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A Commentary on Homer's "Odyssey", Vol. I: Introduction and Books I-VIII by Alfred Heubeck; Stephanie West; J. B. Hainsworth

Review by: Norman Austin

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The Wedding Text in Homer's *Odyssey*

NORMAN AUSTIN

A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, vol. I: Introduction and Books i–viii, Alfred Heubeck, Stephanie West, J. B. Hainsworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 408 pages, \$89.00.

IT is a small but telling sign of the shift in Homeric studies that a commentary on the *Odyssey* could be a collaborative project by three scholars of differing views on certain fundamental problems of the composition of the poem. Could a consortium of scholars have produced such a commentary a hundred years ago, when every Homerist thought he alone could decipher the authentic poem beneath the many-layered palimpsest? This Oxford *Commentary* represents, to some degree, the new catholicism in Homeric studies, which we can attribute in large measure to the influence of Parry and Lord.

The three scholars contributing to this *Commentary*, holding to no single line of orthodoxy, have made a diplomatic agreement to ignore their differences: the *Odyssey* is treated now as a written text, now as an oral composition. The shifts in focus may be unsettling for a novice, who looks to a commentary for the authorized interpretation. Yet the diverse perspectives represented here are truer to the current state of affairs in Homeric scholarship at large and even in individual readers' interpretations. Homerists have grown more cautious, aware that today's plausible hypothesis may be rendered obsolete by some new finding tomorrow. Even Unitarians are sometimes Analysts, and vice versa.

The collaborators on this project are all loosely "Unitarian," if the term still holds any meaning in Homeric studies since Milman Parry. They accept, that is, the essential unity of the *Odyssey*, though they do not assume a single poet as the composer of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Heubeck and West specifically take the *Odyssey* to be a later composition than the *Iliad*; "scholarly convention favors a generation" between the two, West concludes (p. 34). Such a theory, which posits a specific date for the composition of the *Iliad* and another date, equally specific, a generation later, for the composition of the *Odyssey*,

plays havoc with Parry's theory of a centuries-long tradition of purely oral composition. Heubeck and West resolve the dilemma by supposing that the final, and most significant, influence in the shaping of the *Odyssey* was the art of writing itself. In their view our present *Odyssey* would have been beyond the capabilities of strictly oral bards; only the technological advantages of writing could have made such a monumental poem possible. Hainsworth, however, posits an intermediate stage between the improvisational period of the oral bards and the written text, when the text was stabilized by the rhapsodes, who then transmitted it in a memorized form.

Each of the scholars provides an introductory essay. Heubeck reviews the history of the Homeric Question of the past hundred years, particularly as it relates to the composition of the *Odyssey*. Hainsworth provides a brief but informative review of the peculiarities of the Homeric dialect and their metrical implications for the oral-formula theory. He calls this dialect *Kunst-sprache*, by which he means not the consciously artificial dialect of later imitators, like Apollonius or Nonnus. Rather, he emphasizes the special nature of Homer's Ionic Greek, which could embrace words and forms from other dialects (notably Aeolic), retain archaisms side by side with neologisms, and generate new forms as suggested by its own formulaic patterns. West gives a clear, useful summary of the ancient evidence for the transmission of the text.

The *Commentary* proper is divided into two parts, West giving the commentary on *Odyssey* 1–4, and Hainsworth covering Books 5–8. Both scholars, sympathetic to Parry's work, are not overly troubled by inconsistencies in the narrative. West even enjoys them: they are "easy to detect and censure," she writes, but we should rather admire the poem's "hospitable attitude towards incompatible elements" and the skill that "allows us at times to benefit from alternative narrative possibilities rather than feel the need to defend or explain away discrepancies" (p. 62).

No commentary on a work as complex, ambitious, and problematic as Homer's *Odyssey* could hope to satisfy all scholars. West and Hainsworth have taken the middle road, modest and undogmatic in presenting their own views, while acknowledging the force of the arguments by Analysts and Unitarians alike. They have given us a new guidebook to the *Odyssey* marked by

good sense and the exactitude for which British scholarship is renowned. Such a volume is not for quick perusal but calls for repeated visits and slow meanderings. Stocked with information on the most disparate topics and with copious citations of modern scholarship, this *Commentary* will be a valuable aid for readers of the *Odyssey* for years to come.

And yet, on this side of the Atlantic, this *Commentary* has an almost old-fashioned ring. Each age reads its own Homer; so too does each nation. While this *Commentary* is attentive throughout to the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition, the studies of both oral traditions and the written text that have influenced literary criticism since Parry are absent (mercifully, some might say) from their discussions.

We might locate the difference between British and American readings of Homer in their orientation toward “the text” and “the tradition,” terms once thought to be self-evident. This *Commentary* sharply demarcates *text* from *tradition*, whereas the distinction between them is more blurred on this continent. Witness, for example, Pucci’s *Odysseus Polytropos* (Cornell, 1987), and Nagy’s *The Best of the Achaeans* (Johns Hopkins, 1979). For Pucci Homer is, beyond all considerations of oral composition, a text, or two texts (at least) reading and reflecting each other. For Nagy Homer is all tradition, and even to speak of the text is anachronism. The two scholars would seem diametrically opposed yet they have more in common than appears at first sight. Pucci’s “text” is much more fluid than the text we associate with the written word, and Nagy’s “tradition” is so conservative as to be itself a text, though a text without an author. Or rather, tradition itself is the author: Nagy refers to the Homeric poems as “the culmination of perhaps a thousand years of performance-audience interaction.”¹ Pucci would seem more sympathetic to the idea of an individual author yet, given his concept of the fluidity of the texts reading each other, it would be difficult to locate any one moment when the individual poet, Homer himself, emerged from the collective tradition.

For the scholars of this *Commentary* matters are more simple. A text can exist only in writing, while oral tradition for them represents the fluid, the amorphous, the spontaneous. They accept unchallenged Parry’s hypothesis that oral composition = free improvisation. Thus for Heubeck oral composition is inadequate to explain a poem like the *Odyssey*. “Free impro-

visation," he writes (p. 11), "plays only the smallest part" in the complex structuring of the *Odyssey*. The "network of references to future or past events . . . parallelisms, climaxes, reversals: all these bind each of the poems together into a harmonious and balanced structure, in which each episode and scene has its proper place, in which nothing can change places and nothing can be added or left out" (p. 12). Such structuring is for Heubeck the signature of a literate poet: "the strength of the Homeric poets lies in skilful composition, that of the oral bards in improvisation. The creations of oral singers are always new, as chance and the immediate situation dictate; their songs are for the moment and ephemeral. But there is nothing ephemeral about the Homeric epics; they are meant to be permanent and permanently valid" (p. 12).

Heubeck's assumption that oral composition = improvisation, while writing entails "planning and careful arrangement . . . mental effort and detailed polishing" (p. 12), is shared, in varying degrees, by West and Hainsworth. Though Hainsworth allows for an intermediary memorized text between the improvisational origins and the written poem, he too, in treating Homeric repetitions, reverts to reading the *Odyssey* as the product of sheer improvisation.

The hypothesis sounds plausible: the art of writing allows for countless erasures and revisions, and the final document is surely more permanent than the random medleys of an oral culture. But what is our evidence that oral cultures are indifferent to continuity and permanence? Why should only writers have the capacity to shape and polish their compositions, while bards without access to pen and papyrus must be blown to and fro by every passing whim? Even granting that instability and happenstance characterize the ballads of the guslars whom Parry and Lord recorded (a moot point), are we justified to take all poetic compositions within a purely oral culture as only improvisation?

The history of Greek literature after Homer sounds a cautionary note. The Ionian philosophers emerged after a convenient and efficient system of writing had become well-established; several of them wrote books, if we accept the doxographical tradition, and some, like Xenophanes and Heraclitus, were openly contemptuous of the foolish gossip of the epic tradition. Yet where are their books now? Where is Anaximander's map or his

celestial sphere? Homer, obsolete though he was, still stands complete while the moderns — Anaximander, Heraclitus, Xenophanes — lie in shards. Perhaps it was not the art of writing that made Homer monumental, but rather writing promised a new means of survival for what had already been accorded monumental status.

The assumption is so obvious that it scarcely warrants a second thought, that the Homeric poems must have grown slowly from a motley tradition of fable, legend, and folktale, until a master poet synthesized the material into cohesive poems worthy to be called epics. The master poet — Homer — we assume must have emerged at the very end of the tradition, to impose order on the chaos characteristic of the poetic products of oral cultures. By common consent we date him in the Geometric period (7th or 8th centuries), but never to the immediate post-Mycenean period. Yet one of the most striking features of Homeric verse is its conservatism.

Page's study of the Catalogue of Ships and the Catalogue of the Trojans and their allies in *Iliad* 2 deals a serious blow to the idea of free improvisation.² Archaeology now inclines us to believe that the two Catalogues are, indeed, texts accurately transmitted from the Bronze Age. Given the use of writing among the Myceneans and their obsession with inventories, the Catalogues may well derive from written records. In any case, they must have been given, in the Bronze Age itself, the privileged status we associate with written records. How else are we to account for the disparity between the geopolitical knowledge of Anatolia as expressed in the Trojan Catalogue and the actual conditions prevailing in Anatolia in the Geometric period, when the poems are assumed to have been composed?

If the two Catalogues were given privileged status by the Myceneans exiled to Anatolia, as documenting their history before the diaspora, what else might have been similarly privileged? Given the importance of the copper trade in the Mycenaean age, the economics of war, and the pride of the Myceneans in their bronze equipment, the alliance (at *Iliad* 11.19–23) between Agamemnon and Kinyras, king of Cyprus, sounds more like history than poetic fancy. The breastplate, with its many metals and enamelled serpents, which Kinyras contributed to Agamemnon's war chest ("as a favor," when he heard the reason for the Trojan expedition) may be poetic embellishment. But

perhaps not. If the boar's tusk helmet of *Iliad* X could survive centuries of oral poetry, could a tradition with such reverence for history not also preserve the piece of armor that marked the political alliance between the king of Mycenae and the king who held the copper monopoly in the Mediterranean?

Page, in discussing the Catalogue of Ships, demonstrated also its divergence from the knowledge of mainland Greece as shown in the rest of the *Iliad*. We can accept a gradual narrative shift away from the historical conditions recorded in the Catalogue, as the homeland of the Anatolian bards became a distant memory, more distant even than Troy. Yet the drift is remarkably slight. So few anachronisms have crept into the *Iliad* that we are almost compelled to assume a deliberate intention to exclude them early in the post-Mycenean tradition. In several centuries of the oral tradition not a single direct reference to the fall of Mycenae or Pylos crept into the Homeric poems, though there are hints pointing in that direction. The more archaeology uncovers of the Bronze Age, the more we respect the *Iliad*'s historicity. Athens, we are told, tampered with the text but how meager these tamperings seem, given the centuries in which she had time to secure her authority as keeper of the Mycenean tradition.

If the *Iliad* is historically conservative and its very elements — formulas and themes — are also conservative, as is now generally assumed, why should we not extend the same conservatism to the plot itself? We can imagine some blurring of historical fact in the centuries of oral transmission, some shifts in emphasis, or a deepening exploration of character and fate, but how are we to explain the *Iliad* as, on one hand, conservative in the extreme and, on the other hand, a composition quite unlike anything that had preceded it in the tradition? If the function of the bards were less entertainment than to transmit cultural history, the *Iliad* may have taken its present form much earlier than we usually assume.³

The Myceneans were far from primitive in their arts and technology. They had the use of gold, silver, copper, and tin, and were beginning, it seems, to discover the magnetic properties of iron (*Ody.* 19.13). They were world-class traders (in their world), with a flourishing trade in Anatolia, the Levant, Egypt, North Africa, Sicily, and even farther west. Their craftsmen included metallurgists, sculptors, engravers, painters, scribes.

They liked their art to be both delicate and monumental. Were their poets and musicians less sophisticated than their other artists? If the *Iliad* had been composed from the beginning to serve as their history for the Myceneans laboring to found new homes on a foreign soil, what would it be if not a sacred text?

Most scholars would agree that the *Odyssey* is a looser kind of poem than the *Iliad*. Though it too is history, in that it looks back to the Trojan War and to the casualties suffered by the Myceneans on their return to the homeland, history yields now some of its prerogatives to fantasy and romance. More neologisms have crept into the text and anachronisms are not so rigorously excluded. That the *Odyssey*, with its more frequent allusions to the Iron Age, is a later poem than the *Iliad* is certainly a reasonable conjecture. Yet surely it did not shoot up overnight solely in response to the *Iliad*, once the *Iliad* had taken its written form. The *Odyssey* too must represent a long tradition of oral composition, though with a more permissive attitude toward history, as though from the very beginning the tragedy of Achilles all but compelled a companion piece, in which history and fantasy could be blended into a soothing analgesic. We glimpse the poem's permissiveness in the allowance made for several narrators, sometimes of the same events, with the greatest allowance extended to Odysseus himself, who mixes several varieties of narrative into a delightful blend of the plausible, the implausible, and the true.

No doubt Odysseus was an amalgam as scholars have argued — the Mycenaean hero who engineered the fall of Troy, the shipwrecked sailor of Egyptian tales, the Cretan pirate (Minoan or post-Minoan) respected or feared throughout the Mediterranean, the Phoenician trader, the Greek mercenary who made his fortune at the Pharaoh's court. When did the Mycenaean warrior assume his other roles — the sailor, the pirate, the entrepreneur?

In the *Odyssey* Demodocus sings of a feast when Achilles and Odysseus fell into a quarrel, and Agamemnon rejoiced, seeing the Delphic prophecy come true, which pointed to the inexorable doom of Troy.⁴ Was this quarrel the free invention of the *Odyssey*-poet, or a fact of history remembered in the tradition? Perhaps we should read the quarrel as representing the ramifying process whereby the same Mycenaean history crystallized into two separate epics evolving concurrently and synergisti-

cally, celebrating two kinds of hero, each noting and evaluating his rival's charisma as their reputations grew.⁵

The implications of the theory that oral poetry = improvisation become apparent in Hainsworth's treatment of the marriage theme in the Nausicaa episode. At *Ody.* 6.229 ff., after Odysseus has washed the brine from his body and clothed himself in the chiton and robe provided by Athena, via Nausicaa, Athena completes the beautification of the hero by making him "larger to look on and more massive, and she set the hair on his head in curls, like the hyacinth flower." There follows the simile of the goldsmith, endowed by Athena and Hephaistos with magic skills, pouring gold over silver. The same simile is repeated at 23.159–62 when Odysseus, freshly bathed again, is presented to Penelope as her rightful husband.

If we feel a resonance in the repetition of the simile we are responding, in Hainsworth's view, as readers, not as the audience listening to an oral bard. "The modern reader," Hainsworth notes in regard to the simile at 6.232–35, "who is trained in such matters, will probably recall the present use, with Nausicaa's reaction, on reading the second, and see in it the symbol of Odysseus as bridegroom: it is possible that some such thinking unconsciously affected the poet's choice of imagery. However, the Homeric audience were too thoroughly accustomed to repetition for any particular instance to have been significant for them; the repetition therefore cannot have been conscious." In connection with "the matter of Nausicaa's marriage," Hainsworth notes at 6.27 that

it adds a certain piquancy to the relations of Odysseus, Nausicaa, and Alcinous, but it is otherwise superfluous to this part of the *Odyssey*. . . . It is likely that the marriage (and some other elements such as the games in viii) is mentioned because the poet is familiar with a folk-tale in which an unprepossessing suitor outwits glamorous but unworthy rivals.

But who is this assembly, which would yawn through the musician's best riffs? And if the audience is unconscious, must the musician be unconscious too? The theory that repetitions in Homer preclude conscious intention seems at variance with the very nature of the Homeric poems. The circularity that Bakhtin

discovers in classical epic is far more prominent in Homer than in any subsequent imitation in the age of literacy.⁶ The written poem, we think, allows the reader to scan back and forth through the text, as listeners could never do. Yet the written epics, while imitating Homer in so much else, failed to borrow the single most salient technique of Homeric style – the repeated formula, the sheer mass and variety of Homeric repetitions. As Bakhtin has argued, classical epic is a self-enclosed, self-absorbed, self-referential form.⁷ Such a form acquires its meaning and emotional force through the density of cross-references made possible only by extensive repetition at every level.

The network of references and parallelisms binding the *Odyssey* into a cohesive whole, which Heubeck takes as proof of a written text, is, in fact, quite unlike anything in any post-Homeric imitator. It is so indigenous to the Homeric mode of thought that it seems rather to be the essence of a conservative oral tradition than the mark of literacy. The whole *Odyssey* is rich in the kind of resonance and nuance that only the most highly repetitive musical form can engender (e.g., Bach, Mozart). Modern translators of the poem will suggest the repetitiveness of the Homeric style, but none have dared to tax their readers' tolerance with the full force of Homeric repetition, preserving intact, time after time, not only the formula but its placement in the verse. The new translation of the *Odyssey*, for example, by Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley, 1990) achieves density by quite different means. The only post-Homeric epic that gives something of the feel of the *Odyssey* for repetition is the "modern sequel" (as it is subtitled in Kimon Friar's English translation) – the *Odyssey* by Kazantzakis, a Cretan who was perhaps attuned to the still-flourishing oral traditions on his native island.

Let us take "the matter of Nausicaa's marriage." As the *Odyssey* has followed its destiny into our Western lands, our attention has shifted from the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope to the adventures of the hero, so much so that in modern parlance *odyssey* has become synonymous with travel and exploration. But Homer's *Odyssey* is a home-coming; the travels are but the obstacles between the hero and his final goal. What is the theme of the *Odyssey* if not marriage, as anger is the theme of the *Iliad*?

The poem opens with the marriage of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, a sorry parable progressively unfolded, which does not reach its conclusion until the ghost of Agamemnon makes his second appearance (in Book 24). Moments later (in epic time) Athena, arriving at the palace at Ithaca, wonders whether she has walked in on a wedding feast; if so, she observes to her young host, it is certainly an unruly celebration (1.225–29). Of course it is no wedding, but a cruel parody; the wedding, which Athena coyly anticipates, will not be celebrated until Book 23. But Athena's surmise offers a convenient opening onto Penelope's plight, who is under pressure to declare her husband dead and make a new marriage for herself. Athena is mistaken, but she is not far off the mark: the riot in Telemachus' halls is closer to a wedding than he cares to dwell on. Penelope's evasive tactics have been discovered and her remarriage all but guaranteed. Her happy-go-lucky suitors are feasting as if the wedding were already at hand. This is the poem's first, but by no means the last, simulacrum of a wedding.

The marriage theme plays intermittently throughout Books 1 and 2, circling around Penelope's two marriages — the one consummated twenty years earlier and her impending second marriage. The theme fades, only to reemerge in Book 4, when Telemachus arrives at the Spartan court. Who, in Homer's audience, would not want to be an inconspicuous fly in that boudoir? Let Telemachus be our eyes and ears to report the conversations between the world-famous cuckold and his most famous wife. So Telemachus arrives at Sparta to find — yes, a wedding feast in full swing; or rather, to make it more amusing, a double wedding.

But the wedding parties are whisked off stage before we have had time to see the bridal couples. Novelists would be ashamed to trifle with their readers in this way, whetting their curiosity only to leave them with their antenna feeling the empty air. We barely register a few scintillating details — Helen has been barren since the birth of their (her?) daughter, Hermione; Menelaus has sired an heir, named "Great Sorrow," on a palace slave; Hermione, Helen's daughter (or theirs), is being given in marriage to the son of Achilles, thus fulfilling the terms of a settlement made at Troy — before the set is cleared and we are ushered into the palace, where more pressing matters engage Telemachus' attention, among them the near-perfect marriage

of his hosts, the less fortunate marriage of their famous siblings, and, finally, the mysterious marriage of his own parents, Penelope and Odysseus.

Bracketing Odysseus' affairs with Circe and Calypso (germane as they are), we next hear the wedding anthem when Odysseus is swept ashore at Scheria. Hainsworth finds the theme adding piquancy to the relations between Odysseus and Nausicaa but otherwise of no great consequence. But the theme colors the whole of Book 6, both the events and the relationships, and introduces themes to be played out more expansively later in the poem. Here Homeric circularity works in the clearest way, through repetition, variation, and retardation, with themes begun only to be stopped in mid-career or sidetracked, and completed at some later point. The marriage toward which the whole poem moves is now split into two, with some aspects distributed to the Nausicaa episode and others reserved for Penelope's reunion with Odysseus. The ceremonies begin with Nausicaa's vision, which opens Book 6, when Athena fills her young mind with romantic notions, but they are not concluded until Odysseus and Penelope retire in Book 23, and some will say not until the end of Book 24.

The poet has presented himself with an interesting challenge: though the poem unfolds inexorably toward marriage there will be, in fact, no wedding, since the principals in this case are already husband and wife. The wedding, which will conclude the poem, must therefore be a simulacrum, and if that high moment is only make-believe, why not multiply the simulacra? Introducing Nausicaa into the plot allows the poet to replicate not only the wedding ceremonies but, more significantly, the simulated bride. While Odysseus will simulate the groom in both instances the functions of the bride will be given in the first instance to the virgin with adolescent yearnings, easily infatuated, whose innocence will allow her a certain forwardness. But then she will be replaced by the older and shrewder woman, and the simulated courtship will be that much more challenging.

To argue that Homeric audiences could not read the *Odyssey* backwards and forwards like a text, as we do, is to misapprehend not only the nature of Homeric epic but the structure of the societies in which such poems could arise. Convenient as repetitions would be for a bard in oral composition and performance, they are symptomatic also of a traditional culture's

most-prized values. Everything is repetition in such cultures; the whole of life, individual and collective, is a text, or a set of texts, texts within texts, already composed. Every member of the community is taught, from the day of his or her birth (or at least, their naming), to study the texts and play their parts accordingly.

Even in our culture, which has thrown off many of the cohesive bonds of tradition, brides-to-be who have never sat down to read the wedding service will yet know the text by heart, having learned it from mother, aunts, sisters, the movies, or drugstore romances. They may introduce variations into the ceremonies — newlyweds want to see their own signatures in the marriage register — but they will not lightly tolerate others introducing even slight deviations into the authorized text. The “Wedding Text” would be even more firmly engraved on the minds of Greek villagers, for whom marriages are still matters of consequence. Such is the text and context that the *Odyssey* calls to mind. Greek villagers might well enjoy the poem’s play on the old familiar theme, as it disposes the elements over various episodes, repeating some, postponing others, adding now and then an ironic surprise, which would be no surprise since the text would be so well known. They would agree to be surprised, the whole performance being, after all, only make-believe.

The wedding begins with the laundry theme. Laundry always precedes the wedding in Greek folk custom — so we learned from Mary Ruddick, our native informant in Classics 402 (Homer).⁸

“Yes,” Mrs. Ruddick repeated emphatically, “you must wash everything before the wedding. You take everything out. Everything.”

Athena makes the connection plain to Nausicaa: “your wedding day is at hand . . . not much longer will you be a virgin” (6.27, 33). Nausicaa awakes astonished, and with good reason. Here it is, her wedding day, but where is the groom? No wonder she is shy to explain herself and prevaricates when she asks her father for a wagon to transport the laundry down to the river.

When Athena generates the laundry theme in Nausicaa’s imagination she describes the clothes as *sigaloenta* (“shining,” 6.26), repeating the same epithet a few lines later (6.30). “Some take this as a careless use of the *Epithet*,” Stanford notes in his commentary on the passage, “since the clothes are admittedly

soiled.” Hainsworth relates *sigaloenta* to Hittite and Luwian cognates (“clean”), and ultimately to the Sumerian (“pure”), but concludes that it is “always, as here, a decorative epithet.” That, certainly, is the simplest interpretation. Since Parry we have learned not to fret over incongruities like garments that need washing but are said to be already clean, all in the same hexameter. Epithets are heroic patina. Everything in Homer’s heroic world is radiant, even the commonest fabrics, and even when they need washing.

Here our native informant, Mrs. Ruddick, reported that while all the clothes must be laundered before the wedding, some clothes are especially meant (“marked,” as the linguists might say); namely, the best clothes – the wedding dress, the trousseau. Athena does not, in fact, say the clothes are soiled, though Nausicaa will slyly put it that way to her father. More accurately, Athena reminds Nausicaa (6.25–27): “Nausicaa! How has your mother brought you up to be so careless? Look, your good clothes are lying about in neglect and here it is, your wedding day.” We are grateful for our wider perspective, which allows us to trace connections between a Homeric term and cognates in other Near Eastern languages, but while we are diverted by our etymologies village wives might, more naively, see in Nausicaa’s pure and shining raiment her wedding dress.

Next the nudity theme, which it is interesting to trace as it is deployed through the two make-believe weddings. The full erotic shock is vouchsafed to Nausicaa’s virginal eyes. So offensive is the passage that it has prompted at least one modern scholar to excise all references to the nakedness of Odysseus in the Nausicaa episode, and has provoked a note, all too brief, in Hainsworth’s commentary on genitals and Homeric decorum (at 6.129). Nausicaa, protected by her innocence and emboldened by Athena, was not as shocked as she should have been. She had, we recall, already thrown aside her veil in a careless moment, while playing Artemis-in-the-mountains, the game that, in an authentic marriage situation, would be the last she would share with her girlfriends. The other girls scattered in terror but not Nausicaa. If they feared rape, she had a wedding on her mind.

The nudity theme is more ingeniously and delicately treated when the make-believe groom is prepared for the wedding in his own palace at Ithaca. It surfaces when Penelope calls for Odys-

seus' bath, only to be short-circuited, first by Odysseus, who will accept only a token footbath, and then by Athena, who averts Penelope's attention, leaving the shock to fall squarely on Eurykleia instead. The frontal nudity of Book 6 is rendered down to a bare thigh; in the place of genitals a scar is exposed, by firelight, not to the full light of the midday sun as in Book 6; and the vision is vouchsafed not to the bride but to her old slave woman. For the arabesque between the naked groom and the unveiled bride in Book 6 (with provocative branch and unforgettable palm) the poet here substitutes a long diversion that leads to the birth of Odysseus, his naming, and his initiation into manhood – a more profound nakedness than the nude body in Book 6. The narrative on Odysseus' scar and name occupies the position that within the wedding context might be called “the mother of the bride inspects the groom's family tree” (cf. Arete, needle-eyed, remarking on the stranger's princely dress in Book 7).

Next comes the bridegroom's bath. Here too we admire the poet's dexterity, who will not settle for the simple solution when a more complicated one can be found. The theme is duplicated, treated first in the Nausicaa episode and again at Ithaca, but then reduplicated, with the groom receiving two baths at Ithaca. His first bath in his own home being only a partial bath (with only a partial exposure) – the footbath administered by Eurykleia – the bath is not complete until Odysseus is given his full bath by Eurynome after he has rid the house of the unwanted rivals.

We return at last to the simile of the goldsmith plating silver with gold, which brings the bath to its conclusion. Such a simile, painting a scene from contemporary life, could no doubt be turned to a variety of uses. Yet the two uses in the *Odyssey* suggest a complex that would likely restrict the simile to certain highly charged moments. The goldsmith in both passages is no human technician, though she is likened to one, but the goddess of all technicians, Athena herself, and her function is to gild the lily or, in this instance, the hyacinth. In both cases the simile is the poet's arabesque to draw our eyes to the enhanced beauty and stature of Odysseus and particularly to his new head of hair, freshly curled. But the hairdressing scene is itself the final term in a whole process of beautification, which by Homeric exten-

sion becomes beatification (one step lower, however, than Menelaus reaches through his marriage to Helen).

Beautification begins with the bath. In the Nausicaa episode the hero, reluctant to be exposed to virgin eyes, begs permission to bathe himself. He varies the “reticence” formula at Ithaca when he will have nothing but a footbath, and will allow no one to administer it, unless there be some trusted old slave woman in the house. The bath is administered but since it is only the preliminary bath the time between it and the final bath is filled with further courtship rituals between Odysseus and Penelope and the contest for the bride. The hero’s second bath in Penelope’s house is then administered by Eurynome. After the bath the hero is anointed and dressed, whether by himself or by an attendant. The hero is now ready for his hair stylist – who else but Athena?

Athena as the divine beautician leads us into the simile of the goldsmith’s magic, which then returns us to the narrative. At Book 23.162–63 the simile concludes: “so Athena shed grace on his head and shoulders, and Odysseus rose from his bath like the immortals.” In the Nausicaa episode the simile stops just short of apotheosis (6.235): “so Athena poured grace on his head and shoulders.” Bathed, oiled, and clothed, with every curl in place, the hero sits down – a *kouros* again – in one instance to be admired and courted by Nausicaa, in the other to win the final test of his simulated courtship with his wife.

The goldsmith simile, positioned to conclude a series of steps in a beautification process, reveals much about the function of Homeric similes. The process – being bathed and dressed – is natural enough, but through Athena’s intervention it is lifted out of the natural order, as metallurgy is itself a transcendence of nature. Gold poured over silver is the beautician’s final rinse: our hero emerges from her shop transformed from weather-beaten old pirate to supple *kouros*, and from man to god.

In Book 23 this moment, calling for such divine intervention in the merely mundane world, when time is both reversed and transcended, is “the presentation of the bridegroom to the bride,” which immediately precedes the entrance into the bridal chamber. The presentation of the groom would figure more prominently in a bride’s agenda when marriages were dynastic arrangements and she herself might not see her spouse until the wedding day (cf. Hermione in Book 4). Why not assume the

same function for the simile in the Nausicaa episode, when the whole of Book 6 is dedicated to “wedding”? In both instances the roving buccaneer must be thoroughly cleaned and rendered fit for domestic use. In one case he emerges before his simulated bride like a shipwrecked desperado, or something even more primitive; in the next he stands before his intended like a lion splattered with the blood of the kill. Is this not the prototype, the Urtext, of weddings in a thousand villages ancient and modern?

The finale in the bath scene of the Nausicaa episode reveals that the bridegroom theme was, indeed, the text informing the narrative. While Odysseus emerges from his bath in Book 23 with his apotheosis complete, in Book 6 he sits apart, at the seashore, “glowing with beauty and graces: and the girl stared” (line 237). But then the apotheosis formula is passed to Nausicaa, as if to allow it to flourish in her girlish imagination (6.239–44):

Hear me, my white-armed companions, and let me speak:
not without the will of the all the gods who live on Olympus
does this man mix with the godlike Phaeacians. Before,
he seemed a miserable creature indeed. But now he is like
the very gods who hold broad sky. Would that such a man
might be called my husband . . .

Poor Nausicaa. Who does not sympathize with her, fictional as she is, watching Athena manipulate her innocence to further the poet’s ulterior motives? She is seduced by all the romance of the wedding – the dreams, the dress, flirtatious innuendoes, and a handsome groom too good to be true – only to find it was all make-believe, and the consummation – the wedding party, the processional into the bridal chamber (with attendant and bridal torch), the bed, and the post-coital pillow talk – is reserved for a merely human woman twice her age. Once her part is done Nausicaa is removed from the scene like the superfluous bridal couples of Book 4, though with greater tenderness.

And yet, if it is any consolation, the wedding is make-believe for Penelope too. Before she and her husband retire he instructs their grown son to have the bard strike up the phorminx and simulate the wedding dance (23.130ff.). And so it happens: the bard, ever obliging servant of illusion, takes his phorminx and in

the twinkling of an eye the corpses are gone and the great hall resounds with the dancing feet of “men at play and fine-girdled women.” The village gossips, passing by, like Athena in Book 1, were shocked (23.149–51): “So! Someone has married the much-wooed queen after all. Hard-hearted woman! She could not endure to protect the great home of her lawful husband until his return.”

There was no wedding, but there was a marriage, a strange one to be sure and far from perfect — much of its romance had been mined, alas, to embellish Helen, Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa, the Sirens, et al. Still, the ghost of Agamemnon, with one last cry from the grave, leaves us in no doubt that it was better than his.

NOTES

1. Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1979), 15.
2. Denys Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley: University of California, 1959).
3. cf. Nagy (1979), 18: “Between the two of them, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* manage to incorporate and orchestrate something of practically everything that was once thought worth preserving from the Heroic Age.”
4. *Ody.* 8.74–82.
5. On this point, see Nagy (1979), 21–25.
6. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981).
7. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*.
8. Mrs. Ruddick, enrolled in Classics 402 (Fall, 1990), is an Anatolian Greek, whose family was transplanted to mainland Greece, and in time Mrs. Ruddick was transplanted to the United States. Her grandmother spoke the Pontic dialect, now no doubt all but extinct. We in the class relished those moments of happy surprise when Mrs. Ruddick would discover where Homer and modern Greece intersected. Sometimes it would be a Homeric form or a turn of phrase familiar to her from her grandmother’s Pontic dialect; at other times it would be a cultural attitude or custom that would lead Mrs. Ruddick to argue for quite a different translation from ours.