

The Muses' Playground: *Odyssey* lecture 3. Stories, lies, and audiences

A) rhetorical skill of Odysseus

- plausible and realistic lies

1) "Hateful to me as the gates of Hades is that one who hides one thing in his heart and says another" (Achilles, *Iliad* 9.312-3)

2) "for I loathe like Hell's Gates the man who is driven by poverty to lie." (Odysseus to Eumaeus, *Od.* 14.156)

3) "He spoke and made the many falsehoods of his tale seem like the truth" (*Od.* 19.203)

B) Examples:

- Apologue of Odysseus to Phaeacians (9.1-13.187) (2140 lines): relating his experiences, sometimes with hindsight

- suspect? Consider narrator's self-presentation and tailoring to audience?

- Some aspects verifiable (e.g. 2.19-20 narrator tells us of Antiphus)

- Odysseus slanting material: exculpating himself (loss of men)

4) "In all I have gone through as I made my way across the seas, I have never had to witness a more pitiable sight than that" (*Od.* 12.258-9, *Od.* of companions eaten by Scylla)

- Tailoring to audience: Phaeacians: Phaeacian's enjoyment of story-telling (cf. Demodocus); fairy-tale side (receptive to exotic tales); love of sailing; hatred of Cyclops; importance of Arete (stories of females); stories encourage gifts

5) "These Phaeacians had once lived in the broad lands of Hypereie, and been neighbours to the Cyclopes, a quarrelsome people, who took advantage of their greater strength to plague them" (*Od.* 6.4-6)

6) "Indeed, I could not tell you the tales, nor even give you the names, of all the great men's wives and daughters whom I saw, for before I had done the livelong night would have slipped away" (Odysseus, *Od.* 11.328-31: strategic pause)

7) "The night is still long, too long for reckoning; and the time has not yet come for us to seek our sleeping-quarters. Tell me more of your marvellous doings. I could hold out till the blessed dawn, if only you could bring yourself to stay in this hall and continue the tale of your misfortunes" (*Od.* 11.373-6)

- giving Phaeacians a message: not a suitor; guiding them to good hospitality

8) "never for a moment did they win my heart" (Odysseus, *Od.* 9.33, of Circe and Calypso)

- Cyclops: rules broken; perversion of guest-gifts (to be eaten last; boulder) and escort (calls on Poseidon); cf. other tales: Aeolus; Circe; lotus-eaters; Laestrygonians; Calypso (over-zealous host)

9) "Of all his company I will eat Nobody last, and the rest before him. That shall be your gift"

(Polyphemus to Odysseus, *Od.* 9.369-70)

10) “But come here, Odysseus, so that I may make you some friendly gifts and prevail on the great Earthshaker to see you safely home” (*Od.* 9.517-18)

11) “what they did was to give them some lotus to taste, and as soon as each had eaten the honeyed fruit of the plant, all thoughts of reporting to us or escaping were banished from his mind” (*Od.* 9.93-5)

- narrative to Penelope (23.306-43): invites speculation

12) “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’ lying tales x5 (13.253-86; 14.192-359; 17.415-44; 19.165-202 + 221-48 + 268-9; 24.244-79 + 303-14)

- mostly sad; mix of lies and truth; generally successful

- tale to disguised Athena:

13) “And now I have come here myself with all these goods of mine, leaving the other half of my fortune to my children. For I had to take to my heels. I killed Idomeneus’ son..” (*Od.* 13.257-9)

14) “He answered... not with the truth. It had been on the tip of his tongue but loyal as ever to his own crafty nature he contrived to keep it back” (*Od.* 13.254-5)

15) “And so my stubborn friend, Odysseus the arch-deceiver with his craving for intrigue, does not propose to drop his sharp practice and the lying tales that he loves from the bottom of his heart” (Athena, *Od.* 13.291-5)

- tailoring to circumstances: e.g. Athena armed: discourage attack and encourage help

16) “He had tried to fleece me of all the spoil I had won at Troy” (*Od.* 13.258, of Orsilochus “Ambush-rouser”)

- tale to Eumaeus (who had been sold into slavery by Phoenicians; servant of Odysseus)

17) “my mother was a concubine he bought” (*Od.* 14.202-3)

18) “But in the course of the eighth, I fell in with a rascally Phoenician, a thieving knave who had already done a deal of mischief in the world.” (*Od.* 14. 287-289)

- tale to (rich) suitor Antinous:

19) “Time was when I too was one of the lucky ones with a rich house to live in, and I have often given alms to such a vagabond as myself, no matter who he was or what he came for” (*Od.* 17. 419-21)

- tale to Penelope (Cretan Aithon, brother of Idomeneus): more on Odysseus; Eumaeus had already told Penelope that the stranger was a Cretan and had news of Odysseus from Thesprotia

C) how bad is lying? rewards for good stories

20) “don’t try to wheedle your way to my heart with any falsehoods” (Eumaeus to Odysseus, *Od.* 14.387)

21) “Beggars in need of creature comforts find lying easy, and to tell a true tale is the last thing they wish” (*Od.* 14.124-5)

22) “Old man ... that is an excellent story you have told us. Every word went home, and you shall have your reward. Tonight you shan’t want for clothing..” (*Od.* 14.508-10)

▪ cf. poetry: made-up elements/ “true”; cf. de Jong on *Od.* 8.487-91 (i) lying tales; (ii) rumours based on hearsay, stories which may be true but can’t be vouched for by the speaker; (iii) stories of old which everyone knows from hearsay (‘myths’); (iv) narratives recounted by eye-witnesses; (v) songs by professional singers: eyewitnesses through association with the Muses

23) “For it is remarkable how well you sing the tale of the Achaeans’ fate and of all their achievements, sufferings, and toils. It is almost as if you had been with them yourself or heard the story from one who was” (Odysseus to Demodocus, *Od.* 8.489-91)

24) “The word ‘truth’ does not imply historical accuracy, but rather a vivid evocation” (de Jong)

25) “To have that man by me at home with his enchanting tales was like sitting with one’s eyes fixed on some bard inspired to melt one’s heart with song, so that nothing matters but to listen as long as he will sing” (*Od.* 17.518-21)

26) “... we are far from regarding you as one of those imposters and humbugs whom this dark world brings forth in such profusion to spin their lying yarns which nobody can test.” (Odysseus, *Od.* 11.363-6)

Bibliography

de Jong, I. 2002. *A Narratological Commentary to the Odyssey* (Cambridge)

Doherty, L. E. 1991. ‘The Internal and Implied Audiences of *Odyssey* 11’, *Arethusa* 24: 145-76

Most, G. W. 1989. ‘Self-disclosure and self-sufficiency in Greek culture’, *JHS* 109 (1989), 114-33

Most, G. W. 1989. ‘The Structure and Function of Odysseus’ *Apologoi*’ *TAPA* 119: 15-30.

Parry, H. 1994. ‘The Apologos of Odysseus: Lies, all Lies?’ *Phoenix* 48: 1-20

Trahman, C. R. 1952. ‘Odysseus’ lies (*Odyssey*, Book 13-19)’, *Phoenix* 6