
Defining Defending Odysseus

CHARLES ROWAN BEYE

IN MARCH 2006, members of the lacrosse team at Duke University were accused of raping an erotic dancer whom they had hired for a late night party. As the event began to be played out in the nation's media, the president of Duke, Richard Brodhead, was called upon to put a spin on the situation that would save the reputation of an institution that wanted very much to be a major league player in the academic world whilst having to be obedient to a vehement body of sports fans among Duke alumni and the southern public at large. Eventually, he was the subject of an article in *The New Yorker* magazine.

Brodhead had recently come to Duke from Yale where he had been Dean of the College and before that a professor on the Yale faculty, a scholar of nineteenth-century American literature. He had to learn almost the day he arrived at Duke that athletics and athletes played a role for which nothing in his experience had prepared him. When he spoke to the *New Yorker* reporter, Brodhead did his best to dignify the situation.

"If you go back and read the *Odyssey*, who is Odysseus?" he asked and, in answer, quoted the opening line of the poem: "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending." Then he continued: "And his ways of contending are intellectual, and they're strategic, and they're political, and they're athletic. And so it seems to me that that would actually be at the foundation of it—it's the image of excellence. I'm not saying that I would embrace athletics on any terms. But that's its

Originally presented at The Rouman Classical Lecture Series at the University of New Hampshire.

relevance. And then you have to couch it in the right terms, to have it be consonant with the other values of the university. There are other things as well. It's about working in teams, about learning to do things together that people can't do alone."

Apart from the fact that the Homeric Odysseus was a loner, the least likely to embrace any team activity or cooperation, Brodhead was fantasizing some kind of ideal male figure, as though this humanistic literary notion was at one with the product turned out by the Duke athletic programs, as though Duke's athletes went out onto the field or stood around the beer keg at their late night parties, fortified with a knowledge of Odysseus and the poem in which he is the central figure. Brodhead went on to say: "The metaphorical value of sports is actually quite deep, when you stop and think about it. Our culture doesn't ask us often enough to think about it." Clearly the reporter could be quite cruel in what he chose to quote.

Nonetheless, Brodhead's observations on Odysseus and the *Odyssey* will sound familiar to anyone who has taught or been a student in one of those ubiquitous literature courses designed to fill the so-called "humanities" distribution requirement. Their relevance to the particulars of the Duke situation stems, one imagines, from Brodhead's conception of Odysseus as a kind of gentleman, and of athletes in general, certainly Ivy League athletes, as representative of a kind of manly deportment that one associates with nineteenth-century gentry and aristocracy. Reading Greek and playing soccer or cricket were the fundamentals of a nineteenth-century English upper class education, be it school or university. Which in turn derives from Greek aristocratic values from the archaic period down to the advent of Macedonian kings into the mainland. The perfectly-turned, muscular body of a male who exercised and competed in games stood out from the mass of misshapen workers whose repetitive work movements grotesquely distorted the musculature of their legs, torsos, and arms.

Brodhead got the word “contending” from Robert Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Odyssey*, to which all professors of English seem to turn—it being, as they think, “more poetic.” But in fact *polytropos*, that very famous defining epithet for Odysseus, means “much turning.” Who knows in what sense? Some would say “devious,” others “capable of reinventing himself.” Fitzgerald the poet-translator was very free with his translation, looking for something beyond the literal. Brodhead took “contending” from him, thinking, no doubt, of the playing field. But “contending” it does not mean, athletics it does not apply to.

In the subsequent issue of *The New Yorker* (9 October 2006), a letter to the editor was printed which sternly rebuked Brodhead:

Richard Brodhead, Duke’s president, attempts an apologia for big-time college sports invoking Odysseus as an “image of excellence.” But another reading of Odysseus shows him to be a manipulative, self-aggrandizing liar, a deceitful opportunist, and a thief. He never stands up to the incompetent leadership of Agamemnon, he spends years in alcohol and dissipation, and what passes for his personal courage is, more often than not, just egotistical recklessness that leads to the death of his own men (which he is always quick to blame on someone else). Maybe Odysseus does have a lot in common with big-time college sports after all.

The disconnect between the professor and the letter writer is once again an illustration of that famous truth, that a mark of a great literary piece is the wide variety of responses it provokes in those who come into its orbit. People look for different things in stories, although the letter writer strikes me as peculiarly judgmental when he declares that “[Odysseus] spends years in alcohol and dissipation.” On the contrary, I would say Odysseus is one of the more temperate and controlled of the heroes Homer brings into his narratives. What wine he drinks is no more than any person in that period who must choose between dubious water sources and a beverage whose quality he can control.

As for “dissipation,” no doubt the letter writer had in mind Odysseus’ forays into the beds of women other than his wife. But it is a commonplace the world over to consider a male soldier separated from his wife for long periods in need of hygienic sexual intercourse; in the patriarchal slave-owning culture of the heroic Bronze Age, it would never be questioned. As to Calypso, Circe, and the other ladies who figure one way or another in Odysseus’ sexual life, and I am thinking of Nausikaa and Penelope, we shall get to them later.

Professor Brodhead’s identifying Odysseus as a model of gentlemanly behavior for the Duke athletic programs no doubt stems from the fact that over the centuries the ruling classes of Europe have always appropriated ancient epic poetry for telling their story; the poems are the great apologia for their practice of exploitation and control. As that class gentrified, their notion of the heroes did as well. Probably academics are the last group who still see them that way, watered down still further, of course, into the context of contemporary university life so that these heroes and their daring deeds become so many verbal sparrings and joustings in the senior common room, the departmental meeting, the faculty senate. But the fact of the matter is that the boys of the Duke athletics programs probably *are* much closer to what the ancient heroes were all about.

Let us remember Patroklos, certainly one of the most sympathetic figures introduced by the *Iliad* narrator. Patroklos himself tells (23.85) that he arrived at the court of Achilles’ father as a youth, presumably having had to get out of town, after having grown so angry over a game of chess with his cousin that he killed him. “I didn’t mean to,” he claims; just the out-of-control impetuosity of a young male, one might say. I bring this up so that it might stand for all the acts of physical violence outside of the battlefield that the narrators of the two poems detail. That, in turn, is important to remember so as to counter President Brodhead’s concept of Odysseus and the hero.

If I were looking for a modern analogue, I would turn to the cast of characters presented in the television serial drama "The Sopranos." The ancient hero lived in a society without police, standing army, or any of the other protections the modern world is meant to offer. Their social value derived from the fact that they could protect people; but this they did by brute force. They did not play by the rules; they made the rules. Violence, force, and brutish bullying are the back-story everywhere in the poems. Think of the suitors and their implied use of the serving women, no better than rape really, or Telemachus and his punishment of the same women, as sadistic as anything we read about in the tabloids, or Agamemnon and the young girl Chryseis whom he publicly declares he will bring back home as his "comfort woman," or Odysseus and his crew putting ashore in the land of the Kikones, and deciding to take advantage of the moment by pillaging and slaying the inhabitants, only letting off the ones who paid them what we today would call "protection money."

Nonetheless, it is notable that the narrators of the two poems almost never find fault with the major aristocratic male figures, certainly not with Achilles or Odysseus. Possibly this is because the poets who created the narratives and the audience for whom they were intended recognized that the hero class kept things in line, just as it is well known in our contemporary America that there is no breaking and entering, no street muggings, and a woman is safe walking the streets even late at night in a town where the Mafia live.

People who object to "The Sopranos" series emphasize the vicious, anti-social, and sometimes psychopathic behavior of its characters. Their objections are met with a chorus of high praise for the power of the acting, the dialogue, the photography, the uniform excellence of a disparate group of directors. To my mind, these latter assets generally incline American HBO viewers to care about Tony, Carmela, Christopher, and all the others despite their manifold dys-functionalities. I should like to argue that, in the same way,

the narrator of the *Odyssey* has structured his narrative so that it demands that the auditor—in our time the reader—accept him, root for him, and in the end, be pleased with the success he finally enjoys in his life's adventure.

The writer of the letter to *The New Yorker* obviously never surrendered to the seductions of the narrative. While the *Iliad* narrative rides on psychological portraits of violent men acting out and finally facing the elemental nothingness of their lives through their awareness of death, the *Odyssey* is quite different, not really the story of a man, as is so often claimed by its critics, but rather an exercise in the infinite charms of story-telling. In this view, Odysseus is less an actor, less a hero, less a man with a destiny than he is a mechanism of the plot. However attractive and independent he may seem at times, the plot lines are what influence our reaction to him.

The narrator makes a point to emphasize storytelling at the start of the poem. In the opening banquet scene at Ithaca, after the meal, everyone in the banqueting hall sits in silence while the court singer, Phemius, sings, as the narrator says, "of the harsh homecoming of the Achaïans from Troy." The narrator brings Penelope into the room just at that moment so that she can ask Phemius tearfully for some other song, a piece from the tradition he knows so well, since singing tales of the homecoming, she says, only makes her think of her husband still absent.

In a surprising outburst, Telemachus defends the singer. "Mother, why would you prevent him from singing whatever inspires him? He didn't cause the misery he is singing about. And men always give more applause hearing a new song that's going the rounds with the singers."

This seems to me a remarkable statement of intent on the part of the creator of the *Odyssey* narrative. First, that the song, its narrative, is as the *poet* conceives it to be. The narrator foregrounds poetic invention over the fixity of tradition in those words. Second, that the material which makes up the narrative is not the same as the events and personages

with which it deals. The force of that observation is to separate out the narrative as something entirely independent of its presumed context; it has as much validity as the reality it depicts and is independent from it. Third, the audience for poets is not mired in tradition; they openly seek innovation and variation, which is to say that they listen self-consciously to the narrative being sung.

The narrator returns to the matter of narration when Odysseus is being given shelter and hospitality at the court of the Phaiacians (book 8). First, he is described in the banquet hall listening with the others to the singing of Demodokos who is telling tales of events during the Trojan War. Odysseus tells the server to make up a special plate of choice food for the singer as a token of Odysseus' appreciation of his talents and technique. The narrator is describing in Odysseus a man who has critical faculties and aesthetic judgments. This, while interesting, does not seem unique. As we remember from the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon's team of ambassadors go to Achilles' encampment to get him to come back into battle, they come upon him and his side-kick, Patroklos, taking turns singing songs about the famous deeds of men of old. These two no doubt can also pass judgment on the skills of the professional singers in the army camp. Very talented amateurs, we might call them.

More interesting is the way in which Odysseus responds when he is finally called upon to identify himself. Rules of hospitality at the time allowed a stranger to protect his anonymity until he had been given food and lodging, and Odysseus has been withholding his name despite the obvious curiosity of his royal hosts. Finally, when King Alcinous sees his guest crying at the events Demodokos is describing in his song, he cannot contain himself. "Who are you, stranger?" he shouts out.

What follows is an extraordinary *tour de force* in which Odysseus stands where Demodokos had stood, creates an introduction to himself as elaborate as any song that could be sung, then launches into an account of his travels after

leaving Troy that occupy the next two thousand lines of hexametric verse in a poem that is only some 12,000 lines long—in short, about one-sixth of the narrative. Two observations must be made at this point.

1. The subject matter of Odysseus' account is completely alien to the traditional world of heroic epic: malevolent forces, whirlpools, singing maidens, and witches with wands that can transform are staples of it. What is more, some of its prominent features, like the giant Polyphemos, or the motif of insulting a deity who then becomes an avenger, or Odysseus' descent into the Underworld and his description of it, together with his consultation with the seer Tiresias, all these are, as we now know, staples of a Sumerian-Akkadian narrative story of the adventures of Gilgamesh. The ongoing decipherment of cuneiform tablets is constantly telling us more about this third-to-second-millennium narrative which originated in the area of present day Iraq. The story of Gilgamesh is now thought to have been in circulation, passed about by singers, somehow made available far west of present-day Iraq, to Mycenaean and Dark Age centers of culture where it might have been the kind of novelty item a singer could incorporate into his traditional materials. Whatever is the case, the great reply that Odysseus makes to King Alcinous must have struck the listener as highly artificial, both because of its peculiar content and for its great length.

2. The narrator makes a point to emphasize the high artifice of Odysseus' singing. In the course of his delivery, Odysseus falls silent—no doubt exhausted, poor guy—and Queen Arete bursts out (11.335): "Now what do you think, gentlemen, doesn't this man have quite the stature, and a well organized mind?" And like so many self-centered hostesses, she continues: "The stranger is mine [which is to say 'he's my find']. But we should all give him a present."

And Alcinous himself breaks in with: "When we look at you, Odysseus, we just know that you are not one of those tramps wandering around telling lies, out to deceive us and from which nobody can learn anything. You have a shapeli-

ness to your words, a good brain in you, and you tell your story out with expertise, like a singer." He insists that Odysseus continue to sing. "The night can go on and on; it is not time to go to sleep." Odysseus sighs but continues.

And when finally, hours later, he falls silent, Odysseus says: "I stop here. This is where I began, and I'm not going to repeat myself when I told it so well the first time around."

Like the professional singer, Odysseus cares about what he is singing, the shape of his story. Like the professional, when he is told not to stop by his presumptive patron, he can continue on; he has endless endurance. His audience recognize the quality of his delivery, can compare him against professionals they have known, recognize how superior he is to the fakes, the obvious amateurs who stop at their doorstep. What will amaze the narrator's audience is that an overbearing, arrogant hero is cast in the role of a performer, a step above the cooks and waiters, no doubt, but nonetheless hardly a lord.

Again, as in the case of Telemachus' defense of Phemius, the narrator emphasizes that the story is a construct, a self-conscious artifact of the singer. The story is strange; the delivery dazzles the audience. It is another reminder that storytelling is in some ways the subject of this poem.

At this point, I would like to suggest something for which there is no authority whatsoever in the text, but is the kind of thing a reader can imagine while an auditor of oral poetry cannot. My inspiration for doing this is the contemporary tendency among Homerists to posit all sorts of hidden meanings in the text, the attitudes of the ever-silent Penelope, for instance, or the implied relationship between the *Il-iad* and the *Odysey*, for another. What I should like to propose is that Odysseus, as the narrator tells, has just spent seven years with Calypso, having passed time in her company filling out those long boring evenings after dinner telling her stories of the Trojan War and the days before that in Ithaca. And he fell into the habit of singing it out as he had always heard it done in the palace back home and after

dinner in Agamemnon's command headquarters. Repeated performances over time perfected his hexameters, so that when he gets to Scheria he is, as one senses by the elaborate manner of his revealing his identity, both proud of his talent and ready to pull off two thousand lines.

If Odysseus is audacious in telling this extraordinary story to the court at Scheria, so is the narrator for having constructed so ingenious a narrative. The *Iliad* moves forward on the psychological roller of emotions. Agamemnon gets angry being thwarted; Achilles responds in anger, departs in petulance; and so it goes, until, when Achilles will not come back to the fight, his tent-mate, concerned over the Achaian losses, borrows his armor and is killed, which produces enough anger and desolation in Achilles to send him back into the battle, to the killing of Hektor and his own certain death implied in the future, beyond the limits of this narrative. That is how a writer would pitch this story at a conference in Hollywood. Too bad somebody didn't get to the scriptwriter of the film *Troy* to tell him what he was doing wrong. Brad Pitt's thighs are just not enough to make a great film.

But the *Odyssey's* singer / writer has created a far more ambitious narrative for which he lays down a series of story lines that keep things going when it might otherwise have faltered. These several scenarios force his audience to care about Odysseus, and urge on the successful completion of his story, just the way the crowd in a sports arena roots for the team. It is the brilliance of the narrative that keeps Odysseus' fortunes in play, just as the skills of scriptwriter, cameraman, and actors require the HBO audience to care deeply for Tony, Carmela, Christopher, and the rest of that crowd.

The *Odyssey* story can be schematized as three separate stories: Telemachus in search of his father, Odysseus trapped on the islands of Ogygia and Scheria, and Odysseus regaining his throne (which includes his son and wife). To overcome the inherent incoherence of this material, the narrator uses Athena as a kind of chapter heading or storyboard, artificial, and with no great motivation. She announces the

plot in the first book; she reiterates it when the second section is introduced, that is, the Ogygia and Scheria section; and she is there to greet the auditor / reader with the upcoming plot details when Odysseus wakes up on Ithaca and the third section is underway. She's even down on the road on Scheria, disguised as a little girl who can give Odysseus directions to the palace, and she is busy again on Ithaca putting a mean mood into the suitors so that they will misbehave with the beggar, which puts into sharper relief the divide between Good and Evil. At the very end of the poem, when the relatives of the suitors are ready to do battle with Odysseus in a story that has no ending, Athena shouts out, "Stop," which is to say announces, "The End"; Zeus punctuates her command with a thunderbolt and the action is over. Nothing could be more unlike the *Iliad*.

Odysseus reestablishing himself on Ithaca is the foundation of the entire poem. The narrator puts in play a series of maneuvers that resembles the Cinderella story so much that one has to imagine its existence as part of an oral world of *Märchen*—the technical German word for fairy tale used by literary historians—long before their codification into written texts. Athena, the Fairy Godmother, appears to Odysseus as he wakes up on the beach, where she proceeds to outline for him what trials lie before him until he achieves his longed-for goal. Disguised as a beggar, he is like Cinderella or any other societal outcast and failure whose almost miraculous success is the very stuff of the fairy tale mentality. Indeed, Odysseus has already been depicted sitting in the ashes of the fireplace when he takes the mendicant posture at the court of King Alcinous. Here in Ithaca, the journey from the beach to the palace is fraught with humiliations inflicted upon him by the haughty suitors or their hangers-on, which is an analogue to the snickering and taunting that Cinderella must endure from her contemptuous stepsisters. In the end, Cinderella triumphs when her fat-footed step-siblings cannot jam their feet into the slipper brought by Prince Charming's messenger. Likewise, our hero, after hearing the

jeers from the assembled throng, strings the bow which the suitors cannot, and shoots them dead.

That Prince Charming himself in the person of Penelope announces the contest of the bow has occasioned a flurry of surmise. The idea of the contest comes out of nowhere; Penelope just announces the idea. For the past half century, there has grown a body of opinion that insists that Penelope knows that the beggar in disguise is her long-missing husband—which provides her motive. But nowhere does the narrator say that Penelope suspects. That she has been given what the knowledgeable audience consider rather obvious hints does not alter the fact that the narrator says nothing. Critics who are overly influenced by psychological motivation as it appears in nineteenth-century novels, and critics who wish to enlarge the role for Penelope in the poem insist upon her understanding. There are other critics, myself included, who insist quite otherwise: that the narrator always indicates what the audience is supposed to understand, and that an arbitrary imposition of a happy ending against all odds is consonant with what I take to be the narrator's agenda in formulating the scene. Still, just as Prince Charming was determined to use the slipper test to find the lady with whom he was smitten on the dance floor, so Penelope in the Prince's role activates the mechanism whereby all will be tested and one found to fulfill the requirements.

Parenthetically, I might remind my audience of the idea that the Old Testament story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is an imaginative verbal projection of the experience of every newborn of being expelled from the paradise of a mother's womb. I would point out its corollary here where the story of Odysseus and the suitors mimics the primal experience of spermatozoa who must pass through a body of water to get to the waiting egg, and there fight with vast numbers of other sperm until one breaks through and releases the chemical which kills all the competition. You might call it the *Spermiad*, in fact, structured around the vast

movement into life on the molecular level which surfaces in the climactic moment of the poem.

A second track laid down by the narrator is established in the opening lines of the poem when Zeus declares that humankind is unwilling to see that they themselves bring on their own punishment for the wrongs they do, advancing Orestes' revenge killing of Aigisthus as his example, a theme that the narrator repeats often throughout the narrative. The obvious parallel with the situation at Ithaca converts the coming narrative into a triumph of Good over Evil. The audience who will be made to cheer for Cinderella / Odysseus overcoming all odds will also take satisfaction in Justice Triumphant in the rampage following the stringing of the bow, when Odysseus impersonating Good triumphs over Evil. It is at this point as well that the narrator introduces the formulae and logistics that closely resemble the battle narratives of the *Iliad*, thereby allowing the man to emerge from the allegory and recover the virile power associated with heroes on the battlefield.

By putting Odysseus back onto even a miniscule battlefield, the narrator momentarily foregrounds a traditional component of his main character which was severely tested, if not lost, in the extraordinary adventures of the mid-section of the narrative, that is, Odysseus' seven year sojourn on Calypso's island. Odysseus is unique among the Homeric heroes for having a deity so obsessed with his welfare and, what is more, a female. Only Achilles is trailed by a female deity, and that is his mother, on hand, as mothers so often are, to bewail her son's fate. Athena, for her part, while not sexually attracted—she is too resolutely the virgin goddess for that—is capable of an ambiguously flirtatious conversation with her protégé when she tells him how much she admires his devious ways. There is always something so charged, if not feverish, in the intimacy of approving transgressive behavior.

Athena leaves Odysseus lingering on Calypso's island in what is certainly the most unheroic, most challenging of all

the trials that befall him on his return home. The narrator describes Odysseus as desperately wanting to leave Ogygia, crying in homesickness, but having to stay and, more to the point, share Calypso's bed. I mentioned much earlier that an audience of that period would not expect celibacy from a married male away from home. Yet the situation must produce, it seems to me, quite another reaction in the males in the audience when the narrator emphasizes Odysseus' profound unhappiness with the arrangements. In a patriarchal society of that time, where marriages were arranged and wedding nights were more likely than not sanctioned rape scenes, households teemed with female slaves, the highways and byways with prostitutes, men were no doubt accustomed from puberty to have their way easily with women, and on their own terms. Nothing in their experience would prepare them for enforced sexual servitude to a woman. Far more degrading than performing as a court troubadour, the role of sex toy exposes a kind of courage, a kind of endurance in Odysseus beside which the details of the fantastic travels and struggles pale. As Karen Horney, the great Viennese psychiatrist of the thirties observed when discussing masculine anxieties, "in the sexual act, males have to perform, women do not." Critics often observe that the five-hundred-line Ogygia experience is only in the narrative to provide a time lapse for Telemachus to reach his late teens, although it is also here that Odysseus' famous rejection of Calypso's gift of immortality occurs. Five hundred lines seem more appropriate for the more arresting description of the couple's erotic arrangements. With this episode, the narrator has introduced a comic counterpart to the ubiquitous comments on the faithful Penelope's celibacy, that is, the image of her husband manfully performing his nightly duties in the home of the insatiable Calypso. It is comic, yes, but also every man's deepest fear.

To use the word "comic" requires a definition of terms. One would like to imagine Odysseus' predicament comic in the sense of "funny," except that there is nothing more noto-

riously difficult than trying to gauge whether something that seems amusing or laughable in a faraway, different culture was meant that way. As Louis MacNeice famously put it when talking about Greek antiquity, “it was all so unimaginably different, and all so long ago.” There are other episodes which generate the same uncertainty, for instance, the stark-naked Odysseus’ encounter with Nausikaa on the beach, or Menelaos and Helen trying to top each other’s memories of Odysseus while all the time engaging in some pretty serious conjugal crossfire, or Queen Arete trying to dominate in the banquet hall at Scheria while her husband’s steward doggedly shifts the focus back onto the king. Those moments are high social comedy for someone reared on Noel Coward, Oscar Wilde, or Neil Simon. I only hope they were meant that way, although I am happy to take refuge in the theory of the intentional fallacy, and laugh no matter what.

To get back to definitions, there is also “comic” used as the opposite of “tragic,” when referring to perspectives, modes, tones—any number of terms come to mind—when defining narratives. The *Iliad* is tragic we say, the *Odyssey* is comic. The easy definition is that the former ends in sorrow and despair, the latter more ambiguously has, to put it crudely, a “happy ending,” in the sense that the major characters have all survived, and the grand objective of their reunion, father, son, and wife, has been achieved.

Comic narratives are generally defined as life-affirming. The late-fourth-century CE critic Evanthius wrote, “Homer made the *Iliad* as a tragedy, the *Odyssey* as a comedy,” defining this as “tragedy is a repudiation of life, just as comedy is a grasping of it” (*in tragoedia fugienda vita, in comoedia capessenda*). Comedy, then, is all about seizing hold of the life force: sexual intercourse, eating, sexy women, babies, and erections are some of the common motives of the genre, no matter which form it takes, drama, for instance, or poetic verse. The eating and drinking at the banquets of Scheria are just as much an expression of this sense of the comic as is the notorious meeting between Odysseus and

Nausikaa on the beach. It is equally true of the depiction of the relationship of Calypso and Odysseus. To test your sense of the truth of this proposition try imagining Achilles or Patroklos or Agamemnon or Diomedes in those scenes. Even poker-faced, earnest Hektor would sweat and wriggle nervously. Those figures are not meant for the comic moment.

That said, one will note as well that the Ogygia and Scheria episodes both have a surface charm. Events on the island of Ogygia are amusing, especially when Calypso gets into a temper over the discrimination practiced on female deities who want to hang on to their human male lovers, and even more when Odysseus tries to explain to the resentful, frustrated Calypso that, delightful and beautiful as the island nymph is as a sexual partner, he has a—well, let's face it—pedestrian need to get back home to his own kind. The events on Scheria are even more the stuff of our drawing room comedy in the sense that they dramatize so exquisitely the unspoken or half-spoken negotiations between humans that are the mark of highly evolved persons—I am thinking of the French version of that word: *évolué*.

As a prelude to the narrative transformation of Odysseus into Cinderella, that is, the scenario of an underdog coming out magically on top, the narrator portrays Odysseus in the humiliating pose of sexual servant and court entertainer. The former situation requires his fairy godmother's help to get free of it. In the latter situation, his singer's skill wins him what he most wants—passage back to Ithaca. But the episode on the island of Scheria begins with another moment of sexual frustration and humiliation, which is remarkable. It is drawn in an exceedingly subtle fashion because ancient writers, as all males throughout history, had an instinct against foregrounding male sexual situations other than the triumph of the predator.

Odysseus wakes on the beach to the sound of female voices. Shall we imagine him tumescent as is generally the case for males upon awakening? He goes forward out of his hiding place, sees Nausikaa, and the narrator draws atten-

tion to his naked state and his genitals by mentioning that he breaks off a branch to cover them with its leaves. He thinks to kneel as a suppliant before her, then quickly decides not to take her by the knees. Why? Because, one can imagine, he is naked and for his own support he would have to lean in with his naked chest against those lovely, dimpled, teenaged knees. And why does the narrator introduce Odysseus pondering the matter? So as to direct his male auditor / reader to the fantasy I have just suggested. Moments later she tells him that she will have some of her young maidens wash him, a commonplace of hospitality at that time, and he demurs.

Again, the narrator draws attention to something that highlights Odysseus' own sexual confusion, his vulnerability, in the situation. It is marvelously comic in the drawing-room comedy sense of the term, and grandly comic in the expression of the force of life so manifest in the *Odyssey* narrative. For purposes of the immediate narrative, it also shows Odysseus vulnerable to a woman again, just as the Calypso episode demonstrated. Here on the beach in Scheria, Odysseus must endure the ensnaring gaze, the controlling gaze, that which males have practiced upon women since time immemorial. He kneels naked in supplication, in the subordinate female position under the evaluating, objectifying gaze of a woman. He does, however, at least manage to triumph over male physical desire, even if it means no touching, as well as washing and clothing himself in a private place. This supreme effort matches his refusal later when he is offered this delectable teenaged virgin as a bride.

It is his homeland that he desires more than anything else. Like Scarlett forever murmuring how she wants to go back to Tara, Odysseus again and again talks of the yearning he feels for his homeland. The attentive reader will note that his longing is generally expressed as a desire to see his son, and a desire to walk once again on Ithaca. Sometimes he mentions his father, remarkably infrequently his wife, the ever-faithful Penelope.

Critics, who we must imagine are worried about Penelope getting her feelings hurt, will argue that such was the discretion of the times that it would have been bad form to mention his wife too frequently as though her reputation, her private person would be compromised by his public avowal of an interest in her. Literary historians like to categorize the story of Penelope and Odysseus as the first intimation of a major narrative pattern found in later novels, or romances, as they are called, that is, the story of the star-crossed lovers, separated by some cruel twist of fate, who spend the entire plot-time fighting to rejoin one another and thus live happily ever after. One thinks of Chariton's glorious *Chairias and Callirhoe*, an absolutely charming, crazy, and witty story working this theme. But that, of course, is not exactly the way the story plays out here. Once he is home and in bed with Penelope, the celebrated reunion does indeed take place, but thereafter she is never mentioned either by her husband or by the narrator. And we must remember that in his famously entertaining travelogue Odysseus mentions meeting Tiresias in the Underworld who tells him that once home, he will set out again to travel further. This could be a subconscious aversion on the part of Odysseus to staying put at home with his wife, just the kind of experience he has only too recently undergone in Calypso's cave on the island of Ogygia. For those auditors / readers who sympathize with Penelope, who want to praise her for her chastity and abstinence, there is no reason to believe that that is due to her wish to remain true to her absent husband. Yes, there are protestations of love and tears of longing. But certainly that wonderful dream when she cries over the death of her geese attacked and killed by the murderous eagle dramatizes the conflict in her feelings. It is much more likely that Penelope stays away from the suitors and in the women's chamber because she knows that once she selects another husband and he is king, Telemachus will be murdered. No, she is celibate so as to protect her son until he is old enough to assume the throne. Perhaps, indeed, her decision to hold the contest

stems from her recognition that, upon his return from the mainland, Telemachus is sporting a newly-sprouted beard, and that thus times have changed.

In the same travelogue delivered to the court on Scheria, Odysseus can indulge in a fantasy of sexual excitement as he describes the cat-and-mouse game Hermes warns him he will have to play with the dangerous, erotic Circe. That is the kind of challenge to which a male will rise, one might say, with infinite delight, and one remembers that the narrator has Odysseus confess that it was only the intervention of his crew that motivated him to get out of Circe's bed and back on the road. No doubt he, like any other male, was more comfortable in this adulterous situation knowing or hoping that his wife at home was keeping herself for him. Such is the irony of gender.

The narrator has one more story line to use as binding for the disparate elements of his plot, when he structures events loosely on the theme of a man's life. For this he uses the Telemachus episodes for youth; Odysseus on his travels for a man in his prime, for which the Ogygia incident is as pertinent as the Scheria scenes; then Ithaca for the man returning home in later years, followed by a curious scene of old age when he introduces Odysseus making a visit to his elderly, frail, and possibly senile father, Laertes, at the very close of the poem. The narrator has just finished describing Achilles' funeral, which is a logical decorative motif to conclude the stages of a life lived—what is more, a comic affirmation of Odysseus, who is alive at the end, while Achilles, the tragic hero, appropriately enough, dies. The narrator has managed to invest the visit to Laertes with a combination of the poem's themes: the stages of life, for one; the magical powers of transformation for another, as Athena gives old Laertes a temporary makeover so he can go into battle; then, the heroics of battle narrative, as the temporarily rejuvenated fellow goes out in armor to the fray.

It is tantalizing that Odysseus lies to Laertes when first they meet, giving himself a false identity. Where is Odysseus

the man who breaks down sobbing for the years he missed with his own son Telemachus? Is it because the narrator, true to the repetitive nature of oral poetry, cannot structure scenes of arrival and greeting in any other way in this poem? Does it show the fundamental paranoia of Odysseus that cannot be erased even in this moment of familial intimacy? Does Odysseus only know how to lie?

I would like to end this talk with a somewhat improbable analysis of a moment that for me sheds light on Odysseus' seeming cruelty and coldness toward his father. I believe that the motivation for his behavior lies in the response the audience might make, if only subconsciously, to the story Eumaeus tells Odysseus when he is in disguise shortly after he returns.

The swineherd's account of his life contains another back story, faintly limned yet perhaps perceived at least subconsciously by the audience of the *Odyssey*, indeed, perhaps not all that clear to the narrator who created it. Eumaeus describes how he, a king's son, was betrayed by his nanny and given to pirates. They in turn sold this young boy to the royal family of Ithaca as a palace servant. Here he stayed until, as he says, he and Odysseus' sister, Ktimene, became too intimate whereupon he was sent off to the opposite end of the island to take up the life of a swineherd. The reference to Ktimene evokes a household scene where Odysseus and his sister were encouraged—or it was tolerated—to accept the lad as their playmate, a companion of some sort, until pubescence set in.

So Odysseus must have heard Eumaeus' sad life-story when he himself was a boy. A novelist would have used this material: the young Odysseus listening wide-eyed to the mournful little Eumaeus evoking the idyllic home of his infancy, the travails of his capture and transport. It is both the perfect motive for the demonstrable paranoia and mistrust of Odysseus—which are not necessarily commonplace psychological baggage for the pampered son of a king—and an ironic gloss on the disrupted life and wanderings of our hero later on in the narrative.

Odysseus and his sister seem not to have resisted the arbitrary and summary removal of their playmate, his utter disappearance from their lives. Certainly, the narrator does not give Odysseus any emotion now on hearing the story, nor does Eumaeus suggest that the brother and sister tried to prevent his removal to the harsh and lonely life of a swineherd. The sudden dismissal of their playmate by Odysseus and Ktimene's parents, while obviously commonplace in the circumstances, nonetheless is cruel and cold, even if unwittingly so. Perhaps only an American of this time and place in history would pause to put that construct on the swineherd's story. Still, it is interesting to consider that it serves as an introduction for Odysseus to the land where he was born; it is almost the first thing he hears once he is back on the island. The coldness, the emotional deprivation sensed in this story, is perhaps mirrored in the moment when Odysseus lies to his father. What kind of a king was Laertes, one wonders. It inspires the reader to think how hard it is to parse the political situation in Ithaka and surrounding territories; certainly Odysseus is so suspicious that he can only imagine returning to his kingdom in disguise. Eumaeus, the swineherd, vows his undying loyalty to the absent king. Does he represent the mass of the peasantry? Why then did Odysseus not go through the countryside rallying support and storming the palace? The narrator keeps those questions suppressed; instead, he keeps his audience in thrall to the demands of the story lines that will all converge on success and triumph.

The Homeric poems are thought to have been originally composed orally, probably over a long period of time, by generations of chanting poets, shaping the story and passing it on. The audience heard what it could in the split second of delivery; the subtleties perhaps emerged through years of repeated listening. The contemporary *reader* of these texts, pausing, going back, pondering, meditating, has an entirely different understanding. It is almost a different poem. The strong story lines surrender their grip; details and hidden impressions surface.

Odysseus can become less the “ideal of excellence” as President Brodhead saw him—no doubt inspired by years of teaching him as an icon of western civilization in his humanities courses—and more the flawed figure that the letter-writer to *The New Yorker* outlined. The same dichotomy exists between the boys in their bright uniforms, whose padding and protective gear make them into mannikins of a stylized ritual and drama as they come running out onto the field in all their glamour to the shouts of the roaring crowd, and the frightened, bleary-eyed, inebriated young men being loaded into the police van for a trip to the station for their mug shots.