

The Muses' playground. *Odyssey* lecture 2: The Returns

A) Return songs in early Greek hexameter poetry: see epic cycle "Nostoi" ("returns"), mostly lost

1) "Amymone had a son Nauplius by Poseidon. This Nauplius lived to a great age, and sailing the sea he used by beacon lights to lure to death such as he fell in with. It came to pass, therefore, that he himself died that very death. But before his death he married a wife; according to the tragic poets, she was Clymene, daughter of Catreus; but according to the author of *The Returns*, she was Philyra; and according to Cercops she was Hesione." (Apollodorus *Bibl.* 2.1.5)

analysis approach? (e.g. Heubeck, West, Hainsworth: Books 3 and 4 incorporate with modifications a theme already familiar in an independent poem)

B) popularity (suitors; Menelaus; Aeolus; Phaeacians; Penelope (*Od.* 23.310-41); the *Odyssey*)

2) "He [Telemachus] found them [the suitors] listening in silence to a song which their admirable bard was singing to them about the Achaeans' return from Troy and the disasters that Pallas Athene made them suffer" (*Od.* 1.325-7)

3) "I was able to satisfy his [Aeolus'] thirst for news by giving him a full account of the Argive expedition to Ilium and the Achaeans' start for home" (Odysseus, *Od.* 10.14-16)

4) "Finally he came to his disastrous voyage to Scherie, where the kind-hearted Phaeacians had treated him like a god and sent him home by ship with generous gifts of bronze ware and of gold, and woven stuffs" (*Od.* 23.338-41, Odysseus telling return for the third time)

Metanarrative reading? *Odyssey* itself is the most up-to-date return poem and hence most popular

5) "We cannot blame Phemius if he chooses to sing of the Danaans' tragic fate, for it is always the latest song that an audience applauds the most" (Telemachus, *Od.* 1.351-2)

C) successful/failed returns within the poem

contrasts: Greater Ajax and Achilles (met in underworld) have no return. Odysseus superior

6) "For in that case the whole Achaean nation would have joined in building him a mound, and he would have left a great name for his son to inherit" (Telemachus wishing Odysseus had died at Troy, *Od.* 1.239-40)

7) "Put me on earth again, and I would rather be a serf in the house of some landless man, with little enough for himself to live on, than king of all these dead men that have done with life" (Achilles, *Od.* 11.489-91)

shipwrecked Greeks: wrath of Athena (Greeks failed to punish lesser Ajax properly for attempted rape of Cassandra in Athena's temple)

8) "It appears that in setting out they gave offence to Athene, who raised a gale of wind and heavy seas against them" (Hermes to Calypso, *Od.* 5.108-9); cf. *Od.* 1 (Phemius sings to suitors)

Lesser Ajax: wrath of Athena and Poseidon

9) "Aias, to take him first, was wrecked in his long-oared galleys by Poseidon, who drove him onto the great cliff of Gyrae and then rescued him from the surf. In fact, he would have evaded his doom, in spite of Athene's enmity, if in his blind folly he had not talked so big, boasting that he had escaped from the hungry jaws of the sea in defiance of the gods. His loud-voiced blasphemy came to the ears of Poseidon..." (fate of lesser Ajax, *Od.* 4.499-504)

Odysseus' companions

The myth of Agamemnon who dies on return: resonances (Agamemnon/ Odysseus; Clytemnestra/Penelope; Orestes/Telemachus; Aegisthus/Suitors); tailoring myth (omissions; adaptations)

story as encouragement to Telemachus

10) "For Orestes, as Hermes pointed out, was bound to avenge Agamemnon as soon as he grew up and thought with longing of his home" (*Od.* 1.42-3): Hermes warns Aegisthus: cf. warnings given to Odysseus' companions and suitors

11) "Have you not heard what a name Prince Orestes made for himself in the world when he killed the traitor Aegisthus for murdering his noble father? You, my friend - and what a tall and splendid fellow you have grown!- must be as brave as Orestes. Then future generations will sing your praises" (Athena/Mentes *Od.* 1.298-302): encouraging Telemachus

12) "As for Agamemnon, I know your home is far from his, yet even you must have heard how he had no sooner got back than he fell a wretched victim to Aegisthus' plot. And a grim reckoning there was for Aegisthus! Which shows what a good thing it is, when a man dies, for a son to survive him, as Orestes survived to pay the murderer out and kill that snake in the grass, Aegisthus, who had killed his noble father. You, my friend ... must be as brave as Orestes" (Nestor encouraging Telemachus, *Od.* 3.193-200)

13) "And for myself I would rather live through untold hardships to get home in the end and see that happy day, than come back and die at my own hearth, as Agamemnon died by the treachery of Aegisthus and his wife" (Athena/Mentor, *Od.* 3.232-5)

warning to Odysseus > Odysseus extra cautious

14) "'Let this be a lesson to you also', replied Agamemnon. 'Never be too gentle even with your wife, nor show her all that is in your mind. Reveal a little of your counsel to her ... Not that your wife, Odysseus, will ever murder you'" (Agamemnon to Odysseus, *Od.* 11.441-4)

15) "It seems to me that I should have come to the same miserable end as King Agamemnon directly I set foot in my home, if you, goddess, had not made all this clear to me." (*Od.* 13.383-5)

vindication of Penelope

16) "What a contrast with Clytaemnestra and the infamy she sank to when she killed her wedded lord! Her name will be cursed whenever she is sung. She has branded all her sex, with every honest woman in it." (Agamemnon, *Od.* 24.199-202)

Nestor: return but lack of glory; death of son

17) "It was a happy coincidence for the poet that Nestor, whose tendency to reminiscence is well established in the *Iliad*, was geographically the most accessible of the returned heroes." (Heubeck,

West, Hainsworth, 1988: 54)

18) “There too Antilochus, my own dear son, as good as he was brave, the fastest runner of them all, and what a fighter too!” (*Od.* 3.111-12, of Nestor's son who died at Troy)

Menelaus: some similarities in return journey (e.g. long wanderings, driven off course by storm, detained on island, consults clairvoyant)

BUT Menelaus has less glory; no heir (Megapenthes by slave woman); sorrow

19) “So it gives me little pleasure to call myself the lord of all this wealth, since ... I have had much sorrow in my life and have already seen the ruin of one lovely dwelling full of precious things. How happy could I be ... with even a third of my former estate, if those friends of mine were still alive who died long ago on the broad plains of Troy” (Menelaus, *Od.* 4.93-8)

Menelaus' relationship with Helen; Helen foil to Penelope

20) “...I was already longing to go home again. I had suffered a change of heart, repenting the infatuation with which Aphrodite blinded me when she lured me to Troy from my own dear country” (Helen, *Od.* 4.60-62)

21) “though Argive Helen would never have slept in her foreign lover's arms had she known that her countrymen would go to war to fetch her back to Argos, even she, the daughter of Zeus, was tempted by the goddess and fell, though the idea of such madness had never entered her head till that moment” (Penelope worried she might be seduced, *Od.* 23.218-224)

stories of Helen (spying mission) and Menelaus (wooden horse)

22) “However, the time came when he let me bathe and anoint him, and, at last, after I had given him some clothes to wear and solemnly sworn that I would not disclose his name to the Trojans before he returned to the huts by the ships, he gave me full details of the Achaeans' plans” (Helen, of Odysseus, *Od.* 4.252-6)

23) “you challenged all the Argive captains in turn, altering your voice, as you called out the name of each, to mimic that man's wife.” (Menelaus addressing Helen, *Od.* 4.278-9)

24) “subtle acts of self-justification, self-explanation, and mutual recrimination” (Olson)

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