to unfold.

Penelope's "sturdy hand" in line 6 has a semi-legendary status in Homeric scholarship as one of the two prime exhibits of formulaic epithets being used in what are argued to be absurdly

inappropriate contexts. (The other is "blameless Aegisthus" at 1.30, where Shewring sides with Anne Amory Parry and others by translating it as a merely honorific title, "Lord Aegisthus".) "Sturdy" is a standard epithet of Homeric hands: Odysseus has one at 20.299 and 22.326, but what is the delicate Penelope doing with such a beefy extremity? Perhaps, it's been seriously suggested, she needs it to work a bronze age door-key, which was basically a clonking great tool for manipulating bolts from the wrong side of the door; or perhaps it means that her fist is sort of balled up around the key. Worrying about this is usually a warning to get out more. As William F. Wyatt Jr. pointed out ["Penelope's Fat Hand (*Od.* xxi.6–7)" in *Classical Philology* 73 (1978) 343–4], there's nothing particularly weird about a tall, stunningly good-looking bronze age queen in her late thirties being admired for her physique.

1. in the storeroom

From the busy action of the megaron, the narrative switches to the lonely figure of Penelope, whom we follow in a kind of tracking shot as she makes the fateful journey to the storeroom. Another passing reference to Athene's prompting signals to the audience that this is the moment of destiny, as we watch her make the silent journey with her maids to the long-unopened room where her most treasured memories of Odysseus are quite literally stored.

2. the bow's history

The narrative technique here is like the tale of Odysseus' scar in book 19. Mention of the bow leads into its complex story, which is told at length before the action of the main narrative quite catches up with it. Like the scar story, it's associated with Odysseus' coming of age: in this case, his first major diplomatic assignment for his father Laertes, where his skills of speech and negotiation are put to their first major test. It's a tricky brief: making a formal complaint and request for compensation for a Messenian pirate raid on Laertes' flocks. (Elsewhere in the poem Odysseus' sheep seem to be pastured off-island, but never mind.)

But the mission itself isn't the point of the story. While in Sparta (which here seems to be thought of as controlling Messenia, the fertile plain of the south-western Peloponnese between Sparta and Pylos), Odysseus finds his mission overlaps with that of Iphitus of Oechalia, later to be murdered by Heracles under disturbing circumstances that are clearly meant to recall Aegisthus and the suitors. The flashforward in a flashback is initially disorienting, but the point is revealed in what follows: it's Iphitus' premature death that causes Odysseus, unusually, to leave his best bow behind in Ithaca instead of taking it with him to Troy.

Incidentally, if you look up the names of Eurytus and Ortilochus in Shewring's index, you'll see we've already met with mentions of these characters in contexts that shed light on the story here:

- Eurytus, whose bow Iphitus has inherited, was mentioned at 8.222–8 as one of the legendary archers of old. Later sources say that his bow (the very one used in this contest) was actually made for him by the archer-god Apollo himself.
- Ortilochus is the father of Telemachus' Pheraean host Diocles, with whom he stops overnight on the journeys in either direction between Pylos and Sparta. Evidently his domain lay between Menelaus' and Nestor's, which may be why it's loosely described as "in Lacedaemon" (Sparta).

3. Penelope's moment of decision

Penelope's momentous entrance into this storeroom of memories is marked by a narrative closeup on its unlocking and a simile apparently meant to convey the creaking of the doors after long disuse. I may as well say that the lock mechanism (particularly the role of the thong) is one of a number of mechanical and topographical details in this book and the next that tend to bring commentators out in fits of improbable diagrams, and that I'll try and spare you all this. Obviously what matters in this scene is the moving description of Penelope alone with the bow, weeping privately over all that it means to her, before she snaps back to her role as queen, and goes marching off again with her women to play her final role before the suitors.

B. The contest

With Penelope's announcement here we move to the book's main business. The formal challenge of stringing the bow and shooting through the axes, with marriage to Penelope as the reward, sets up a tautly-constructed sequence of attempts and interludes that will be the spine of the plot for the rest of this book.

1. Penelope's challenge

Penelope's speech is forthright stuff. She presents the contest as a call of the suitors' bluff: their one remaining pretext for continuing their parasitic pressure is Penelope's failure to resolve the issue of her marriage. Now, in no uncertain terms, she proposes a resolution: pass this test of your worthiness to succeed Odysseus, and I'll marry you, reluctant though I'll be. As in book 19 when she first announced this plan, it's far from clear what she's up to, but even if she doesn't seriously expect any of the suitors to pass the test, the stakes are high and the result out of her hands, so there's clearly a real risk of having to deliver on her promise.

We'll come to the bow and its stringing shortly, but this is as good a moment as any to deal with the notorious problem of what on earth is going on with these axes. Clearly nobody's shooting an arrow through twelve solid iron axe-heads – so what *is* the challenge here? There are three main attempts to explain it:

- They're Minoan-style double-headed axes, stuck in the ground *handle-first*, and the arrow passes between the two heads.
- The axes are *upside-down*, with rings on the ends of the handles to hang them from, and that's what the arrow has to pass through.
- They're axe-heads without the handles, planted in the ground *blade-down* so that the arrow could in theory pass through the holes where the handle goes.

It would be nice to be able to say that the text gave us some means of choosing between these, but it's compatible with all three – each of which also has its problems I shan't get into here. It's probably healthier not to try and resolve this one. (You might end up having to share a padded cell with a Neoanalyst.)

2. Antinous' response

Eumaeus and Philoetius immediately grasp what this means, and for the first time in the poem both are overcome with emotion. But Antinous puts on a more devious act, marked by one of those rare moments when the narrator has to point out explicitly that what the character says isn't at all what he's thinking. For Penelope's benefit, he disguises his contempt for the herdsmen's display of feeling as concern for her own feelings, and deprecates the prospect of success in terms that flatter her memory of Odysseus. But Homer's comment has two layers of irony to all this: the gap between his words and his secret intentions, and the further gap between those intentions and what will actually happen once Odysseus gets hold of the bow.

3. Telemachus' attempt

But the most complex reaction comes from Telemachus, who succumbs to another moment of unnatural laughter, which he tries to cover up by passing it off as a fit of divine madness. Evidently his glee actually arises from an understanding that his mother's announcement is the start of the suitors' doom, though it's unclear how much he's inferred of the plan Odysseus has been silently brooding on since Penelope's decision was leaked to him the previous evening.

At any rate Telemachus embraces Penelope's proposal with an enthusiasm clearly born of something more than eagerness to see mum finally off his hands. In a shrewd preemptive move, he immediately volunteers himself for the contest – not for Penelope's sake, but as a way of proving himself a worthy inheritor of his father's kingship. This cleverly puts down a marker that Telemachus sees the contest as less about Penelope than about about who succeeds Odysseus, and has no intention of letting anyone confuse the two rewards.

So saying, Telemachus sets up the equipment for the archery phase of the challenge with almost giveaway expertise. Perhaps he's realised that Odysseus needs the archery contest set

up so that he can move straight from stringing the bow to notching arrows without incurring suspicion. But his eagerness to prove himself his father's son almost undoes him, as he comes closer than any of the suitors will to actually stringing the bow and ruining the whole plan. Odysseus has to shoot him a look to remind him, with a nail-biting use of the famous Iliadic "three times … and then a fourth" formula. Telemachus catches the signal, and swiftly resumes his play-acting, with a disarming false admission of weakness that reassures the suitors they've nothing to fear from him.

4. Leodes' attempt

Now we make our first acquaintance of another of the suitors' more striking individuals: the pious Leodes, who with Amphinomus and Agelaus represent the more thoughtful and morally aware wing of the suitors' party. As with the other two, he'll end up being judged (in a particularly grim climax to the slaughter) for his willingness to throw in his lot with the suitors: a further reminder that good intentions and thoughtful words are worthless if you're not prepared to back them up with decisive action.

Leodes' attempt immediately shows us why all the suitors are bound to fail. The younger generation of aristocrats have grown up in peacetime, and spend all their time lounging around at banquets rather than practising the skills of a warrior. It's this that will enable Odysseus to taken them on en masse and win. As Leodes correctly predicts, the test of the bow will only confirm that none of them is worthy of Penelope. Yet he, like Amphinomus, returns to his seat rather than leaving the palace while he can, and seals his fate in the process.

Antinous responds indignantly to Leodes' prediction of failure for them all. With characteristic *ad hominem* rudeness, he dismissed Leodes as a weakling; but he nevertheless proposes three steps to make the task easier, by setting up a comfortable position for the attempt, and both warming and greasing the bow beforehand. (Notice Antinous' use of Melanthius to fetch and carry as a counterpart to Penelope's use of Eumaeus.) Antinous is keen to maximise his chances, but to no avail: one by one the other suitors drop out, leaving only Antinous and Eurymachus in the running.

5. Odysseus reveals himself to Eumaeus & Philoetius

With the suitors occupied over their own attempts at the bow, Odysseus has a moment to take the herdsmen aside for a daring moment of initiative that will prove decisive in the battle to come.

(a) choosing sides

First, he proposes a theoretical question: if Odysseus were suddenly to materialise in Ithaca, whose side would they take? He's already heard enough from both of them to be fairly sure of the answer, but what he's about to do is the biggest risk he's taken since he arrived in Ithaca. Once again it's Philoetius who's the more forthright of the two, in lines that echo their scene in the previous book (20.235–9).

(b) unmasking and proof

Only now does Odysseus reveal that he's known their answer all along, and that he's been watching and testing them all along. As succinctly as he can, he dramatically reveals his identity; promises them rewards if the three of them come through this day; and because this time he hasn't been magically retransformed by Athene to confirm his true appearance, he offers the incontrovertible proof of the scar, which Eurycleia has helpfully reminded him of. (He'll use it again in book 24, though Penelope will turn out to be made of more sceptical stuff.)

(c) the plan

But this is no time for emotional displays, which could still throw the whole plan into jeopardy. Instead, Odysseus swiftly outlines his instructions.

- First, they need to re-enter the hall singly so that nobody will suspect any collusion or conspiracy.

- Next, Odysseus will present himself as a competitor for the challenge of the bow. The suitors are bound to object, so he'll need Eumaeus ready to preempt this by putting the bow in his hands as soon as they start to protest.
- Once Odysseus has the bow, each of the herdsmen must seal an entrance to the megaron each. The inner doors to the rest of the palace open out of the megaron, so Eumaeus needs to get the women to bar them in from the other side.
- Philoetius' task is more straightforward: to bar the outer doors to the courtyard in a way that will cut off the suitors' escape.

At no point in any of this does Odysseus tell them, or us, what he intends. Perhaps Telemachus has a clue; but the audience is kept guessing right up until the moment when the slaughter begins.

6. Eurymachus' attempt

As Odysseus reenters the hall alone, Eurymachus is making a last attempt at the bow, and only too aware of the watchful eye of Penelope silently judging him and all of them. In frustration, he loses his normal glibness and cool, as with deadly accuracy of insight he realises what Penelope has done. Marriage or no marriage, she's trapped them all into publicly demonstrating that not one of them is worthy to fill Odysseus' boots. Their *kleos* is permanently ruined; this failure is what will be remembered.

7. Antinous proposes adjournment

Antinous, perhaps wary of Penelope's reaction to this inconvenient outburst, tries to wriggle out of the trap by conveniently remembering the festival of Apollo that everyone else in Ithaca has been dutifully celebrating while the suitors gorge themselves indifferently without offering the god so much as a bone. Antinous' solution is to propose an adjournment till the following day, when they can renew their efforts fuelled by the formal sacrifice of yet more of Odysseus' choicest animals, thanks to the willing complicity of Melanthius.

8. Odysseus' attempt

This is Odysseus' one chance. With the contest formally (and perhaps unexpectedly) adjourned, he has to make his move now. But we've seen in his instructions to Eumaeus that he knows the most difficult part won't be stringing the bow, but in getting the suitors to allow him anywhere near it. Luckily, he has one supporter in the hall we've all but forgotten about; and from here to the end of the book, the parts of Odysseus' trap will click one by one into place.

(a) the debate

At first, it looks as if the contest will be over without the beggar going anywhere near the bow. Antinous' proposal is accepted, and the feast resumes as normal. What is Odysseus up to? Is he going to forego his attempt entirely?

(i) the beggar volunteers

But it's a matter of timing. Odysseus lets enough time pass for the suitors to relax, the tensions voiced by Eurymachus to subside, and the formal contest to feel properly over. Then, in a careful speech, he appeals (with a sidelong glance at Penelope) to Antinous and Eurymachus – not, as we might expect, for a shot at stringing the bow, but to go with Antinous' proposal and let the gods grant the victory as they please (some heavy irony here). Only then, as a seemingly incidental followup, does he propose trying the bow himself – carefully emphasising that he's not joining in the contest, but merely proving his strength to his own satisfaction.

(ii) Antinous objects

The suitors are outraged, as Odysseus foresaw. As the narrator's comment notes, they take seriously the prospect of the beggar succeeding where they've all so conspicously failed. As usual, it's Antinous who responds first and most forcefully: has the beggar forgotten his place? is he drunk? If so, he can benefit from a characteristically grim and brutal story: the legend, famous in art including the Parthenon sculptures, of Eurytion's drunken violence at

the wedding feast between the Lapiths and the Centaurs. (Homer chooses his words discreetly, but later sources say Eurytion tried to rape the bride.) As Eurytion paid the price by being mutilated, so Antinous renews his threats from 18.85 of similar disfigurement to the beggar.

What Antinous doesn't realise, but we do, is that the lesson of the story works the other way around. It's Antinous and the suitors, not the beggar, who are playing the role of Eurytion by their own outrageous violation of codes of feasting and courtship; and Odysseus, not they, who will inflict a righteous punishment.

(iii) Penelope answers Antinous

But Antinous has forgotten himself in front of Penelope, who has been a silent presence in the background throughout this book. She reminds him that the beggar is Telemachus' guest, not his, and answers his imagined objections as though the beggar were claiming the right to compete for Penelope's hand. By firmly ruling out the beggar's eligibility for the prize, she throws down the gauntlet to Antinous: he can admit that what he's really afraid of is being outperformed by a tramp, or he can go ahead and allow the beggar to try his strength.

(iv) Eurymachus objects

As commonly in such exchanges, it's left to the smooth Eurymachus to try and talk Penelope around. He accepts her analysis, and frankly admits that it's not the threat of competition for her hand that worries them; it's the damage to their *kleos* from being publicly outshone by a homeless vagrant.

(v) Penelope answers Eurymachus

But Penelope is ready for this. Eurymachus is a fine one to talk about *kleos*, when their whole conduct in Odysseus' house has stripped them of whatever honour they might once have had. The suitors have literally nothing to lose. Penelope lays down the conditions clearly: if the beggar strings the bow, he'll be rewarded with a generous but standard package for favoured wanderers: the long-promised cloak and tunic and passage to his next destination, plus a spear and sword and a decent pair of sandals.

(vi) Telemachus takes charge

This is a tricky moment in the plotting, because the last thing we want is for Penelope to be trapped in the hall when the shooting starts. But how to get her offstage when she's committed herself personally to the beggar's chance in the competition? The solution builds on the carefully-prepared tensions between mother and son, which Telemachus now uses as a pretext to repeat his behaviour (and original words) from 1.356–64. The difference is that this time his assertiveness is a calculated act. He pretends to interpret Penelope's intervention as an affront to his own authority and responsibility as the beggar's patron, and insists that he alone is in charge. That'll be all; he'll take it from here; Penelope is peremptorily dismissed. It's a brilliant play, getting Penelope out of the room and safely off to sleep moments before all hell breaks loose in the hall she's just vacated.

(b) the bow brought to Odysseus

During the preceding dialogue, Eumaeus has already started to carry out Odysseus' instructions. Now, as tempers rise to what seems sure to be a direct confrontation, the suitors notice and try to stop him, just as Odysseus anticipated.

(i) the suitors threaten Eumaeus

With Penelope now off the scene, the suitors can threaten violence openly – promising Eumaeus that if he doesn't back off his corpse will be found under mysterious circumstances, half-eaten by his own farm dogs. It's an unnerving moment, and for a moment Eumaeus' own resolve fails him.

(ii) Telemachus intervenes

But as Eumaeus hesitates, Telemachus chivvies him from the other side. It's hard to gauge how far his threats here are a performance and how far he's genuinely angered by Eumaeus' momentary failure of nerve. At any rate his outburst here has the desired effect of drawing the suitors' attention away from Eumaeus on to himself, and it's greeted with another of the waves of misplaced mirth that are such a striking feature of the volatile psychological texture

of the palace books. Eumaeus completes his mission unmolested, and Odysseus is left holding the bow.

(iii) Eurycleia seals the hall

Now to phase two of Odysseus' instructions. Eumaeus gives the instructions on barring the inner doors, as Odysseus perhaps intended, to Eurycleia, without either of them realising that the other is part of the conspiracy. (It's a neat touch of invention to remember to credit Telemachus with the order, since of course Eumaeus has no authority of his own and can hardly reveal whose bidding he's really performing.) Eurycleia readily complies, no questions asked, while Philoetius takes advantage of the attention on the beggar to bar and lash the outer doors into the yard.

(c) the challenge fulfilled

Odysseus, meanwhile, has been taking his time – perhaps deliberately, to give the herdsmen time to seal the doors, but the effect is one of brilliantly drawn-out suspense. Instead of going straight into the stringing, he inspects the bow for signs of damage in storage – jokingly misinterpreted by the suitors as an artisan's professional interest. The second anonymous comment is another instance of the fatal wish-formula "I wish that X as surely as Y" when Y is anything but sure and X is asking for trouble.

(i) stringing the bow

All this has perhaps prepared us to expect a bit dramatic flourish of effort over the actual stringing; but the twist is that for Odysseus it's completely effortless. The simile of a bard stringing a lyre is a particularly neat one: it's an image of casual, everyday expertise with which anyone listening to a performance of the poem will be already familiar, and Odysseus seems to acknowledge the likeness by plucking the string musically as he finishes.

(ii) the thunder

The suitors hardly even have time to be appalled. Thunder sounds outside, for the second time that day: an unmistakable omen from Zeus of something very, very big. But Odysseus doesn't leap into action; he proceeds to the second phase of the challenge without giving the suitors a glimpse of his real intentions.

(iii) the axes

The test of the axes gives Odysseus a chance at a single practice shot before he has to use the bow in earnest, and its deadly accuracy is a sign of things to follow. (You'll see that Shewring has gone with Page's explanation of the axes, and added a bit about the "handle-tip" that isn't in the Greek as such.)

(iv) disarming and arming

But even in the seconds before the slaughter, Odysseus works on lowering tensions and putting the suitors back at their ease, ready to be caught off guard. In addressing himself to Telemachus, he makes sure of catching his eye for the unspoken facial signal that follows. We've seen Odysseus' eloquent eyebrows in action before, rather less effectively, when they were all he had left at 12.194 to signal to the earplugged crew to untie him as they passed the isle of the Sirens; but a closer analogy to this scene is Athene's signal to him at 16.164 to nip outside for a briefing and makeover ahead of his unmasking to Telemachus. But even as he gives the signal, his words are calculated to disarm the suitors by winding the action down and turning their minds to the expectation of a relaxed evening ahead. So successful is he in this that the suitors won't realise what's happening even after the slaughter begins, until Odysseus himself spells it out to them.

Telemachus, however, gets the message. He arms, and takes his long-awaited place at his father's side, as the book ends on the supreme cliffhanger in Homer. (Spare a thought for readers of ancient books, who'd have to roll up the volume they were reading like rewinding a videotape, then take the next one out of its pigeonhole, and unroll to start reading again – always assuming they'd had the foresight to get the next volume in beforehand…)

BOOK 22. THE BATTLE IN THE HALL

The structure of the combat itself is in three parts. First, the three most prominent of the suitors are picked off, and the numbers further whittled down by Odysseus' arrows; then there's an interlude involving the arms in the store-room, and a brief appearance by Athene; and the sequence climaxes with a pitched battle involving the mass of the suitors. The book ends with a series of scenes dealing with the aftermath in the hall.

This is the *Odyssey*'s version of a big Iliadic battle sequence, with the conventions of Iliadic battle narrative adapted to the unusual indoor setting and combat conditions. There are a lot of famous uncertainties of detail in the layout, but the main outlines of the narrative topography are clear enough.

A. The first kills

One of the most effective things about the narrative that follows is the suitors' disorientation. They still don't realise what's going on even as Odysseus takes up position on the threshold (blocking their exit from the hall), divests himself of his disguise (to free his limbs for action), and empties the quiver of arrows on the ground (for rapid loading). His first speech continues his tactic of misdirection, announcing merely that he's going to attempt a new target. The audience, of course, get the ironic under-meaning at once; but the suitors have been carefully manipulated into a frame of mind where all they're expecting is a peaceful evening's feasting, and what follows is as shocking as it is dramatic.

1. Antinous

We've already been told that Antinous will be the first victim of Odysseus' vengeance. In contrast to the modern preferences for leaving the biggest baddie to the end, Odysseus shrewdly takes out the ringleaders first. He's already ascertained in the preceding books that the suitors are easily led as a group, and that Antinous is the pack leader; he's also the most vicious, has taken the lead in abusing the beggar, and above all has spoken open threats against Telemachus and his supporters. It might seem almost merciful that he never knows what hit him; but Odysseus is denying him the privilege of dying in an honorable fight like the rest of them.

(a) the death shot

The narrative technique here is a tour de force. With the arrow notched to the string, Homer cuts to a slow-motion close-up of Antinous in mid-gesture, freezing the image just before the arrow strikes. Then the camera goes inside Antinous' head, lingering on his complete unawareness of what's about to happen in the next split-second. As well as a dramatic touch of irony, it's an important snapshot of the mood of the suitors as a whole, and explains why they react in the way they do. But then, like the moment when Eurycleia recognised the scar, the narrative swings back into real-time action, and all hell breaks loose. First the death shot is described in the familiar Iliadic closeup of the moment where weapon penetrates flesh, before pulling back to show the body crashing to the ground. Then Antinous' death is graphically described in terms that exploit the unusual feast setting: the **goblet** he was holding a moment ago goes flying, the **table** is knocked over in his death spasm, and the **food** is splattered with his blood.

(b) the suitors' reaction

Now we pull back to see the suitors' astonished response. Their first instinct, as Odysseus foresaw, is to equip themselves with the shields and spears adorning the walls; but only now do they realise that the arms that used to hang in the hall have been removed overnight. By Homeric protocol, they've left their own spears outside the sealed entrance, and all they have is their swords: fine in close combat, but little use against an archer, as they're about to find out. It doesn't help that, as the narrator points out, they still think that Antinous' death was a tragic blunder by a incompetent vagrant who will be no match for their combined swords. Odysseus' strategy of misdirection has served him well.

(c) Odysseus unmasks

But now the time for roleplay is over. In a speech of tremendous power and resonance, Odysseus recites the charges against them: the clearest statement in the poem of the precise nature of the suitors' crimes.

- First, they're accused of wilfully consuming his property. That they do so by exploiting (or rather abusing) the codes of hospitality doesn't fool anyone. They've admitted themselves that their real aim is to put pressure on Penelope and Telemachus.
- Second, they've corrupted Odysseus' own household by raping his maids. Some commentators take the accusation here as merely an exaggerated reference to the twelve bad girls who've allowed themselves to be seduced by the suitors, but there've been references to wider abuse at 16.110–11 and 20.318–9. Seducing the twelve is not the suitors' crime, but the twelve maids' themselves for allowing it – which is why they'll have to pay a grim price of their own at the end of the book.
- They pressurised Penelope to be unfaithful to a husband who was not confirmed dead, taking advantage of his absence and her consequent vulnerability.
- They persistently disregarded basic moral codes and the religious and social powers that uphold them.

And so, finally, to the sentence. All have shown themselves guilty; all are condemned by their own actions to death. Notice that nowhere in this has he even felt the need to speak his real name.

2. Eurymachus

With Antinous gone, Eurymachus is the de facto leader of the surviving suitors. It's a role he immediately justifies by being the only one of them all not to panic. Instead, he typically summons up all his considerable powers of smooth talking to try and blag a way out.

(a) Eurymachus negotiates

Eurymachus' speech is a clever performance. He doesn't try to dispute the charges; Odysseus has seen enough at first hand for that to be a hiding to nowhere. Instead, he adroitly pins it all on Antinous, who's now conveniently unable to answer back. To blacken Antinous' motives further, Eurymachus alleges that he was only ever interested in power anyway, and brings up the plot to murder Telemachus without revealing that he himself had been wholeheartedly committed to the plan. Finally, Eurymachus makes his formal counter-proposal: compensation covering the full value of all the losses incurred by Odysseus' estate.

(b) Odysseus refuses

Odysseus hears this out; but like Achilles with Agamemnon, his anger and offence is beyond material compensation. Negotiation is not an option; the only choice is between dying fighting or dying trying to escape.

(c) Eurymachus rallies the suitors

Eurymachus is too smart not to see the truth in this, and instantly switches into strategic mode. His sharp mind analyses the situation accurately: Odysseus can pick them off with his arrows unless they can turn their superior numbers to advantage, and they're sitting ducks so long as they're trapped in the megaron. The first thing they need is a defence against the arrows. They don't have shields, but they can improvise an approximation from the individual dining-tables that are part of the setup for Homeric feasting. (The idea of everyone sitting or reclining round one big table isn't a Greek one.) That may offer them enough protection to be able to use their superior numbers to displace Odysseus from his commanding position on the threshold; and if they can break out of the megaron, there's a real chance of raising support from outside to overwhelm him.

(d) his charge and death

It's a good plan, but not what actually happens. Eurymachus charges without waiting to grab a table himself, and Odysseus' arrow gets him long before he can close in. Again the traditional graphic description of death blow, fall, and spasm are inventively adapted to the

unusual setting, and again the imagery plays up the ironic transformation of the archetypal peacetime activity of feasting into an Iliadic bloodbath.

3. Amphinomus

With Antinous and Eurymachus gone, natural leadership falls to the thoughtful but flawed Amphinomus, who failed to take the chance that was offered him by Odysseus the previous day. This time there's no pause for discussion; Amphinomus must know that their only chance is to overwhelm Odysseus with speed and force. But his mistake is to focus on Odysseus as the sole threat. Telemachus' spear catches him in the back: the prince's first kill, and a turning-point in the action.

Telemachus quickly sees that a spear isn't much use in their present situation. Arrows can be replenished, but once a spear's thrown, it's gone. He can't use his sword, because they can't afford to let the suitors get that close; he needs more throwing-weapons from somewhere.

B. The armoury

The episode that follows is a bit hard to visualise, and commentators have argued to no great conclusion about exactly where we're to imagine the storeroom is relative to the megaron. But whatever the layout, the situation is clear enough: Telamachus' inspiration is to use the very armour they removed last night from the hall, which is accessible from the megaron without going through either set of sealed doors, and whose whereabouts of course only he and Odysseus know. As well as protecting Odysseus against the suitors' swords, this will enable Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Philoetius to fight alongside him. Odysseus' arrows won't last forever, and if the now leaderless suitors can coordinate themselves to charge in a mass he won't be able to shoot them all.

1. Telemachus arms the heroes

While Odysseus covers them, Telemachus and the herdsmen arm; then they're able to return the favour when the arrows run out and Odysseus needs to arm in his turn for close combat. The now severely depleted suitors seem understandably reluctant to charge three or four heavily-armed men, and for a moment it's not clear how the battle will develop in this new phase.

2. Melanthius arms the suitors

Meanwhile, the suitors are taking stock of their options, and paying more attention to their surroundings; and it's here that Melanthius' insider knowledge of the palace begins to tilt the advantage back towards the suitors.

(a) Agelaus' plan

Leadership of the remaining suitors has devolved now to Agelaus, the Amphinomus-like figure whose perceptiveness and intelligence were earlier seen in his speech at 20.322–37. His first thought is for a volunteer to try and slip out through a side door and raise the alarm – though Odysseus, who knows his palace better than any, has anticipated this tactic and posted Eumaeus in position to intercept any such attempt.

(b) Melanthius' mission

This is where Melanthius' detailed knowledge can suggest an alternative plan. Agelaus' scheme is too risky: even if someone could slip out, Odysseus could simply shoot or spear him from the doorway as he tried to make it out of the yard. (Melanthius' explanation here can be translated in more than one way, none of them terribly clear, but this is one of the least implausible interpretations.) Melanthius, however, has a better idea: if Odysseus and Telemachus have been able to arm themselves, he can guess which storeroom they must be using; and he also knows a way there that will bypass Odysseus and his supporters.

Sure enough, Melanthius is able to slip into the storeroom and bring arms for twelve of the suitors without being detected. Suddenly the fight is no longer between four armed men and a mass of unprotected flesh, but against three times their number in equally well-armed

men and many more in reserve. Odysseus and Telemachus instantly realise that only an insider could have done this; and the name of Melanthius springs to the lips of both.

3. Melanthius caught

Melanthius' mistake is to try for a second run after his enemies have rumbled his route. Eumaeus, primed to keep lookout, asks for instructions: shall I kill him myself, or would you prefer to deal with him?

(a) Odysseus' plan

But Odysseus wants Melanthius taken alive for now, to be dealt with at leisure after the battle with the other faithless servants. Appropriately, the task of dealing with him is delegated to his rival herdsmen, with strict instructions on how he's to be rendered helpless.

(b) Eumaeus & Philoetius capture Melanthius

A deft little narrative sequence ensues, as we follow the herdsmen in their stealthy pursuit and watch them take up their positions silently outside. The focus then turns to the unwary Melanthius inside, preoccupied with his search; and as he heads back for the doorway, the tatty shield of Laertes is treated to a lingering description to spin out the moment of suspense, with a sense that Melanthius' own attention is momentarily on the shield rather than on the passageway outside. The springing of the trap breaks in on the reverie, snapping us back from the distant past to the here-and-now; and in a few swiftly-told moves Melanthius is left dangling in midair as instructed, with a witty parting shot ringing in his ears from Eumaeus, who has waited a long time for this moment.

C. Enter Athene

As the heroes regroup, the book's strangest episode follows. The appearance of a god to urge on the hero is a familiar enough feature of battlefield narrative, but the effect of Athene's disguised appearance here in the sealed megaron has an eerie unreality about it. (Line 206 will recur, with a strangely effective resonance, as the last line of the poem.) In the action so far, there's been no sign at all of the divine assistance Athene promised the previous night, and it would clearly be a bit of an anticlimax if she were to save Odysseus the trouble and glory by taking a direct hand. The function of this episode is to bring Athene in in a more subtle way, with an ingenious twist on the conventions of divine disguise, and to keeps her in the frame but out of the actual fighting.

1. Odysseus and "Mentor"

Unusually, though Odysseus sees through the disguise, he addresses her for the others' benefit under her mortal name. The real Mentor, of course, hasn't set eyes on Odysseus in twenty years, or vice-versa, and Odysseus is careful to work a hint of this into his greeting.

2. Agelaus' threats

The suitors, as usual, see only the surface of things, and fail to ask the right questions. Instead of wondering how an old man could have slipped into the midst of a pitched battle in a sealed room, they threaten him with immediate death and the plunder of his property. Again it's the suitors' new leader Agelaus who speaks for them – not realising just who he's addressing in such terms.

3. Athene's response and withdrawal

Athene keeps up her cover, but addresses Odysseus in a way that shows she knows that he knows who he's talking to. On one level, it's a version of the standard Iliadic speech of encouragement through appeal to shame and reputation; but it's given a piquant Odyssean twist by being disguised as something the real Mentor might say. And despite her promise to stand by him, she does what she did the last time she appeared as Mentor (3.372): turns herself into a bird, and flies off. But where Nestor immediately recognised the sign of a god, here the suitors will obtusely rationalise away Mentor's disappearance. Only at the very end

of the battle, when the armed suitors have already been defeated, will Athene show the last of them her full terrifying power.

D. Pitched battle

Now the battle enters its final and most desperate phase. Only twelve suitors remain: evidently the twelve armed by Melanthius, who are named in turn in the closing phase of the battle. Eight of these twelve are figures we've met before; here they are, with their nemeses here.

name		**killed by**
Agelaus	fourth leader of the suitors	Odysseus
Amphimedon	not mentioned before, but plays a surprising posthumous role in book 24	Telemachus
Ctesippus	threw the hoof of meat at the beggar, 20.284ff.	Philoetius
Demoptolemus	not previously known	Odysseus
Elatus	not previously known	Eumaeus
Euryades	not previously known	Telemachus
Eurydamas	gave Penelope earrings at 18.297–8	Odysseus
Eurynomus	son of Aegyptius, 2.21–2	not specified
Leocritus	spoke against Mentor in the assembly, 2.242ff.	Telemachus
Leodes	first to attempt the bow, 21.144ff.	Odysseus
Peisander	offered Penelope a necklace at 18.299–300	Philoetius
Polybus	not mentioned before, but the name appears in Eurymachus' family (1.399 etc.); perhaps his younger brother?	Eumaeus

1. the first exchange of spearcasts

Agelaus registers Mentor's disappearance, but not its true nature or significance. As far as he's concerned, the odds have simply been readjusted back in their favour: twelve armed men against four, and even with only one spear each it's still twelve spears against eight. With Odysseus' arrows spent, it's time to move into an Iliadic pattern of combat, with exchanges of spear-throws followed by close combat with swords if the spears don't prove decisive. Agelaus' tactic is to throw their twelve spears in two waves of six – presumably, as commentators suggest, because there isn't room in the megaron for more than six men to stand abreast. As Agelaus shrewdly notes, they don't even have to kill all of the four, because if they can strike down Odysseus then the battle is already won.

(a) the suitors all miss

But now Athene begins to take a hand, again in a pattern of intervention familiar from the *Iliad*. She invisibly deflects all six spears, leaving the throwers exposed to a wave of retaliatory spear-casts from Odysseus' foursome.

(b) the heroes all score

The result is a dramatic shift of the odds in the heroes' favour. Though they can only kill four of the six, the second rank fail to follow up with their other six spears, leaving Odysseus' team the opportunity to retrieve their original spears. Since Odysseus' quartet had two spears each to start with, it's now eight spears against six.

2. the second exchange

The exchange of spears is now repeated, with a similar outcome but with some variations to spice it up.

(a) the suitors graze Telemachus and Eumaeus

The suitors' second wave regroups and throws, but the only hits are minor ones. Ctesippus' throw is a wry reminder of his equally vain aim when he tried to throw a hoof of beef at the beggar in book 20 – something Philoetius will make more of in a moment.

(b) the heroes all score again

Now another four suitors are taken down, leaving just four to go. Telemachus repays Amphimedon for his flesh wound, while Ctesippus is brought down not by Eumaeus (whose shoulder he grazed) but by Philoetius, for reasons that quickly become clear.

Philoetius' speech over Ctesippus

Philoetius gets to deliver the only boasting-speech accompanying any of the Odyssean kills. As the Cyclops episode indicated and the Eurycleia scene will confirm in a moment, the *Odyssey* is generally uneasy about the Iliadic tradition of gloating over the victims of battle. This is no doubt one reason why this speech, like Eumaeus' earlier witticism to Melanthius, is given to one of the herdsmen rather than to Odysseus or Telemachus. But there's also an obvious appropriateness in Philoetius' being the one to pay Ctesippus back for his earlier offence. A more gung-ho character than the solemn Eumaeus, he's also a superintendent of Odysseus' cattle, so has a direct interest in the misuse of Odysseus' beef; and he relishes the opportunity to turn Ctesippus' earlier heavy-handed irony about gifts back against him.

3. the fight at close quarters

With the remaining suitors all spearless and down to a foursome, the heroes abandon long-range tactics and move in to use their remaining spears to stab.

(a) Odysseus stabs Agelaus

The suitors' leader Agelaus has escaped the spearcasts, but Odysseus targets him in the close encounter, and he's the first to fall as the four move in for the final kill.

(b) Telemachus stabs Leocritus

Leocritus is aptly killed by Telemachus, with whom he clashed back in the assembly in book 2. It was Leocritus who openly predicted that if Odysseus came home to find the suitors feasting in his hall, they'd kill him on the spot.

(c) The last slaughter

Only now does Athene unleash her power directly against the suitors: not physically, but through the panic terror inspired by the aegis she wears in scenes of battle in the *Iliad*.

Athene routs the suitors

Given that there seem to be only four survivors at this point (Eurynomus, Leodes, Phemius the bard, and Medon the page), the impression of mass panic and slaughter here may seem a bit overdone – though perhaps some of the victims are those wounded but not dispatched by earlier arrows and spears. But one Iliadic technique that hasn't been used in the battle narrative so far has been the shift between individual and mass action, with the latter generally accompanied by vivid nature-similes. The opportunity's seized here for a rare double simile: gadflies scattering cattle, and eagles attacking a flock.

the heroes mop them up

The second simile is a particularly significant one, because its imagery harks back to the long series of eagle-and-prey omens now being fulfilled: in the Ithacan assembly (2.146ff.), at Telemachus' departure from Sparta (15.160ff.), in Penelope's dream (19.535ff.), and at the suitors' last meeting that very morning (20.240ff.).

E. The suppliants

But now this most Iliadic of books takes a surprising and very Odyssean turn, with a series of openly moralistic scenes of judgment to close the book and the process of revenge on an emphatically ethical note. First comes a trio of characters who throw themselves on Odysseus' mercy, and are treated according to their deserts; and then Odysseus and his co-

conspirators deal with the aftermath of the slaughter in the palace, including the fates of Melanthius and the unfaithful maids.

1. Leodes

Supplication scenes are of course a familiar feature of Iliadic battle-narrative. But this one, like other Iliadic motifs adapted in this book, gets a distinctively Odyssean twist. We met Leodes in the previous book, as the thoughtful and unwarlike performer of sacrifices who was first to attempt the bow, and correctly predicted that all would fail. Even the narrator described him at 20.143ff. as "an enemy of unrighteousness … indignant with all the suitors", so his protestations of innocence here seem true enough – though if he was one of the twelve who armed, he must have just thrown a spear. But Odysseus delivers a grimly uncompromising verdict: just because Leodes opposed some of the suitors' abuses doesn't make him innocent of their crimes. He joined their cause, presented himself as a suitor for Penelope, and shared in the feasting that wasted Odysseus' possessions, while his supposedly pious role as officiant at their sacrifices only compounds his crime of association. As with Iliadic suppliants, the supplication fails; but both appeal and verdict have characteristically Odyssean moral underpinnings.

2. Phemius

This can't be an encouraging precedent for the second suppliant, the bard Phemius. Weighing up his options carefully, he chooses the risker alternative in assuming a suppliant pose at Odysseus' knees. But his appeal has stronger grounds than Leodes'. First, he was never a suitor; secondly, he only performed for them under duress (as the narrator confirmed at 1.154, and Telemachus himself can bear witness); thirdly, bards and their talent are precious things in the heroic world, not lightly to be thrown away. Here as so often we seem to get a glimpse of Homer unashamedly puffing up his profession and status; but there's also a serious point to Phemius' arguments, as they'll help to calibrate the moral line of which he and Leodes fall on different sides.

3. Medon

Telemachus backs up Phemius' appeal, and remembers the other loyal servant who was in the hall when the fighting started: Medon the page, used by Penelope in earlier books to keep tabs on the suitors under the pretext of serving their needs. Many commentators detect a touch of humour in Medon's unwarriorly hide-and-seek, and certainly Odysseus' smile in response to his supplication marks a significant change in his mood. But the two are released with a sternly moralisting summing-up, and only as far as the altar in the courtyard. Odysseus doesn't want word getting out to the town just yet.

F. After the slaughter

A memorable sequence now begins, in which the palace servants are brought back into the story to face the aftermath of the slaughter. Amid the (literal) mopping-up that follows, the fates of Melanthius and Melantho will be finally decided; and the stage is reset for the next great scene, the reunion of Odysseus with Penelope.

1. the corpses

The sequence begins with a moment of grim calm, as Odysseus, ever wary, checks for further survivors, and for the first time we get a still shot of the hall filled with corpses. As at other moments of slaughter in the poem, the victims are poignantly compared in a memorable simile to the victims of human hunting: here nets full of fish, dead on the sand.

2. Eurycleia

Odysseus' first act is to call for Eurycleia, the one servant in the palace whose trustworthiness has already been proven – not just by her assurances last night, but by her success in keeping the secret today.

(a) Odysseus' summons

We last saw Eurycleia taking charge, at Telemachus' order, of sealing the doors between the megaron and the inner rooms of the palace to keep the servants out – and also, as we'll see, to keep them in. Odysseus doesn't discuss his plans with Telemachus, but merely asks for her to be fetched. What's he up to? What can Eurycleia do that nobody else can?

(b) her reaction to the slaughter

Eurycleia unbars the doors, and we see the bloody spectacle in the megaron through her eyes. The description and her reaction to it are effectively bridged by a rare Odyssean lion simile. But this most Iliadic simile in the poem, at the end of the most Iliadic book of the poem, is followed by one of the most powerful assertions of the *Odyssey*'s distance from the world of the Iliadic battlefield and its warrior ideology. Eurycleia's impulse, underscored by the simile, is to raise a yell of jubilant triumph at the bloody fulfilment of all her hopes. But that, as we're about to see, is not the *Odyssey*'s way.

(c) Odysseus stills her

For the second time in the poem, Odysseus silences his old nurse before she can give voice. This time, however, he's less concerned about raising the alarm than about the moral implications. The extraordinary statement that "Vaunting over men slain is a monstrous thing" is a world away from the boasting-speeches of the *Iliad*. For Odysseus, the suitors' deaths aren't to anybody's credit, except perhaps that of the gods who enforced their law; the only satisfaction should be that of justice done. This grim lesson is then reinforced by the scene that follows, where the merciless enforcement of justice leads to an outcome conspicuously lacking in any sense of glory or triumph. Already we sense ominous implications for Odysseus' next question: which of the palace women have betrayed him? This is the information Eurycleia promised him last night, and for which he then declined her help; but now the time has come for final judgment.

(d) Eurycleia fingers the traitors

Eurycleia eagerly spills the beans on the dirty dozen, her resentment of whom has been a recurrent thread in her characterisation. Always keen to move things along, she also proposes a second service: somebody surely needs to go up to Penelope's room to tell the queen the news. But Odysseus, as in book 19, declines her offer – priming us to expect the great scene with Penelope in due course, but only after Odysseus has dealt with the maids.

3. the maids

The scene that follows is an uncomfortable one for modern taste, and even Homer seems uncomfortable with the idea of Odysseus himself slaughtering twelve helpless slave-girls. Instead, the buck gets passed to Telemachus and the herdsmen; and Telemachus varies the orders on his own disconcerting initiative.

(a) Odysseus gives the order

Odysseus' instructions are that the twelve faithless maids should be the ones who have the job of helping to clean up after the slaughter, before being taken out and executed in the yard by Telemachus and the herdsmen. Though it's no less than Odysseus warned them of the previous night, even Eurycleia would find it hard to extract a sense of triumph from their fate.

(b) the last cleanup

Under Odysseus' direction and led by Telemachus and the herdsmen, the twelve begin the unhappy task of clearing the corpses out into the yard, and scrubbing the evidence of the slaughter from the megaron. The sentence of death when the task is done gives the whole activity a nightmarish quality, which builds to a crescendo as they're led out in silence to execution. But now comes a surprise twist: Telemachus decides to dispatch them by hanging rather than the sword. His motives are obscure, and have been interpreted with varying degrees of Freudian implausibility. Is he, perhaps like Odysseus, uncomfortable bloodying his sword on defenceless slave-girls? or do his final words evoke a pent-up grudge? What he

says, at least, is that they don't deserve a quick and easy death by the sword; and with grim ingenuity he takes it on himself to devise an alternative.

(c) Telemachus strings them up

Telemachus' practical energy here recalls the purposeful, active side he showed earlier in laying out the contest of the bow. But the hanging itself is narrated for pathos, with another poignant hunting simile used of the victims as the girls are compared to snared birds. The final detail of the twitching feet is particularly haunting. If this is justice, we're at least invited to feel a pang of sympathy for its victims.

4. Melanthius

But this is nothing to the fate of Melanthius, recounted with stark brutality in a few brisk lines that carefully leave out the details of who carries out this vicious mutilation. If it seems barbaric to us, we should remember that the same fate was threatened by Antinous against both Irus (18.75ff.) and the beggar (21.285ff.); and that Melanthius has not only sided with the suitors against his own master, but armed them with his master's own weapons to kill him. When, if at all, in the whole procedure Melanthius actually dies is left queasily unclear.

5. purifying the hall

Now Odysseus gives his third round of orders: to fumigate and purify the hall, in both a ritual and a practical sense. Only when that's done will the megaron be ready for the loyal servants to enter, and the setting prepared for Penelope's climactic re-entry. As usual, Eurycleia offers a helpful additional suggestion of her own, and has to be told to get on and do what she's told and no more for now.

6. the women return

With the megaron purified, the rest of the household is at last permitted to enter, and we get a brief, touching scene of Odysseus surrounded by his loyal maids. Only now does Odysseus let his guard down, in a moment of overwhelming emotion; but this is merely the warmup for what is about to happen as Penelope re-enters for her most famous scene of all.

BOOK 23. ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE

After the Iliadic action climax of book 22, this book is a quintessentially Odyssean performance. For the last time in the poem, we're back in the world of books 14 and especially 19, as the two cleverest but least trusting people in the world try to outmanoeuvre one another in a long two-handed interaction. It's the culmination of the psychological strand in the poem's dramatic plotting, both in the characterisation of Penelope and in the complex interplay of speeches and minds.

A. Eurycleia & Penelope

At the end of book 22, Odysseus gave Eurycleia three assignments. Two have been carried out: bringing fire and sulphur to purify the megaron, and calling the other women in from the inner rooms of the palace. That leaves the mission upstairs to fetch Penelope from her room, where thanks to Athene's sleep therapy she's snoozed through the entire battle.

4 exchanges of speeches

What follows is probably the most naturalistic dialogue sequence in Homer. The eight short speeches passed between Penelope and Eurycleia have the feeling of a real conversation, with a complex to-and-fro between two strong and subtle characters. Eurycleia's body language sets the mood of her opening speech, as she wakes her mistress to deliver the news all in a gabble: Odysseus home, the suitors all dead, Penelope's dreams come true. But that's the problem: for a woozy Penelope, emerging foggily from a rare good night's sleep, it's all too much like her dreams to be taken seriously, and she dismisses Eurycleia's fantasy as a touch of dementia. Eurycleia sticks to her guns, but realises a bit more explanation is needed: the

beggar she spoke to last night was Odysseus in disguise, Telemachus was in on the conspiracy, and the whole thing had to be kept secret from the suitors.

Penelope now swings, as she will throughout the book, between incredulity and hope. At first she wants to believe; but there are parts of this scenario that still make no sense. If the suitors are dead, how did one man kill over a hundred? Significantly for what follows, Eurycleia has to admit she doesn't know; she was of course outside the hall throughout, and never even witnessed the contest of the bow as Penelope did. Her narrative merely tells the women's side of the story: shut in an interior room, cowering in terror to the sounds of slaughter on the other side of the barred door, and then Telemachus' voice ordering the opening of the doors, revealing the astonishing tableau of Odysseus alive in a hall of corpses. She rapidly brings Penelope up to speed on what's passed since, and urges her to come and experience the fulfilment of all her hopes for herself.

But this is exactly what Penelope finds so unbelievable, and for the second time Eurycleia finds herself told to temper her jubilation. She's prepared to accept the evidence of Eurycleia's eyes on the suitors' death at the hands of the stranger; but nothing she's said gives her any reason to believe in his identity. If the suitors are dead, it doesn't mean Odysseus is alive.

Penelope's scepticism is incomprehensible to Eurycleia's blunter mind. She's seen proof of Odysseus' identity with her own eyes in Penelope's presence last night, and like Odysseus to Eumaeus in book 14 she challenges Penelope to kill her if she speaks false. Penelope sidesteps this offer more deftly than Eumaeus: if her theory of divine vengeance is right, then Eurycleia's "evidence" means nothing. But she's more than willing to see the proof of the suitors' death, and to see Telemachus safe.

B. The meeting

It's through Penelope's eyes that we now see the figure in the firelight as she descends into the megaron. In a rare moment of direct insight into her complex thoughts, we see her hesitating between two courses of action, one sceptical and one accepting. But as she approaches, she finds herself unable to do either. Instead, she sits in the light, inspecting him intently, and the silence stretches uncomfortably.

1. Penelope's gaze

Again the narrator lets us into the conflicting thoughts behind this unnerving silence. The physical resemblance to Odysseus is there; but as we were reminded at the end of the previous book in his rebuff to Eurycleia's offer of fresh clothing, he's still wearing the remains of his beggar disguise.

2. Telemachus and Penelope

Telemachus, as usual, fails to understand what's going through his mother's mind. He finds her silence incomprehensible, and misinterprets it as coldness. He doesn't realise that Penelope, unlike himself, has a living memory of Odysseus to compare the stranger against. It's always an unsettling experience to catch up twenty years on with people you were close to in your teens. Your memory of their younger self is so powerful that the older version doesn't displace it.

Penelope explains, with perhaps less frankness than she shows, that her silence comes from indecision over where to begin. She doesn't question in so many words his assumption that it's the real Odysseus, but instead delicately indicates that the real Odysseus will be able to prove his identity in ways that only he and Penelope know.

3. Odysseus' instructions to Telemachus

Odysseus' smile could be appreciation of her shrewdness and tact, amusement at her incredulity or Telemachus' obtuseness, anticipation of a further round of mental sparring with his favourite antagonist, or several or all of the above. Whichever it is, he sees to the root of Penelope's doubt (the fact that he's still disguised), and catches the hint in her last words: Telemachus is to be discreetly dismissed from the scene that follows.

Before Telemachus leaves, Odysseus takes the opportunity to consult with him over their next move, in the clearest indication yet that the story is far from over. In the Homeric world, revenge has consequences, and individual acts of crime and punishment have to reckon with the wider community. Things may look simple to the warrior on the battlefield, but transposing an Iliadic *aristeia* to the alien setting of a private feud means facing the justice of the community. In both epics, we've seen this process in action, both in the personal histories of figures like Patroclus (*Iliad* 23.85–90) and Theoclymenus and in the scenes of collective dispute resolution on Achilles' shield and in the Ithacan assembly. If killing 106 young members of the kingdom's aristocracy seemed like a tall order, it's nothing compared to persuading their families to be happy with the outcome.

Telemachus agrees with the assessment, but makes it clear that Odysseus will need to do all the thinking on this one. The rest of them will back him up; but first they need a plan. Odysseus candidly admits he hasn't yet worked out the later stages, but already the outline of the final book is starting to take shape. First, they need to stop word of the suitors' deaths getting out – something he's already taken practical measures over by confining Medon and Phemius to the palace. Now, he proposes a more elaborate ruse: to put on a show as though the day had gone according to expectations, and that Penelope had actually chosen a new husband. That will cover for the suitors' failure to come home from the palace, so that it'll be morning before the truth gets out – and by that time the killers will be off the scene, on a secret mission inland whose nature Odysseus isn't yet revealing.

4. the false wedding

So the party goes ahead, with the whole palace united in what is effectively a homecoming dance for their master and a collective celebration of the household's liberation. But passers-by draw the conclusion Odysseus intended, and cluck tongues at Penelope's apparent fickleness: a fine touch of irony, and a subtle indication of where the people's judgment really lies.

C. The last test

Now comes one of the most famous scenes in the poem. Penelope has faded from view while all this has been going on, but we've been promised a further scene between the two of them alone, in which private secrets will establish the stranger's identity once and for all.

1. Odysseus' final makeover

The first stage is to strip Odysseus of the last remnants of his disguise. In a close verbal replay of his transformation from shipwrecked vagabond to hero at 6.230–5, he's bathed, anointed, dressed in fresh clothes, and subjected to the last of Athene's divine cosmetic routines. Looking every inch himself at last, he returns to face Penelope, who hasn't moved or spoken during all of this.

If Odysseus was expecting Penelope to fling herself into his arms at the sight of his true appearance, he must be sorely disappointed. He quotes Telemachus' words from 23.97–103 above, though it's teasingly unclear whether he's come round to Telemachus' view of Penelope's feelings, or whether he's subtly reminding her of her response to Telemachus then, when she mentioned "secret tokens" that would settle the matter once and for all. Does his request to Eurycleia mean he's giving up for the night? or is he challenging Penelope to make her move now or not at all?

2. the bed test

Penelope's answer is a brilliant performance. With her opening word, she turns Odysseus' opening jab back on him. (The Greek word *daimonie* is hard to translate: Stanford nicely glosses "You're a mysterious woman" and "You're just as mysterious.") Next, she blandly disavows any of the motives he charges her with, without actually giving anything away of what's really going through her mind. All she says is that she's remembering how he looked the last time she saw him – though if Odysseus is paying attention, he'll catch that for the first time she's referred to Odysseus as "you".

But since he's asked Eurycleia to make him up a bed, Penelope makes as if to fall in with the plan. In the most famous of all such moments in Homer, she gives an instruction to Eurycleia that's actually designed to be overheard by Odysseus. As you'll see from Shewring's note, the Greek text is unclear here and we're not sure exactly what Penelope's proposing. Shewring goes with the rather desperate solution of changing the Greek word "outside" to "inside" and assuming that what Penelope's asking Eurycleia to do is to put a bed in the chamber (implying that the old bed's been moved out). If "outside" is right, she's asking her bring the (old) bed out of the chamber and make it up there (implying that the bed's been somehow made moveable).

For the first time, Odysseus loses his cool completely. In a wonderful speech, he begins with an indignant outburst at the implication that his bed has been moved, then seems slowly to realise that he's walked straight into Penelope's last and most brilliant trap. The story of the bed of course is a superbly chosen symbol of the rooted permanence of their marriage, and it's notable that it means as much to Odysseus as to Penelope; while the olive that formed the natural bedpost happens, not coincidentally, to be Athene's sacred tree. We also see the skills of Odysseus the craftsman, which were displayed particularly in his boat-building in book 5, as he single-handedly builds not just the bed but the entire room that will signify the private space of their marriage. Indeed, it's his craftsmanship that makes the secret possible. Other palace servants will be familiar with the unusual bedroom, but only Odysseus knows exactly how it was built. By the end of his speech, he seems to recognise that merely knowing all this has proved his identity, and that Penelope was setting him a test. But scarcely less impressive has been the demonstration that it means so much to him emotionally.

3. Penelope's apology

Penelope's guard drops, and for the first time in the poem she opens fully up to another. Her confession to Odysseus here is an important key to her behaviour up to now: that she's had to train herself to trust nobody, lest her story turn into that of a Helen. Or, she might have said, a Clytemnestra; but the point is that all their sufferings, and the hundreds of thousands of other lives destroyed by the war, go back to one woman who made the wrong decision in Penelope's position.

4. embrace and simile

This is the *Odyssey*'s emotional climax (though there's one final moment in the next book that rivals it in intensity), and it's marked by perhaps the most striking of all in the poem's long series of emotional similes. Penelope's feelings at the sight of Odysseus are compared to the situation of Odysseus himself at 5.394–406 – his first sight of the coast of Scheria, after nineteen days at sea and nine years' wandering before that. There we had another famous simile, comparing the sight of land to a father restored to his family from the brink of death. It's almost as though the two scenes are mirror images of one another, creating long-distance emotional links between these key moments in Odysseus' story.

Athene's discreet elongation of the night is a rare suspension of natural law to milk the emotional moment for all it's worth. But it also helps to foreshadow the more overtly supernatural role she'll take in the remarkable final book.

5. Tiresias' prophecy recounted

Odysseus chooses this moment to warn Penelope that his story is far from over. As well as the immediate difficulties she heard him discussing with Telemachus, there's Teiresias' prophecy from book 11 to be fulfilled. We might wonder why he mentions this now, but clearly one function of the scene is to wrap up this loose end in a way that signals clearly to the audience that it's not going to form part of the story. Like the death of Achilles and the fall of Troy in the *Iliad*, it's a part of the story that falls outside the scope of the poem itself, and a way of looking beyond the end of the narrative to the long-term fate of the characters. Penelope's cautiously optimistic comment interprets the significance of the story for the audience: this does look like a promise from the gods of a happy ending, so long as Odysseus goes through the motions prescribed. But first, as we now know, he'll have to deal with the little matter of the suitors' kinsmen's revenge; and that isn't going to be so easily put off.

6. And so to bed

For now, at least, the long day is at an end, and it's time for everyone to retire to bed. As Shewring's footnote observes, there's a cryptic comment in the ancient commentaries that some Alexandrian editors thought that the moment when Odysseus and Penelope turn in was the "end" of the *Odyssey*. What they meant by this has been endlessly debated – especially by analyst critics, some of whom have seen this as ammunition for the view that the rest of the poem is a later addition. But it's clear from other notes that the same named Alexandrian critics did in fact accept most of book 24 as genuine, so the likeliest explanation is that the word "end" here is being used in an aesthetic sense implying "goal", "destination", "climax". Despite the long-foreshadowed importance of some of the events of book 24, it seems a sensible and uncontroversial judgment.

For Odysseus and Penelope, there's a lot of storytelling to catch up on in their pillow talk. Penelope's experiences are skipped past in summary; but Odysseus' own tale is an opportunity for something more elaborate.

Odysseus' story

Like the reference to Teiresias' prophecy, this bravura condensation of the events of books 5–12 helps to pull together threads from the first half of the poem, as part of the process of tying up loose ends and looking back over the story so far. It's the longest passage of indirect speech in Homer, and is clearly trying to find an unusual and different form in which to revisit the events already told. This time around, the story is retold in chronological order; Odysseus' first-person narrative is expanded to include the Calypso and Phaeacian episodes; and the unusual summary form invites the audience to imagine for themselves what Odysseus' full narrative might have been like.

Above all, though, it helps us to see the shape of the story as a whole, with its crucial turning points and lessons learned. Some commentators see significance in the omission of his dalliance with Circe and any mention of Nausicaa, but this is of course just a summary of what was clearly a night-long telling on a similar scale to books 9–12, and it'd be hard to see how he could have told the parts mentioned here without going into those details too.

D. Next morning

With matters between Odysseus and Penelope now literally put to bed, we're ready to confront the bits of the plot that have been carefully postponed for the finale: the aftermath of the slaughter, and the long-awaited appearance of Odysseus' father Laertes. How these will connect up is for the extraordinary final book to reveal; but as Athene allows the elongated night to end, Odysseus sketches the outline of his plan.

1. the plan

Odysseus gently writes Penelope out of the poem at this point. Her role will be to look after the palace during his absence on this last and most dangerous mission. In the long term, Odysseus reveals, his plan is to restore his property by a combination of overseas raids and local levies – an interesting insight into the attitudes underpinning the heroic economy, as well as another subtle piece of long-range plot forecasting to answer questions we might have about what happens after the end of the poem. But his immediate plan, which seems at first entirely unconnected, is to go off on the mysterious mission announced the previous night, whose destination is now revealed as the estate of his father Laertes. We still don't know what he has in mind, but Odysseus warns that this will be a dangerous day: the massacre of the suitors will be discovered, and there'll be hell to pay. Penelope would be wise to stay in her room until it blows over. But the real action is going to take place not at the palace at all, but on a remote country farm. Clearly one effect of this will be to draw the danger away from the palace and household; but beyond that is at this stage impossible to see.

2. the party sets out

For his mission to Laertes' farm, Odysseus keeps the same small hand-picked team that served him so well the previous day. All four arm, foreshadowing a violence confrontation to come. But the principal atmosphere is one of conspiracy and secrecy, as the foursome make

their way out of the town before the rest of the island wakes up to the shocking truth of the previous day's events and the momentous stakes for this one.

BOOK 24. THE FEUD IS ENDED

The final book is far and away the most problematic in the *Odyssey*. It's composed of three individually spectacular episodes that have all been seen from antiquity as in one way or another difficult to reconcile with the rest of the poem. It would be very convenient to get rid of the problems by wielding the analyst scalpel and claiming that the whole book is a later addition, or a series of them, to the poem as originally conceived. That might wash for the first episode, the underworld scene, which does come a bit out of the blue and wouldn't really be missed if we didn't know it was there. But the Laertes scene that follows is another matter: we've been promised such an episode as part of the ending since early in the the second book, and indeed it's hard to see why Laertes should have been so laboriously (and puzzlingly) kept alive if not for the sole purpose of a big scene at the end.

As for the abortive clash with the suitors' kin, that too seems anticipated by the assembly in book 2, which went to some trouble to emphasise that responsibility for the suitors' misbehaviour rests with their families. It's true that the final battle is pretty strange stuff – the one scene in Homer that really does seem ineptly done – but some resolution of the potential blood-feud is needed in the light of the tales of kinsmen's revenge, and again it's hard not to see this as the ending the poem's had in mind all along, even if the execution leaves something to be desired.

Discussion of book 24 tends to be either negative or despairing, but there are some absolutely wonderful things in this book. Pride of place has to go to Odysseus' moving evocation of his own childhood memories in the "tree speech" at 330–44.

A. The second necyia

First comes the most unexpected episode in all of Homer: an astonishing second visit to the underworld, revisiting characters and themes from book 11 in the light of Odysseus' revenge. Ancient critics already had a long list of oddities which they claimed proved that this scene wasn't the work of "Homer". Most of them don't add up to much, but I'll call attention to some of the more striking quirks as we go along. As with other analyst-style mutterings, I don't myself think there's much mileage in trying to prise layers of composition apart. This scene has been part of the *Odyssey* as far back as we can trace its history, and it's such a fascinating episode in all kinds of ways that we have to take it seriously, however and at what stage it got into the poem originally.

1. Hermes conducts the ghosts

The completely unforeseen cut to the procession of ghosts is a startling narrative coup, and returns after eleven books of gritty realism to the exotic supernatural fantasy of the first half of the poem. This is the only glimpse in Homer of Hermes' role in guiding the dead to the underworld, as well as the only use of his epithet "Cyllenian" (after his legendary birthplace, Mount Cyllene in Arcadia); and the topography includes a series of new landmarks ("the White Rock, the Gates of the Sun and the Land of Dreams") that don't seem to square easily with the account in in book 11. But in other respects the conception of the land of the dead is clearly consistent with our earlier visit – the asphodel fields, the semi-sentient nature of the ghosts – and the opening simile is terrific, comparing the sound and movement of the ghosts to the squeaking and flocking of bats.

2. Achilles & Agamemnon

An audacious scene follows, in which we find ourselves back in the company of the most memorable of the celebrity ghosts from book 11, and get to eavesdrop like a bat on the wall on the conversations of dead heroes among themselves. (This time around, they don't seem to need to drink blood to speak.) The point of this will emerge as the scene unfolds and the suitors' ghosts are brought into the scene, but we open with an encounter between the antagonists of the *Iliad* which already brings the worlds of the two poems back into direct

confrontation and comparison. Though we glimpse other Iliadic figures in the background, the main narrative attention is on Agamemnon's posthumous entourage of other victims of the slaughter at Aegisthus' banquet. This prompts both the conversation that follows and the comparison with the fate of the suitors that will occupy the second half of the scene.

(a) Achilles' speech: Agamemnon's death

Appropriately for a book that's all about endings, what the dead seem to spend their afterlife talking about is one another's deaths. Achilles kicks off by commiserating with Agamemnon on the doom we heard about in detail from Agamemnon's own lips in book 11, and from a series of characters in the first four books. In particular, he makes the point Odysseus did in his soliloquy at 5.299ff., that for a heroic life to end unheroically is the bitterest imaginable blow to his *kleos*, and a heroic death at Troy would have been preferable to being saved for an unwarriorly death.

(b) Agamemnon's speech: Achilles' funeral

Agamemnon returns the sympathy by congratulating Achilles on his ideal warrior's fate, the very model of how a hero ought to be remembered. This opens out into a huge set-piece description of Achilles' funeral, that great episode so heavily foreshadowed in the *Iliad* without being actually recounted – though it was in the lost "cyclic" epic *Aethiopis*, which has often been suspect to lie behind both the *Iliad*'s account of Patroclus' funeral and the *Odyssey*'s account here of Achilles'. Now, at last, we get a full epic narration of this pivotal linking episode between the two poems: the last of the great heroic funerals, marking the passing of the age of Achilles.

Agamemnon's narrative begins with the familiar Iliadic motif of the duel over the corpse. We never hear, and it doesn't seem relevant, how, where, and at whose hand Achilles died – though *Iliad* buffs will remember it's Paris and Apollo in the Scaean gates of Troy. Instead, we pick up the story as the corpse is recovered, cleaned, and mourned, in a sequence that irresistibly recalls the fate of Patroclus' corpse in books 17–23.

(i) Thetis, the nymphs, and the Muses

As in *Iliad* 18, but on a bigger scale and with an eerier effect, Thetis emerges with her nymphs from the waves to lead the lament for her son. There's a cameo role for Nestor, who reassures a terrified army that the supernatural chorus is merely the dead hero's divine kin paying their respect as part of the funerary protocol. Ancient critics were uncomfortable at the nine Muses joining in the *Iliad* 24–style ritual lament, particularly as the *Odyssey* only ever refers elsewhere to one Muse (as you can see if you look up "Muses" in Shewring's index). But the *Iliad* quite often refers to more than one (1.604, 2.484, 2.491, 2.594, 2.598, 11.218, 14.508, 16.112), and the standard figure of nine is already established in Hesiod, so it's not really worth worrying about.

(ii) the mourning

The mourning continues for seventeen days, in contrast to the mere nine of Patroclus'; and then we're on to the *Iliad* 23 phase of the proceedings, the funeral and associated games.

(iii) pyre and burial

The procedure here closely tracks *Iliad* 23, with the hero's corpse burned on a pyre with sacrificial animals (no human sacrifices this time, as those at Patroclus' funeral were a symptom of Achilles' personal demons). Then the bones are retrieved from the pyre and buried with a monumental funeral mound raised over them, in terms that closely recall Achilles' own specifications at *Iliad* 23.245–8. The detail about the two heroes' remains being buried in a single urn provided by Thetis is so close to *Iliad* 23.91–2 that critics have suspect that one or other passage has been added to the text on the basis of the other.

(iv) the funeral games

Finally, Thetis herself takes the role of patron of the funeral games that was assumed by Achilles in *Iliad* 23's games for Patroclus. Agamemnon doesn't go into details, but assures Achilles that the prizes were the greatest ever seen, with the implication that the competition for them was also the most memorable. In short, Achilles' death was everything that he could

have wished for as a representative of the standard Iliadic warrior class and its values: a funeral and commemoration surpassing even the games that he himself laid on for Patroclus. For Agamemnon, treacherously murdered on his homecoming by his wife and her lover, there's no such glory in death to console him.

3. The suitors arrive

If the point of all this for the *Odyssey* isn't yet apparent to us, it now emerges fully to view with the arrival of the suitors' ghosts on the scene. Thanks to the international ties of *xenia*, one of these Ithacan aristocrats is known to Agamemnon: Amphimedon, brought in as one of the four leaders of the final dozen armed suitors in the last and most desperate round of the combat in book 22, and who now turns out to have put Agamemnon himself up when he came to recruit Odysseus for the war. Evidently Amphimedon is one of the senior suitors, which helps to explain his brief commanding role in book 22.

(a) Agamemnon's question

Agamemnon's surprise at seeing Amphimedon among the dead recalls Odysseus' at finding Agamemnon there at 11.394ff.. What we get now is an ironic replay of that conversation, with Agamemnon himself cast in the Odysseus role and Amphimedon reporting his own murder in the manner of Agamemnon's great speech at 11.404ff.

Agamemnon is particularly struck by the likeness of Amphimedon's ghostly company to his own: all men in their prime, who must have died in a common catastrophe. He suggests two possible scenarios: a fleet of ships lost in a single storm, or a raiding expedition gone badly wrong. There's a powerful ironic touch in his closing emphasis on Odysseus, whom Amphimedon and we know to be the answer to Agamemnon's question; and an interesting glimpse of significant backstory in Odysseus' reluctance to join the expedition in the first place. Misgivings about the war? Attachment to Ithaca and family? Either would fit well with the Odysseus we know.

(b) Amphimedon's story

Amphimedon now treats Agamemnon, and us, to the suitors' side of the story of Odysseus' revenge. Like Odysseus' retelling of his adventures in the previous book, it's another in the *Odyssey*'s long series of experimental variations of narrative form and voice, revisiting the events of books 18–22 using the first-person technique of Agamemnon's original speech at 11.404ff. De Jong's *Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* brilliantly sets out on pp. 571–3 all the subtle touches of first-person judgment, inference, bias, emotional colouring, and misunderstanding in Amphimedon's account, which systematically plays down the suitors' own guilt in favour of a loaded picture of Odysseus and Penelope as treacherous murderers. Thus their end is "sad", the suitors' pursuit of Penelope omits all reference to their own freeloading, and Penelope is falsely accused of plotting their destruction herself.

(i) Penelope's weaving

Amphimedon's account of Penelope's trick with Laertes' shroud is the third version of this story, following Antinous' account at 2.93–110 and Penelope's own at 19.138–56. Though the main narrative is verbally identical in the three cases, there are subtle differentiating touches of perspective in the way it's introduced and closed. In particular, Amphimedon misrepresents the discovery of the trick as simultaneous with Odysseus' homecoming, implying a chronological and probably a causal link between the two. In fact, as we know, there's no link at all; Penelope's trick was already exposed at the time of the Ithacan assembly in book 2, over a month before Odysseus' return to Ithaca.

(ii) the beggar

Amphimedon is in the dark about how Odysseus arrived in Ithaca; the "spiteful god" he speculates about is none other than Athene, but of course he doesn't know that. Ancient critics were worried by Amphimedon's apparent knowledge of events of books 14–16; but there's nothing here he couldn't have worked out from observation in books 18–22 and intelligent inference in hindsight. Notice that he conveniently fails to mention the suitors' own ambush for Telemachus on the way home.

(iii) the contest and slaughter

Similarly, Amphimedon has now worked out what happened to the arms in the megaron, but he's falsely or tendentiously imagined a conspiracy between the disguised Odysseus and a Penelope who's already in on the plot, and sets up the contest of the axes on Odysseus' bidding. (This happens to be true, but not in the sense Amphimedon imagines; see 19.582–7. A depressing number of analyst and neoanalyst critics have taken seriously the notion that the narrative as we have it preserves traces of a version in which this was exactly what happened.) As for the slaughter itself, Amphimedon exaggerates up the element of divine support – Athene didn't start helping till the arrows gave way to spears – and presents the suitors as defenceless, omitting all reference to their arming and counter-attack, as well as to their vastly superior numbers.

(iv) the corpses and kin

Finally, Amphimedon's biggest play for pathos: our corpses (like the hapless Elpenor's in book 11) still lie unburied, denied their entitlement to funerary rites and mourning from their kinsmen. This neatly brings the narrative back to the current story on earth, but Amphimedon's point is different: particularly in the light of Agamemnon's own fate, he should be moved to sympathy and identification with the suitors' atrocious fate.

(c) Agamemnon's verdict

But now the twist: Agamemnon doesn't react at all in the way Amphimedon intends. Far from being taken in by this highly coloured and loaded piece of artful narrative misrepresentation, he sees right through his former friend's story to its true significance in comparison with his own. The heroes of Amphimedon's story are not the suitors but Odysseus and Penelope, who have built up a story of homecoming, fidelity, and triumph that will be remembered as a counterbalance to his own fate at the hands of Clytemnestra. The tales of Agamemnon and Odysseus, intertwined since the first page of the poem, have finally been resolved by breaking the ominous parallel between them. Penelope is not, after all, a second Clytemnestra; and Agamemnon's earlier cynicism about women's nature at 11.432–4 has at least one shining counter-instance to refute it.

B. Laertes

This resonant diversion over, we return to the main action as Odysseus arrives at last at Laertes' farm. No other episode in the poem has been so long foreshadowed, and no character's appearance so long anticipated. There've been repeated references by other characters to Laertes' location and condition, going right back to 1.187ff.; you can find them all, as usual, in Shewring's index. Yet he's been kept systematically offstage for the whole of the poem until now, and it's hard not to suspect that he's being deliberately held in reserve for something really big and climactic. We still don't really know how all this connects with the larger issue of the suitors' kin and their possible revenge; but in the remarkable scene that follows, some at least of our questions will start to be answered at last.

1. The estate

Laertes has retired to a country farm with a small resident staff in their own accommodation. As the narrative takes stock of the new scene, we feel we're sizing it up through Odysseus' eyes. As they approach, Odysseus discreetly ditches his companions by delegating them to get a meal ready in the cottage, while Odysseus goes on to seek out his father alone. After his experience with Penelope, he has no confidence that he'll be recognised on sight, and clearly feels more comfortable playing this scene without an audience.

2. Laertes

Odysseus disarms, so as not to present a threatening aspect to the old man as he approaches, and sets off in search of his father. Laertes' staff are occupied elsewhere, and we're reminded (for the first time since 4.735ff.) that they include the loyal siblings and father of the late Melanthius and Melantho – though in the event nothing is made of this.

His first sight of his father presents a complex image. On the one hand, he's clearly an active, practical old man purposefully engaged; yet he's also a poignant sight in his isolation and visible depression. As Odysseus' speech will make clear, he looks more like a slave than

a former king. Odysseus hesitates: he could so easily approach him openly and tell him all, but to the surprise and consternation of many fine critics he decides consciously against this.

What on earth is the purpose of the seemingly heartless "test" Odysseus makes of Laertes? As everyone agrees, he surely can't this time be probing the old man's loyalties, which have never been in doubt. For analyst critics, it's a sign that the poet of this episode has finally lost the plot, and that the whole episode is unworthy of the real Homer. Unitarians take a variety of psychological lines, of which the most popular but surely the least convincing is that Odysseus is so trained to concealment and the need to be the one in control of situations that he's locked into the habit of staging recognition scenes on his own terms. Others suggest, more attractively, that what he's really up to here is easing the old man out of his isolation and depression; but it still seems a funny way to do it. Others again cop out entirely by arguing that Homer has a really great idea for one last big recognition test and isn't going to miss the chance simply because there's no good reason for one.

Here's my answer, for what it's worth: Odysseus is testing Laertes' *state of mind*, as part of the preparation for what he may or may not already know will be part of the climactic showdown with the suitors' kin. He's been told a lot about the old man's fragility, and his first sight hasn't been encouraging. He's already discarded any hope that Laertes might recognise him on sight, and must wonder whether he'll even be rational. One way or another, Odysseus needs to know what he's dealing with before he involves Laertes in the final phase of his plan.

3. The Sicanian tale

And so Odysseus presents Laertes with the final variation on his fictional autobiography: the one "Cretan" tale in which he isn't actually from Crete at all, but from a corner of the Greek Mediterranean that was more part of Homer's world than that of the Mycenaean past. Herodotus tells us that Sicania was the old name for what in his day was called Sicily, though it wasn't colonised by Greeks till close to Homer's own time. (Perhaps he's taken the idea from a sight of Laertes' old Sicilian slave woman back at the cottage.)

(a) Odysseus' speech (as "Epiritus")

The speech that now unfolds is charged with concealed emotion. Adopting the identity of a sympathetic stranger on a mission, Odysseus gradually builds up his story in a series of careful stages, moving from Laertes' present situation to the memory of his missing son.

(i) greeting

He begins by establishing his friendly credentials, showing a practised eye for a well-kept orchard, and a sympathetic courtesy towards someone he pretends to mistake for a slave, and a badly neglected one at that. The lines on the old man's unslavelike physique, and how his master ought to be treating him, convey Odysseus' own dismay at his father's condition. All this recalls his early conversation with Eumaeus in book 14, but he now switches to the role he played for Athene in book 13 of a lost voyager trying to find out where he's landed. In a nice passing touch, he claims to have had one taste of the locals' discourtesy already on his way.

(ii) Odysseus in Alybas

Now he plays his trump card: might the old man have heard of the old guest-friend he's seeking, the son of someone called Laertes of Ithaca? He's anxious to learn if his friend ever made it home, and conjures up a vanished world of lavish guest-gifts which he must know will stir the old man's memories of happier times.

(b) Laertes' reply

Laertes responds to the implicit comparison between the old days and the present regime in Ithaca, and reveals that the man to whom he showed such doomed generosity was his own son, who never did come home. In another reminder of this book's running theme of unburial and the role of kin in funerary ritual, he dwells at length on the devastating consequences of this lack of closure for the family left behind. But all this means that the stranger may be the last to have seen the old man's son alive, and he begins to question him closely about the timing and geography. Perhaps as Odysseus intends, he's already starting to come out of his

shell: to show an alert curiosity not just about Odysseus, but about the stranger and how he came there.

(c) Epiritus' response

Odysseus rattles off a string of made-up names, including one for himself – which hasn't stopped scholars ancient and modern from trying to divine their significance, or to place the fictitious "Alybas" on the map. He answers Laertes' questions succinctly: he's arrived in his own ship, but lost his way in a storm, which is why he wasn't sure whether he'd landed in Ithaca; and it was four years ago that he saw off Odysseus, more than long enough for him to have come home if he ever was going to. This conclusion is driven home by the poignant final image of two old-style princes hoping to meet again in a future that will never arrive, as the world in which they met changes to something uglier and sadder.

4. The recognition

Even this much has tested the control of both men to its limit, and in a powerful release of pent-up feeling each in turn now succumbs to a flood of intense emotion which will carry the book into its final and decisive phase.

(a) Odysseus unmasks

With Laertes' recognition that the stranger's story must mean that Odysseus is lost for good, the defences of both break down. Laertes collapses like Priam on Hector's death, and Odysseus' surge of emotion is described in a strange but vivid phrase rather beautifully rendered by Shewring. As with Eurycleia's babbled account to a sleepy Penelope, it all comes out in a rush: his identity, his return home, the killing of the suitors.

And that, we finally learn, is why Odysseus is here. A reckoning is coming, and the outcome is far from certain. As the clock ticks down, Odysseus needs above all to complete this one piece of unfinished family business. As he grimly hints, there may not be another chance.

(b) the scar and the trees

Laertes, like Penelope, isn't going to accept all this without proof, and demands evidence. Odysseus begins with the scar, which were enough for Eumaeus and Philoetius; but his experience with Penelope has taught him that the deepest proofs of his identity rest in the bonds of shared memory and meaning.

It's the lines on the trees that get my vote for the single most moving passage in all of Homer. For the first time, we see Odysseus as a child in this landscape, in a golden memory of a moment with his father that's remained vivid through all the long years since, right down to the numbers and species of the trees. Now, after all the miserable lost years, they're united at last, now an old man and his middle-aged son who's seen more of the world than is good, in the same orchard he remembers from that fiercely-cherished fragment of his childhood. Brilliant.

A lovely article on this scene, by the way, is John Henderson's "The Name of the Tree: Recounting *Odyssey* xxiv 340–2", in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 117 (1997) 87–116.

(c) Laertes on the suitors' kin

Laertes, like Penelope before him, casts scepticism aside and falls into the inevitable embrace. But it's not long before the same sense of urgency takes hold of him, with the realisation that the killing of the suitors means mass retaliation. (Here and in Eupeithes' speech later, "Cephallenians" is evidently used of Odysseus' four-island kingdom generally, including Ithaca itself.)

Odysseus' response is far from encouraging, sounding as it does rather ominously close to his false reassurance to the hapless Dolon at *Iliad* 10.383. If he has a plan, we hear no hint of it, and the leisurely meal at the cottage he now proposes suggests no particular sense of urgency. It's around this point in the book that the whole texture of the narrative goes rather strange, as the pace accelerates and we start to lose sight of the kind of motivating logic we've been used to.

5. In Laertes' cottage

Back at the cottage, an interlude of deceptive pastoral tranquillity unfolds ahead of the breaking storm. The meal Odysseus ordered is ready on their return, and father, son, and grandson are united at last in what may prove their first and last such gathering.

(a) Laertes' bath and makeover

Even before the meal, Laertes' transformation continues. His self-neglect is put aside; he allows himself to be bathed, puts on fresh clothes, and is treated behind the scenes to the last of Athene's celestial makeovers. It's a startlingly different Laertes who sits down to eat with his son; even Odysseus, who's always been on the inside of this kind of transformation, is taken aback, while Laertes himself begins to take on a distinctly Nestorian quality. He starts to recall the exploits of his heroic youth, and hankers for that old strength again so he could have played a part in the previous day's action. Little does he know how soon his chance will come.

In classical times Nericus was a town on the neighbouring island of Leucas, which was connected to the mainland by an isthmus at the time of the story. But ancient texts of this passage were already confusing it with Mount Neritus or Neriton on Ithaca itself.

(b) the meal

The meal itself is briefly narrated; the main function of the scene is to give Odysseus and his team something time-consuming to do while word of the slaughter gets out back in the town. But there's one last bit of business before we leave this touching scene of rustic hospitality.

(c) Dolius and sons

Dolius and sons were mentioned at the start of the episode as the resident staff of Laertes' estate, and now they turn up in time to join in the meal. As we'll soon see, there are good plot reasons for wanting to gather the whole personnel of the estate together in the cottage; but for now the scene is simply an opportunity for a final scene of recognition with a Eurycleia-type figure from Odysseus' past. This time, no proof is necessary; recognition is immediate, as if Odysseus' identity is no longer a matter for doubt and disguise.

To Dolius' question about Penelope, Odysseus offers the same kind of oddly dismissive reassurance he gave to Laertes over the suitors' kin. We notice he says nothing about the suitors' deaths to Dolius; is he trying to avoid having to break the news of the deaths of Dolius' two black-sheep children?

C. The suitors' kin

Throughout the Laertes scene there've been reminders of the less tranquil events that will be happening back in town, and now at last the narrative catches up with the reaction to the slaughter. There's a rushed, unsatisfactory feel to this final section of the book, as though the poet is hurrying to get the last scenes over with; but the outline of events seems to be the ending planned, even if the quality of actual narrative execution is well below Homer's normal standard.

1. the word gets out

Back in town, things are moving fast. The massacre is public knowledge – we met the semi-allegorical figure of personified Rumour at *Iliad* 2.93, where she was described as the messenger of Zeus – and already the corpses are being returned to their families in Ithaca and other islands for disposal. This phase is briskly narrated, because the main interest is not the disposal of the bodies but the political fallout in Ithaca.

2. Eupeithes' call to arms

Now comes an ironic replay of the Ithacan assembly in book 2, in which this time it's the suitors' families who are laying charges against Odysseus' side. Antinous' father Eupeithes now emerges as the leader of the rebel faction, with a rabble-rousing speech charging Odysseus with wiping out two generations of their sons. Like Amphimedon to Agamemnon, but still more so, he suppresses any faintest suggestion that the suitors might have contributed

to the outcome by their own actions, let alone that the present audience could have prevented all this if they'd acted on Telemachus' complaint at the earlier assembly.

Eupeithes assumes, as perhaps Odysseus intended, that the king has fled the palace with the aim of escaping the island to asylum in a friendly mainland kingdom, which is why he proposes a lynch mob to settle the score with the fugitives now rather than waiting for cooler tempers and counsels to prevail. This rush to judgment will be his undoing: a further reminder that in the *Odyssey*'s world the heroic impulse to instant retaliation isn't always the proper strategy.

3. Medon and Phemius

The arrival of Medon and Phemius comes as a shock, because it was assumed that they were slaughtered with the suitors. Now here's the living evidence that Odysseus was discriminating in his revenge, and it's compounded when Medon speaks up openly for Odysseus. In particular, Medon saw what the suitors so disastrously failed to: the evidence of Athene's presence in Odysseus' support. Nobody can say that Eupeithes hasn't been warned: a familiar pattern in the *Odyssey*'s moral plotting, now being activated for one last and decisive time.

4. Halitherses

But the most stinging analysis comes from old Halitherses, whose predictions of just this outcome were scoffed at by Eurymachus in the earlier assembly (2.177ff.). It's Halitherses who points out the blunt truth that they could have stopped all this, and chose not to. Halitherses and Mentor warned them at the time, and they've been proved right. Now, his warning is to stand down, or trigger still further disaster on themselves. If they disregard his advice a second time, they'll have only themselves to blame.

5. to arms

The result is a split, but Eupeithes' party are in the majority: a classic, and fatal, surrender to the old warrior impulse to strike first and reason later. To mark this moment of folly, the narrator steps in with a heavily ironic piece of foreshadowing: Eupeithes has just sealed his own fate, which will mirror that of his son as first to die as the result of his own folly.

D. Zeus and Athene

Now we cut to Olympus for the briefest of divine councils, as Zeus and Athene plot the outcome of this final clash. It's an important part of the divine machinery of both poems that the ending is endorsed as the will of Zeus; but because the *Odyssey*'s been so sparing with Olympian scenes we've had no direct sight of Zeus since his short scene with Poseidon at the start of book 13.

Like Zeus's announcement at *Iliad* 15.59–77, it's a vision which takes us beyond the end of the poem to the long-term consequences and sequel. Zeus makes clear that his will is for a formal reconciliation between Odysseus and his enemies today, whose long-term consequences will be for Odysseus to reign happily ever after, and for the wounds left by the massacre to be gradually healed and forgotten as Ithaca returns to good order and prosperity. It's a great ending, if it can be delivered – indeed, arguably the most influential ending in literary history. But it's going to up to Athene to produce that result from the ominous clash now looming down on earth.

E. The last battle

"Our poet, who has proceeded hitherto with dignified step at moderate pace, suddenly indulges in a moment of leap-frog followed by a gallop for the goal … the story rushes spasmodically and deviously to its lame conclusion." So Denys Page in *The Homeric Odyssey*, an entertaining and thoroughly meretricious presentation of the ultra-analyst case; and it's got to be admitted the pacing of this final sequence is a bit frantic. But whatever the oddities of narrative technique, something like this series of events is needed to wrap up the

story in the way we've been led to expect; and in fact one aspect of the ending was a hugely influential one in ancient literature, as we'll see in a moment.

1. the arming

There's a bit of a spaghetti western feeling about the scene in the cottage, where we rejoin Odysseus' band as they finish a last meal before the posse arrives to finish them off. The spare, rapid narrative style of these final scenes leaves motives very elusive and unstated, though that in itself becomes part of the effect. It's hard, for example, not to read the matter-of-factness with which Odysseus greets the arrival of the death squad as a grim calm in the face of probable death. Surely he can't be expecting what now happens?

Dolius and his six sons now arm alongside Laertes and the original four, bringing the band of defenders up to an impressive dozen – enough to match or outnumber the fathers of the twelve Ithacan suitors. We see now why so much emphasis was put on getting everyone together at the cottage.

2. Athene returns as Mentor

Athene resumes her Mentor disguise one last time. Both Telemachus and Odysseus have encountered her in this shape now, and Odysseus at least clearly recognises her at once.

3. four little speeches

The little exchange of speeches between the four principals here is unlike anything else in Homer, and only goes to illustrate how rich and multi-layered are the exchanges of long, complex speeches we generally meet with. But though they're little more than speech balloons, they do at least give a quick roundup of the attitudes and interaction of the four as the confrontation approaches.

(a) Odysseus

Odysseus now addresses Telemachus as a warrior who's already proven himself a worthy son of his father, and now faces his first experience of a conventional battle in the open.

(b) Telemachus

Telemachus takes this to heart, promising to live up to the heritage of which Odysseus has just reminded him.

(c) Laertes

This in turn bring Laertes in, the third and founding generation of this dynasty of warriors. If the line of Arceisius is to be wiped out today, at least it'll go out like a line of heroes.

(d) Athene

But it's Athene who prompts the actual demonstration of this heroic heritage from the most unlikely member of the trio, Laertes himself.

4. the battle

The battle is over almost before it's begun, which again one can see as either a sign of narrative exhaustion or incompetence or as part of the effect; perhaps both. It's in nobody's interests for this to turn into another massacre; far more effective if the feud is brought to a sudden and permanent halt before anyone but the obviously guilty individual has been punished.

(a) Laertes kills Eupeithes

Athene's command, and her Iliadic infusion of strength into her favourite, complete Laertes' rejuvenation, as his spear takes out Eupeithes himself with an Iliadic crash-line to mark his downfall. The irony of this doesn't need to be stated: father takes out father before he's realised what's hit him, just as son took out son at the same point of the previous clash.

(b) Odysseus and Telemachus attack

Now the other two generations join in, attacking the now-leaderless posse at close quarters. This is a potentially uncomfortable moment, as Odysseus and his heir launch themselves against their own subjects, so it's not surprising that Athene steps in when she does.

(c) Athene calls a halt

This bold recourse to the direct intervention of a god at a point of deadlock in the mortal action had a huge legacy in later Greek literature. The endings of Euripides' tragedies in particular became notorious for their device of moving the action into an irresoluble confrontation before suddenly bringing a god on to tell all the characters to pack it in and go home. Such scenes became known as a "god from the machine", Latinised as *deus ex machina* – after the mechanical crane device that was used for divine appearances at the ends of plays. Aristotle thought this was pretty crummy plotting, sparking off a derogatory use of the term *deus ex machina* to imply an arbitrary resolution imposed from outside the logic of events. But it was clearly a popular device in its day, and the inspiration for this pattern of ending clearly came from Athene's dramatic intervention here, at a point where all mortal means of conflict resolution have been exhausted.

Athene doesn't actually appear to the fighters, but rather cries out in her own voice while retaining the physical form of Mentor. It's made clear that Odysseus' band have the upper hand at this point, and that Athene's intervention spares the attackers rather than them. And sure enough, it's Odysseus who recovers first from the shock of her manifestation, and begins to pursue the mob as it breaks and flees for the town.

(d) Zeus checks Odysseus

Zeus is forced to intervene directly, with a thunderbolt signalling his displeasure at this latest turn. The fact that it lands by Athene rather than Odysseus probably indicates that he's prompting her forcefully to assert herself.

5. "Mentor" seals the truce

It's Athene who now interprets the will of Zeus directly to Odysseus, and uses her guise of Mentor to broker the formal truce that's now sworn between Odysseus and his enemies. The poem ends, as it began, with Athene and the will of Zeus; but it's worth mentioning that the final lines of the poem have been swapped round in Shewring's translation: the last words are "looking like Mentor in form and voice", a recurrent line whose last word takes on special significance here as the goddess reverts to the voice, as well as the appearance, of Odysseus' loyal companion.

THE END

So the *Odyssey* ends, in a sequence that for all its peculiarities of pace and motive remains one of the most influentially *final* endings in all literature – so much so that it became literally impossible to follow, and pretty much established itself as the final chapter in the cycle of Greek myth, the last tale of the age of heroes. There's an appropriateness to this, as it's one of the things the *Odyssey* itself has all been about: the passing of the age of heroes in the aftermath of their greatest achievement, the war at Troy, and the transition to a world already starting to be recognisable in the audience's own. Odysseus himself has negotiated this transition successfully, as so many of his heroic comrades failed to; and in the archaic Greek world of the city-state that was taking shape in the eight-century renaissance that produced Homer's poems, the hero's versatile intellect and delight in the power of words were values that would come to define his culture, long after the tale of Odysseus and Penelope had passed into the memory of bards.

Primary chronology of *Odyssey* (after Stanford 1959: x-xii)

Days	No.	Events	Reference	Lines
1	1	Council of gods; Athene to Ithaca	I.11-444	434
2	1	Ithacan assembly; Telemachus sails (night)	II.1-434	434
3	1	Telemachus in Pylos	III.1-403	403
4	1	Telemachus to Pherae	III.404-90	87
5	1	Telemachus to Sparta	III.491-IV.305	312
6	1	Menelaus' story; ambush set	IV.306-847	542
7	1	Council of gods; Hermes to Calypso	V.1-227	227
8-11	4	Odysseus builds boat	V.228-62	35
12-28	17	Odysseus at sea	V.263-78	16
29	1	Posidon's storm	V.279-387	9
30-31	2	Odysseus drifts to Scheria	V.388-493	106
32	1	Odysseus to Alcinous	VI.1-VII.347	678
33	1	Phaeacian entertainments; Odysseus' story	VIII.1-XIII.17	2836
34	1	Odysseus to Ithaca	XIII.18-92	75
35	1	Odysseus to Eumaeus; Telemachus to Pherae	XIII.93-XV.188	1069
36	1	Telemachus to Ithaca	XV.189-494	306
37	1	Telemachus to Eumaeus	XV.495-XVI.481	544
38	1	Odysseus to palace	XVII.1-XX.90	1728
39	1	Massacre of suitors	XX.91-XXIII.346	1585
40	1	Laertes; suitors' kin	XXIII.347-XXIV.548	574
				12000

Secondary chronology of *Odyssey* IX-XII

Duration	Odysseus	Reference
?	Troy to Ismarus	IX.39-61
?	Ismarus to storm landfall	IX.62-73
2 days	waiting out storm	IX.74-5
?	to Malea & Cythera	IX.76-81
9 days	Cythera to Lotophagi	IX.82-104
?	Lotophagi to Cyclopes	IX.105-51
1 day	feasting on island	IX.152-69
3 days	in Polyphemus' cave	IX.170-59
?	Cyclopes to Aeolia	IX.560-X.1
1 month	with Aeolus	X.1-27
10 days	Aeolia to Ithaca	X.28-46
?	Ithaca to Aeolia	X.47-79
7 days	Aeolia to Laestrygonia	X.80-132
?	Laestrygonia to Aeaea	X.133-141
3 days	Aeaea: mourning & feasting	X.142-186
1 day	confrontation with Circe	X.187-466
1 year	guesting with Circe	X.467-540
?	Aeaea to underworld	X.541-XI.22
1 "day"	in underworld	XI.23-638
?	return to Aeaea	XI.639-XII.7
1 day	with Circe	XII.8-141
1 day?	Sirens, Scylla, Thrinacia	XII.142-315
1 month	on Thrinacia	XII.315-398
1 day	Thrinacia to storm	XII.399-425
1 day	shipwreck to Charybdis	XII.426-446
10 days	Charybdis to Ogygia	XII.447-50