



The Iliad, the Odyssey and Their Audiences

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THE *ILIAD*, THE *ODYSSEY* AND THEIR AUDIENCES

It was a good song, but it had not the key to ladies' chambers.

Chanson de Girart de Roussillon

It has been easy to take the apparently detached viewpoint of the two early Greek epics¹ as actually objective, a window on a 'Heroic Age', on a 'Homeric society' and its values. We used to ask whether 'Homeric society' belongs to the poets' own time or to some earlier one.² We still ask how to characterize and explain the ways in which the 'Homeric world' differs from *any* world that we can accept as having existed: we answer with phrases such as 'poetic exaggeration' and 'epic distance'. We have constructed 'Homeric society', but it remains an isolate. It can tell us nothing in return of the poets' intentions, or of the society of their time, unless we have a working hypothesis as to the place in that society that was held by the poets and their audiences.

This demands equal attention to both. It is now commonplace that oral literature is the product of interaction between poet and audience in a way in which merely written literature cannot be.³ We know the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to be works composed in a tradition of oral literature (whether we think the poets, or their contemporaries, or some later person, first wrote them down). We know this because we recognize in them, on a small scale, the building blocks of oral verse; on a large scale, the architecture of oral narrative. Literate or not, their poets had learnt an art that was oral, and could not have done so independently of audiences. In some epic traditions, notably that of the medieval French *chansons de geste*, the poems in their written form include explicit appeals to an audience for attention and money.⁴ This is not seen in archaic Greek poetry. The *chansons de geste* differ also from Greek epic in referring, explicitly, to previous performances of themselves, as does the *Chanson de Girart de Roussillon*, providing the epigraph to this paper: it will be seen what a difficulty this posed to pre-Parryan editors, who in the search for an 'original' text had to try to edit out all such references. Icelandic sagas resemble the Greek epics in their moral detachment and in the absence of explicit appeal to an audience. But we may think that the audience's part in the making of literature is strongly hinted at in the several

¹ Bowra, for all his comparative stance, was after all a classicist and can have had no clearer examples than the two Greek epics in mind when he wrote that 'though [heroic poetry] celebrates great doings because of their greatness, it does so not overtly by praise but indirectly by making them speak for themselves': *Heroic Poetry* (London, 1952), p. 4; see also Edwards, *IC* v.2–7. In this paper the six volumes of *The Iliad: a Commentary* (Cambridge, 1985–93) are cited as *IC* i–vi; the three volumes of *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 1988–92) are cited as *CHO* i–iii. *Lexikon der frühgriechischen Epos* (Göttingen, 1955–) is *LfE*; Liddell and Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford, 1925–40) is *LSJ*.

² I accept, and feel no need to re-argue, Morris's conclusion ('The Use and Abuse of Homer', *Classical Antiquity* 5 [1986] 81–138) that it is 'almost certain that the institutions and modes of thought in the poems were ultimately derived from the world in which Homer and his audiences lived' (p. 82); a world that included the ruins of Mycenae, a world observed by people who knew that ways of life can differ and that the past was different from the present.

³ This 'poet-audience symbiosis' is well explored by Taplin, *Homeric Soundings* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 2–6; cf. H. Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie* (New York, 1951), pp. 15–20.

⁴ Examples are given by J. Rychner, *La Chanson de Geste* (Geneva, 1955), by D. J. A. West in A. T. Hatto (ed.), *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* 1 (London, 1980), and by J. J. Duggan, 'Social Functions of the Medieval Epic in the Romance Literatures', *Oral Tradition* 1 (1986), 728–66. Duggan is wrong to argue that these asides, circumstantial as they are, form proof that the poems were copied down from normal performances: no clerk of those times could have kept up the requisite speed.

episodes of the *Odyssey* in which fictional singers and audiences negotiate (so to speak) what was sung, how it was to be sung, and how well it was going: just as certain sagas, notably *Egil's Saga*, depict the performance of oral poetry.

From what social standpoint, then, did the poets and first audiences of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* observe and transform the world in which they lived? There has been surprisingly little discussion of this question. It is often assumed, understandably, that the poets of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or at least their colleagues in the epic tradition, were just like the *αοιδοί*, 'singers' whom they themselves depict, performing in aristocratic households, at or after banquets.

Ἀοιδοί within the epics ranged over laments, dances, wedding songs (and Phemius has to pretend to sing a wedding song on a less joyful occasion), moral advice, tales of recent warfare, and of the love affairs of the gods.⁵ Yet many can find in these *αοιδοί* a model of professional singers, mainly or even exclusively of heroic epic, and many have applied the model to Homer. It has required adjustment, none the less. Some take the view that real epic singers moved about more than those depicted in the *Odyssey*: according to a recent formulation, 'professional travelling bards' handed down the oral tradition from which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* survive, though all that the *Odyssey* allows (in a single passage of reported speech) is that, as compared with beggars, singers were among people who could be confident of a welcome if they moved. The thrust of this may be compared with that of a parallel remark on craftsmen in the Syriac text of *Ecclesiasticus*, 'Even when they live in a foreign place, they do not need to starve'.⁶ It is sometimes said, too, that epic poets belonged to a guild, in spite of the early evidence, which suggests unfriendly rivalry between singers. 'We are enemies of one another. It is torture for me when I see another singer who knows more than I,' said a Bosnian poet.⁷

At any rate, the likening of 'Homer' to an Odyssean singer goes back to the beginning of the study of the epics. The singer Demodocus is sensitively depicted as blind in book 8 of the *Odyssey*. This is probably why Homer was traditionally said to be blind, a legend earliest expressed in a *Hymn to Apollo*, composed in the sixth century (if not before) in the hexameter of epic.⁸ The link between Demodocus and 'Homer' is made explicit in later texts: 'some say the poet is speaking of himself,' says an ancient commentator on the *Odyssey* at the introduction of the blind singer.⁹

⁵ *Iliad* 24.720, 18.604 (if genuine); *Odyssey* 4.17–18, 23.133, 3.267–72, 1.325–7, 8.254–369, etc. Cf. J. A. Davison, *From Archilochus to Pindar* (London, 1968). A detailed examination of the use of *αείδειν* and *αοιδός* is provided by M. L. West, 'The Singing of Homer and the Modes of Early Greek Music', *JHS* 101 (1981), 113–29. A distinction is often made by scholars between professional *αοιδοί* and those who were 'gifted amateurs': so S. West in *CHO* i. 96, distinguishing *Iliad* from *Odyssey*.

⁶ H. van Wees, *Status Warriors: war, violence and society in Homer and history* (Amsterdam, 1992), p. 5. Later Greek poets, and reciters of Homer, were often highly mobile. Note the opening of *Margites*: 'Ἠλθέ τις ἐς Κολοφῶνα γέρων καὶ θεῖος αοιδός. But within the two epics the word 'travelling' can only be justified by *Odyssey* 17.384: the passage is quoted below and has to be set against *Odyssey* 13.9. The passage from *Ecclesiasticus*, which does not appear in the Greek version, is as quoted by W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), p. 23.

⁷ M. Murko, *La Poésie Populaire Épique en Yougoslavie au Début du XXe Siècle* (Paris, 1929), p. 21; on rivalry among bards see references given by M. W. Edwards, *Classical Antiquity* 9 (1990) p. 314, nn. 9–12; A. Ford, *Homer: the poetry of the past* (Ithaca, 1992), pp. 93–101, 118. The two epics offer merely negative evidence on the point (one never sees two singers together), but we may consider that *Odyssey* 17.384 and Hesiod, *Works and Days* 25–6 are part of the same trend of popular thought. 'Members of a guild': see e.g. *LfE* i. 982 line 69.

⁸ *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 165–78. See Taplin, *Homeric Soundings*, p. 40.

⁹ Scholia EV on *Odyssey* 8.63.

If the poets *were* like these singers, then perhaps their audiences, too, should have resembled the fictional audiences described in the *Odyssey*—the kings of Scherie and Ithaca, their dinner companions, their families and servants. Hainsworth is one of the few authors who troubles to set out in words a view of what the original audience for Greek epic may have been, making his deductions from *Odyssey* books 1 and 8, which ‘represent the audience as the guests of a princeling at dinner. The audience was therefore male and aristocratic...’¹⁰ It is interesting that he leaves the families and servants out of account.

This view is widely shared. It penetrates scholarly work in neighbouring fields, so that Fågerström, for example, can write: ‘The aristocrats who listened to the songs of Homer can hardly have been very different from [the] gift-devouring basileis who made tenants or even slaves out of the farmers.’¹¹

And it seems to follow, considering the status of the hosts and patrons at these dinner parties, that epic poets would have had to speak for royal (or, if none, aristocratic) interests. Maehler set this thesis out clearly: ‘Common to both epics is that they were created for an aristocratic society, whose needs they fulfil, whose views and preoccupations the poets share for the time being. The poet lives in his society and with his audience.’¹² The opinion seems now to be generally held and further hypotheses can be built upon it.¹³

These prevailing views deserve to be questioned. Their initial plausibility comes from the personalities of the *Iliad*, almost all of them wealthy warriors and ‘leaders of men’. But to see the poets as royal or aristocratic propagandists gets us nowhere with the overall themes of the poems: not with the *Iliad*, which narrates an unnecessarily protracted and counter-productive dispute among kings and aristocrats; not with the *Odyssey*, in spite of its fairly happy ending in Odysseus’s return. The *Odyssey*’s poet describes not an army engaged in prolonged war but a sporadically peaceful society, one in which it is evident that events may depend on the characters and actions of women, of children, of serfs at least as much as on those of kings and warriors.

Hainsworth, discussing the singer’s position in great houses as depicted in the latter poem, recently observed: ‘The conditions described are not such as would naturally give rise to the art form of the monumental epic.’¹⁴ There is indeed a problem here: and quite different circumstances for the performance of archaic Greek epic are imaginable. As a quick reminder of some of the possibilities we may again consider Bosnia:

They sing especially during the long winter evenings around the hearth and at parties in well-off peasants’ houses, at wakes, at religious and family festivals, and in general on all occasions for rejoicing, especially weddings. They still sing in public in cafés, ... near monasteries and churches, as well as at fairs.¹⁵

Two older theories whose purpose was to account for the different atmosphere between *Iliad* and *Odyssey* help to widen the discussion on the circumstances of their

¹⁰ *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* 1 (1980), 37–8.

¹¹ K. Fågerström, *Greek Iron Age Architecture: developments through changing times* (Göteborg, 1988), p. 143.

¹² H. Maehler, *Die Auffassung des Dichterberufs im frühen Griechentum bis zur Zeit Pindars* (Göttingen, 1963), p. 34 [my translation].

¹³ E.g. Janko, *IC* iv. 38.

¹⁴ Hainsworth, *CHO* i. 349–50; in his chapter ‘The *Iliad* as Heroic Poetry’ in *IC* iii. 32–53 he does not, I think, pursue this idea.

¹⁵ Murko, *Poésie Populaire Épique en Yougoslavie*, p. 13. Singers were also invited to noblemen’s houses (ib.). Compare the remarks of Avdo Međedović in A. B. Lord (tr.), *The Wedding of Smailagić Meho* (Cambridge, MA, 1974).

composition. Samuel Butler, romantically attributing the distinction to the nature of the poet, hypothesized an *Authoress of the Odyssey* (London, 1897). But Bentley, long before, had appealed to the nature of the audience: Homer's works were 'to be sung by himself for small earnings and good cheer at festivals and other days of merriment; the *Ilias* he made for the men, and the *Odysseis* for the other sex.' Kirk, in an important and little-quoted section of his well known *Songs of Homer*, revived the suggestion that weddings and fairs are at least as likely as more formal and high-class occasions to have furnished an audience to the poets of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Kirk, one must add, made clear his belief that while the 'popular or market-place poet' was a tenacious survivor, 'the court minstrel is the typical poet in the Heroic Age': the myth of decline and degradation is a potent one. Taplin, in *Homeric Soundings*, has now taken up the idea of festival performance, and argued forcefully that a three-day or three-night *Iliad* could have originated in just such circumstances.¹⁶

There is a need to redefine the boundaries within which the poets of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and their first audiences must be sought. Direct evidence for the enquiry can come only from the text of the two epics. But in re-examining some features of the social life that they depict, we approach them not altogether without clues. We can point to an instructive pattern in some of the problems that have puzzled ancient and modern commentators; for these have indeed found one or two details in Homer's depiction of reality difficult to reconcile with the reality in which they imagined him living.¹⁷ Some points made here will recall Griffin's 'Heroic and Unheroic Attitudes in Homer': he, too, found commentators ready to question or even to delete passages that they considered unheroic.¹⁸

Many descriptions of scenes, and many habitual human activities, recur in the poems: it is clearly appropriate to the economy of this narrative tradition that as often as the poets wish to describe such a setting or narrate such an activity they will use the same words, though varying the level of detail and making adjustments for the characters and circumstances. The 'typical scenes', and other repeated passages, have evidently become more numerous and more closely repetitive in the hands of early editors and commentators,¹⁹ but that trend would not have begun had repetition not been a recognized feature of the 'Homeric' style. So a king's house, as described in

¹⁶ R. Bentley, *Remarks on a Late Discourse of Free-Thinking* (London, 1713); G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 274–80, 135–8; Taplin, *Homeric Soundings*, pp. 22–31, 39–41; note also M. Silk, *The Iliad* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 14–15. Bentley's statement, though intentionally controversial, was not mere speculation: it has solid support in ancient authors. There are plenty of more complex theories, but they fit with difficulty into what is known of oral poetry and its making. There has been talk of teams of performers (for references, Taplin, p. 28 n. 27). G. Nagy asserts that the Homeric epics were composed for competitive relay recital at festivals ('the Homeric testimony... belies the synchronic reality': *Pindar's Homer* [Baltimore, 1990], p. 24 with text and footnotes of pp. 21–3), but the evidence on which he bases the assertion is far from 'synchronic' with the composition of the epics.

¹⁷ J. J. Duggan, *The Cantar de Mio Cid: poetic creation in its economic and social contexts* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 3, puts it thus: 'A heuristic strategy for reconstructing the interpretations of those medieval poets and scribes who produced and first preserved the texts is to pay increased attention precisely to passages that do not fit the models and expectations that prior scholarship has provided.'

¹⁸ *Chios* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 3–13. Was there going to be room for Telemachus at Menelaus's house? How would the Phaeacians recompense themselves for their gifts to Odysseus? Griffin (n. 8) quotes modern scholars' doubts of *Odyssey* 4.621, 13.3–15 where these questions arise.

¹⁹ Janko, *IC* iv. Note the discussion of one such case by Athenaeus 180b–182a. Those who wish to investigate the typical scenes of the epics can now begin from a recent review article: M. W. Edwards, 'Homer and Oral Tradition: the Type-Scene', *Oral Tradition* 7 (1992), 284–330.

such repeated passages, is a typical king's house in the imagined society; a dinner is a typical dinner; and some typical courtesies of the imagined society are embodied in the repeated scene of the feeding of a newly arrived guest.²⁰ If this were not so, we could hardly have built 'Homeric society' at all. However, the poets' imagination seems not quite to encompass the grandeur of the households they aim to depict.

Their characterization of a king's house is built on several simple features. It has solid woodwork:²¹ if grander still, it must be made of bronze and gold like Alcinous's house on Scherie, or have quantities of gold, ivory and bronze on display.²² It has a storeroom filled with oil and wine,²³ but there is only one storeroom, a point which was noted with surprise by an ancient commentator, although, as often, the surprise is sublimated in a celebration that life for 'the Poet' or 'the ancients' was as heroically simple as the epic implies: 'The ancients did not put so much effort into making a separate place for everything.'²⁴

The king's house seems to have one main room in which nearly all household activities take place. This fact in itself, now a commonplace of Homeric study, has taken some accepting, for it appeared to Athenaeus, in the third century A.D., that 'Homer calls the heroes' bigger rooms halls and houses and booths, while moderns call them reception rooms and dining rooms',²⁵ or, in other words, that 'room' is synonymous with 'house'. The other essential division of a king's house is the porch: here not only guests sleep, but also a king's unmarried sons: 'and next to him Pisistratus of the good ash spear, leader of men, who was still young of the boys [Nestor] had in his house.' This seemed wrong to the early editor Zenodotus, who deleted two lines here.²⁶

Yes, a king's house has also some smaller rooms. No one, certainly not the poets or their audiences, can doubt that a king's house has more than one room altogether, or that his queen must have a room or rooms of her own. But how solid is their existence in the poets' and audiences' imagination? What are the technical names for these rooms?²⁷ How do the smaller ones lie in relation to the one big hall? It is well known what problems this simple question has caused to commentators ancient and modern. Where was Telemachus's bedroom?²⁸ Where was Penelope's suite, from which she so often came down stairs?²⁹ The poet appears not to have been looking at a sketch-map while singing of the movements of Penelope, Eurycleia, Telemachus and Odysseus in the later books of the *Odyssey*: many, for all that, have tried to map them. Russo, in the new commentary on the *Odyssey*, still thinks it necessary to give a page, inconclusive naturally, to the question of 'the exact location of Penelope's

²⁰ The fullest and clearest examples of these two scenes are not in a king's house but at Eumaeus's farm: the dinner at *Odyssey* 14.409–56 and the feeding of a guest at *Odyssey* 14.72–113. Here separated by some hundreds of lines of text, the two typical scenes are in other cases adjacent or even interwoven.

²¹ *Odyssey* 17.264–8 etc. An excellent outline of a Homeric hero's household, friendships and estate as depicted in the totality of references in the two epics is given by van Wees, *Status Warriors*.
²² *Odyssey* 7.86–94; *Odyssey* 4.71–6.
²³ *Odyssey* 2.337–343.

²⁴ Scholia EMQ on *Odyssey* 2.340.

²⁵ *Τῶν δὲ ἥρωικῶν οἰκῶν τοὺς μείζονας Ὅμηρος μέγαλα καλεῖ καὶ δώματα καὶ κλισίας, οἱ δὲ νῦν ξενώνας καὶ ἀνδρώνας ὀνομάζουσι* (Athenaeus 193c).

²⁶ Scholia HMQR on *Odyssey* 3.400–401.

²⁷ Consider Eustathius (*Commentary on Homer* 1427.37) on *Odyssey* 1.426: 'Ὅρα δὲ ὅτι παρὰ μὲν Ὅμηρῳ θάλαμος καὶ ἀνδρείος οἶκος λέγεται. οἱ δὲ μεθ' Ὅμηρον τὴν γυναικωνίτην οὕτω καλοῦσιν ('Notice that in Homer a man's room, too, is called *thalamos*. Later authors use the term for the women's quarters').

²⁸ Especially *Odyssey* 1.425–6. For assaults on the problem see e.g. V. Bérard, 'Le Plan du Palais d'Ulysse', *REG* 67 (1954), 1–34; R. D. Dawe (tr.), *The Odyssey* (Lewes, 1993), pp. 79, 163.

²⁹ *Odyssey* 1.330 etc.

chamber' and whether it is or is not her bedroom. He is the inheritor of nearly two and a half thousand years of spiralling scholarship, all centred on the following puzzle: could Penelope (a queen, after all) have a bedroom close enough and open enough to the big hall to enable her, while ensconced in it, to watch Antinous at dinner throwing a stool at the beggar? This was thought a difficulty by an editor as early as Aristarchus: he marked as suspect the relevant passage of the text on the grounds that it showed Penelope as knowing something she could not know.³⁰

It has not escaped notice that in those of its details that are most clearly imagined and most consistently drawn, a king's house closely resembles some ordinary small houses, such as old-fashioned peasants' houses of twentieth century Yugoslavia,³¹ or indeed the ordinary small house in which Eumaeus is depicted as living. It is tempting to explain away the problem, at least in its outlines, with the assumption that kings' and aristocrats' houses of the poets' own place and time were built on the same pattern: bigger, perhaps, than the houses of the poor, but not essentially more complex. But this is not so. In the ninth and eighth centuries the bigger houses of the Aegean, now known in some numbers, had numerous rooms with distinguishable uses, including elaborate and specialized arrangements for storage.³² The stockpiling of supplies such as grain, oil and wine was, indeed, quite as important to those whose houses have been excavated as it was to the fictional 'heroes': but the houses and stores of the better-off were, in significant ways, quite unlike those of the epics.

An imagined king's house has, of course, enough furniture for feasters to sit 'in rows on benches and chairs'. It has plenty of chairs, enough to stretch from threshold to dark interior.³³ There is even a passage in which Penelope, in distress, 'could no longer bear to sit up on a stool (of which there were many in the house) but sat at the threshold of her decorated room'.³⁴ What could have prompted such a parenthesis but familiarity with households that were short of furniture? And in fact the poet does not imagine enough chairs and stools for *everybody*. This is perfectly reasonable at Eumaeus's farmhouse, where there is naturally hardly any furniture and where a pile of firewood, covered for the time being with Eumaeus's own bedding, can form a temporary seat;³⁵ and the same point is handled with humour, at least, in Odysseus's house, when Eumaeus is shown borrowing the carver's stool in order to obey Telemachus' summons to sit opposite him.³⁶ Elsewhere it passes with a nonchalance somewhat disturbing to commentators. *Odyssey* 6.303–9, in Nausicaa's instructions to Odysseus, is a fine example of the difficulties.

'But when the houses and the yard cover you, go quickly across the hall and up to my mother: she is sitting at the hearth in the glow of the fire, spinning her sea-purple wool, a wonder to see, leaning against a pillar, and maids are sitting behind her; and there my father's chair leans against her, where he sits and drinks his wine like a god.'

³⁰ Russo, *CHO* iii. 42–3 on *Odyssey* 17.492–506; scholia in *H* and in Vind. 133 on *Odyssey* 17.501.

³¹ I. M. Garrido-Bozić, 'Mud and Smoke in the Odyssey', *G&R* 15 (1946), 108–13.

³² Evidence is conveniently gathered by Fågerström, *Greek Iron Age Architecture* (note review by Ainian in *Opuscula Atheniensi* 19 [1992], 183–6). Fågerström finds 'renewal of seafaring and of agriculture as the main subsistence strategy, architecturally heralded by an emphasis on vast, diversified and conspicuous storage facilities' (p. 2). He plays down the contrast between his evidence (which is preponderantly for large houses) and that of the epics, observing correctly that the *Iliad* 'depicts the situation of an encamped army... where dinner habits are likely to diverge from those at home' (p. 133); elsewhere, 'we hear of [pig] pens in Homeros, and also of other supplies in special store rooms' (p. 143), a phrase that crucially misrepresents the epics. We hear only of a *general* store room.

³³ *Odyssey* 1.145, etc., 7.95–6.

³⁴ *Odyssey* 4.716–17.

³⁵ *Odyssey* 14.49–51; *Odyssey* 16.43–8.

³⁶ *Odyssey* 17.328–34.

There has been a tendency, in commenting on this passage, to confuse the layout of Nausicaa's home (admittedly crowded) by trying to find a second *θρόνος*, a second chair, for her mother. The Victorian commentators on the *Odyssey*, Merry and Riddell (2nd ed., Oxford, 1886), wrote of line 307: 'Κίονι κεκλιμένη: this cannot mean that Arete is standing leaning against the pillar, as may be seen from line 305 ["she is sitting"], but it serves to explain the position of her *θρόνος*.' The current edition of Liddell and Scott's lexicon, s.v. *προσκλίνω*, shamelessly adjusts 'leans against her' of line 308 to 'stands by her, i.e. hers'. Both authorities, having created the chair, compel themselves twice to misunderstand 'lean' as 'stand near'.³⁷ Translators suffer the same difficulties and deal with them in various ways. Butcher and Lang's (1879) *Odyssey* has 'her chair is leaned against a pillar... my father's throne leans close to hers', taking Victorian care that Alcinous' seat shall have a grander name than his wife's. Dawe's recent translation (Lewes, 1993) gives up its admirable pursuit of literalness at line 308 with 'my father's chair is placed by her side': but Dawe is one of the few translators who have not invented a second chair. The poet and audience, however, are not concerned at all that Arete shall have something to sit on. First they see her sitting leaning against a pillar with the house-girls sitting behind her (lines 305–307); then they see Alcinous' chair leaning against her (line 308). The two pictures, taken literally, do not quite fit together; rather they form a diagram of the interdependence of maids with housewife and of housewife with husband. Arete is at the centre, spinning her wool, the rock against which her husband leans. Whatever she may have found to sit on, in this domestic vignette there is only one chair.

A king's house in the *Odyssey* has, naturally, many feasters³⁸ and many servants.³⁹ The anonymous abundance of those assisting at meals is striking, and the vagueness of the Homeric picture of the life of the rich has been widely commented on.⁴⁰ There is room in the depiction of meals at Odysseus's house for all the servants who have a part elsewhere in the plot: the housekeeper Eurycleia herself takes part in the serving, and so do the maids, of whom Odysseus's house had fifty. And in addition to these there is room for *κήρυκες* and other attendants waiting on the suitors,⁴¹ for 'boys' and for a 'carver'. But in spite of the in-built repetition of the 'typical scenes', there is nothing much to amount to a logical and consistent specialization of household tasks:⁴² serving meat and pouring wine are 'the sorts of things the worse

³⁷ The Greek is ἀλλ' ὅπότ' ἄν σε δόμοι κεκύθωσι καὶ αὐλή, ὦκα μάλᾳ μεγάροιο διελθόμεν, ὄφρ' ἄν ἴκηαι μητέρ' ἐμήν· ἢ δ' ἦσται ἐπ' ἐσχάρῃ ἐν πυρὸς αὐγῇ, ἠλάκατα στρωφῶσ' ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαύμα ιδέσθαι, κίονι κεκλιμένη· δμῶαι δέ οἱ εἶατ' ὀπισθεν. ἔνθα δὲ πατρὸς ἔμοιο θρόνος ποτικέκλιται αὐτῇ, τῷ δ' γε οἰνοποτάζει ἐφήμενος ἀθάνατος ὤσ. LSJ is agreeing with the German commentators Ameis and Hentze (*Anhang zu Homers Odyssee* [Leipzig, 1889–1900], ad loc.). LSJ also offers 'stands by the pillar'; *LfE* (i. 1671 line 5) attributes this explanation to Pökel, 'Bemerkungen zur Odyssee', *Programm Prenzlau 1861*, p. 8, but though an assiduous reader may be persuaded that αὐτῇ refers to κίονι an audience could hardly take it so. All this argumentation, and the very existence of the alternative reading αὐγῇ 'in the firelight', demonstrate later discomfort at the unacceptably rustic picture that the Homeric text conjures up.

³⁸ *Odyssey* 17.269–71.

³⁹ *Odyssey* 7.103–6; *Odyssey* 22.421.

⁴⁰ The vagueness is, of course, related to the nature of oral literature. The poem is not to be pinned down: the pursuit of a cross-reference backwards was unimaginable for audiences and for poet. There were women in Achilles' tent at bedtime: who can say whether they had been there at dinner time (*Iliad* 9.658–68; Dalby, *JHS* 112 (1992), 29–30)? When had Achilles come by the big thatched house in which Priam found him (*Iliad* 24.448–56)? Where did Odysseus's menservants spring from (*Odyssey* 23.147)? When these features are wanted for the setting, or are temporarily essential to the plot, they exist.

⁴¹ *Odyssey* 1.109–12.

⁴² G. Ramming, *Die Dienerschaft in der Odyssee* (Erlangen, 1973), tabulates titles and duties.

do to serve the good'.⁴³ The range of tasks performed by these κήρυκες, who in contexts outside the *Odyssey* officiated at sacrifices and as heralds, has surprised many. 'In Homer κήρυκες generally do all these things, as in "Their κήρυκες and busy attendants were some of them mixing wine..."', because in heroic times κήρυκες was the name for such servants,' an ancient commentator reasons with consoling circularity.⁴⁴ The rebuilders of 'Homeric society' can even suggest that there were two quite different classes of people, princes' assistants and public officials, both called κήρυκες.⁴⁵ English translators have been very lucky to hit on 'squire' as an equivalent with similarly vague and contradictory associations. West is justifiably sceptical of the reality behind the word: 'The conception of the herald as an official envoy... merges rather uncomfortably with his role as a kind of personal assistant, and we may wonder how far the Homeric picture corresponds to reality at any period.'⁴⁶ It has been observed that the employment of κήρυκες as waiters could have been suggested to the poet of the *Odyssey* by the scene in the *Iliad* (in the description of Achilles' shield) in which κήρυκες, after conducting a sacrifice, set out a meal.⁴⁷

The use of κήρυκες as waiters leads to a further observation, one that will take the argument a step further. The similarity of diet in the *Odyssey* as between poor and rich has long been noticed.⁴⁸ It is indeed unrealistic; but the unreality is not in the poor men's meals, those at Eumaeus's farmhouse. It is not stated and need not be assumed, after all, that Eumaeus and his labourers would have eaten meat every day: such men as they, none the less, were ideally placed to sacrifice on special occasions any piglets whose existence had not yet been noted at the big house, and this they are shown apologetically doing.⁴⁹ It is the meals at king's houses that are unconvincing, for in no palace meal do they eat anything but roast meat, bread and wine; and the poet usually says nothing about the quality of the produce. The restricted diet of Homeric heroes has been the subject of puzzlement since the fourth century B.C.⁵⁰ Both ancient and modern commentators have disagreed over the explanation. Some emphasise the moderation of the Homeric way of life, remarking on the absence of fancy dishes, cakes and desserts;⁵¹ others the wastefulness of the endless killing of animals for the suitors' meals.⁵² Some see the poet's intention as didactic, teaching both that sweets are bad and that meat is good for heroes.⁵³ If a preponderant opinion can be identified, it is that the cooking of vegetables, fish and fowl would have been beneath the dignity of 'heroes'.⁵⁴ Why this should be so is not discussed.

Where was the luxury in this endlessly repeated menu? When so asked, the question has a clear answer. Such a diet would have seemed like luxury only to those who were poor enough to have to eat vegetables and bread and wine nearly all the time. To them, the simple substitution of meat would have made an epic meal. To the really wealthy, on the other hand, variety and quality are likely to have had stronger attractions. A more realistic depiction of the meals of palaces or big houses would

⁴³ The words of Odysseus: *Odyssey* 15.324.

⁴⁴ Scholia on *Odyssey* 15.319, quoting *Odyssey* 1.109–10.

⁴⁵ Van Wees, *Status Warriors*, p. 32, n. 25.

⁴⁷ *Iliad* 18.558.

⁴⁸ *Epitome of Athenaeus* 8f.

⁴⁶ S. West in *CHO* i. 90.

⁴⁹ See *Odyssey* 14.80–81.

⁵⁰ The heroic diet in the *Iliad* is even more restricted: there is a shortage even of bread.

⁵¹ The *Epitome of Athenaeus* (8e–9f, 18e–f) and *Suda* (s.v. Ὀμηρος) both note the absence of cakes and desserts, perfumes and wreaths.

⁵² Scholia Q on *Odyssey* 19.61, which cross-refer to scholia on *Odyssey* 1.147.

⁵³ Plato, *Republic* 404b–c, gives Socrates the opinion that the poet's intention was didactic: roast meat is best and most practical for soldiers. The *Epitome of Athenaeus* 9a similarly argues that the diet described is the most nourishing.

⁵⁴ *Epitome of Athenaeus* 25d and scholia AT on *Iliad* 16.747, followed by most modern scholars.

surely have found room for boiled meats,⁵⁵ milk or cheese,⁵⁶ fish, game,⁵⁷ vegetables, and fruit. The poet gives a lyrical picture of pears, apples, pomegranates, olives, and figs growing in orchards:⁵⁸ no one in the *Odyssey* ate them.⁵⁹

If we now look back, a pattern will become clear. Once they have been perceived, several long-standing inconsistencies of 'Homeric society', of the world in which the characters of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are depicted as living, will yield to a similar solution.

The wrong answer will be reached by elevating the epics throughout, by raising the dignity of the characters and aggrandizing their wealth and status, when the poems give no warrant for it. This method is still tried. The Cambridge commentary on the *Iliad* opines that captive women in a soldier's tent would be 'exempt[ed] from literal bedmaking', forgetting, perhaps, that Nestor's wife made up a bed for Telemachus according to the *Odyssey*.⁶⁰ Stanford's commentary on the *Odyssey* and the new Oxford one both express hopes that Telemachus was 'excluded from [the] degrading task' of killing the unfaithful twelve of his maids and mutilating the goatherd Melanthius: degrading perhaps, but self-imposed. In whose estimation was it less degrading for him to give the job to Eumaeus?⁶¹

The right answer will be found by starting, instead, at the bottom of the social spectrum. The poet's depiction of a small, poor household in its daily life is noticeably less inconsistent and less problematic.⁶² Eumaeus and his fellow labourers are served by only one slave, whose acquisition is explicitly motivated, so that one may picture other such households without any servant. The number of servants in the rich households has long been seen as the product of exaggeration. Hainsworth, for example, sensibly writes: 'The fifty maids are formulaic: the same number serves both Alcinous and Odysseus. Fifty signifies a large number, but it also defines what the Homeric notion of a large number was in this context.'⁶³ We may think the same of the 108 suitors for Penelope's hand,⁶⁴ all feeding off Odysseus's lands and wealth, all dining in his noisy hall and sleeping with the twelve hard-working maids who thus earned their deaths.

For these kings' houses are extrapolated from simpler houses such as Eumaeus's. The palaces of the epics are, in essence, small houses, in which 'room' was indeed more or less synonymous with 'house'.⁶⁵ Naturally Penelope knew all about the

⁵⁵ Plato, *Republic* 404b and the *Epitome of Athenaeus* 25b–e, quoting Eubulus 118, comment on the meagre Homeric evidence for the boiling of meat and the eating of fish—'though they were beside the Hellespont,' adds Plato's Socrates. See also *Epitome of Athenaeus* 9c–e.

⁵⁶ In the *Odyssey* cheese is mentioned only as food for the savage Cyclops (*Odyssey* 9.219–23), providing a legendary pedigree for the excellent cheese of classical Sicily. Cheese had already been known in Greece for about two millennia when the *Odyssey* was composed.

⁵⁷ Fish and fowl are eaten by Odysseus's sailors only when all else fails (*Odyssey* 12.330–31); see scholia T on *Iliad* 16.747. The *Epitome of Athenaeus* 13a–b cunningly argues from the 'bent fishhooks' of the *Odyssey* episode that already in Homeric times Greeks habitually fished: 'The hooks were not forged in Thrinacia, but brought with them on the voyage, surely.'

⁵⁸ *Odyssey* 7.114–26; *Odyssey* 24.337–43.

⁵⁹ *Epitome of Athenaeus* 9e; on vegetables, *Epitome of Athenaeus* 24f, 25d.

⁶⁰ Hainsworth, *IC* iii. 145 on *Iliad* 9.658; cf. *Odyssey* 3.402–3.

⁶¹ Russo, *CHO* iii. 297 on *Odyssey* 22.441–73; Stanford (2nd ed., 1958) on *Odyssey* 22.474–7 ('perhaps—one hopes not—Telemachus').

⁶² *Odyssey* 14.407–56.

⁶³ *Odyssey* 7.103; Hainsworth, *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry* 1 (1980), 46 n. 11.

⁶⁴ *Odyssey* 20.107–8, 16.245–53.

⁶⁵ We may add that the kingly householders of the *Odyssey* sometimes wield a surprisingly restricted influence. Menelaus, King of Sparta, for whom all Greece had gone to war, the only man in the epic with a house so big that he has to be told of a visitor at the door, even Menelaus invites 'neighbours and followers' to his children's wedding: '[his neighbours are] from

reception of the beggar, as she knew of her son's sneeze and of the subject chosen by Phemius for his singing: in houses of one or two rooms, in which women's quarters may be divided off with a simple screen or curtain,⁶⁶ there are no secrets. The life of the kings' houses in the epics is the life of poor people's houses, drawn on a larger scale; the meals are the finest meals that can be imagined from the perspective of a poor household.

How should we characterize the process of imagination that led to the rich households of the epics? 'Poetic exaggeration' and 'epic distance' have been tried. They will serve as labels: as explanations they are no less circular than the scholiast's argument about κήρυκες. The large numbers of attendants, the big houses uncertainly divided into rooms, the big meaty meals, the vaguely characterized wealth in stores and precious metals: given a poet and an audience both relatively unfamiliar with the houses and ways of contemporary aristocrats or kings, this was the currency in which the deeds of past aristocrats or kings could be expressed.

Many of the observations made here are not new. Other features of the epics have long been recognized as remote from kings and courts. For example, the marvellous extended similes most notable in the *Iliad* are vignettes of the life of farmers, shepherds, fishermen and huntsmen. The details of pig-keeping and of boat-building are convincing enough to give grounds for an earlier generation of critics to debate whether Homer was a farmer or a carpenter. The descriptions of sacrifice, taken out of context, argued him a priest. What seems to be new is to set these observations down side by side and to look at what they imply *in unison*.

For they do begin to define for us what was the standpoint of the poems. It may not be precisely that of the poets, nor precisely that of their first audiences, but at any rate it is a standpoint on which the poets and their first audiences could meet.

The poems set before us the great questions of human society: but all the interplay of honour and feud, of gift-exchange and hospitality, of law and custom, of marriage and property, of relative power and influences, is as vital to peasants as to aristocrats. They tell of war: their perspective on war is that of a participant who observes the fates of his peers (at whatever level) and those who face him in line. They tell of gods who are honoured unquestioningly with sacrifice yet whose stories are more like folk tale than myth. They tell nonchalantly of kings and their duties, but no more of these topics than can be seen from the farm and the market-place. Their perspective on kings' houses is much like that of the tenant farmer or craftsman who seldom visited a rich man's house and, if doing so, never went beyond the porch and the big hall. It would be a very lucky singer who, called to perform at the palace, departed with an insider's knowledge of the queen's private apartments.⁶⁷

neighbouring towns, not living in his own city; his followers, those of his own city', explains a scholiast in evident embarrassment (Scholia EQ on *Odyssey* 4.16). Griffin, *Chios* (Oxford, 1984) p. 4 reminds us that Menelaus's guests had to bring their own food.

⁶⁶ With the simplest houses described by Fågerström, *Greek Iron Age Architecture*, compare those of sixth century B.C. Sardis, "'single cell'" buildings of... a plan which would form one large room, very much like village houses in the same area both today and in the past': A. Ramage, *Lydian Houses and Architectural Terracottas* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), pp. 6-7. Ramage conjectures from slots in the walls that the one room would in actual use have been divided either with a curtain or with a wattle wall. (The latter is less likely as it would have required doorway posts: postholes were not found.) Ruth Picardie's description of women's life in rural Iran (*Independent on Sunday*, 13 November 1993) is not irrelevant to the world of the *Odyssey*: 'Families live in one room; privacy in the marital bed is achieved by drawing a curtain. Domestic labour begins at four o'clock in the morning, when the day's bread is baked.'

⁶⁷ Agamemnon left a singer behind in his palace, we are told, as moral guardian of Clytemnestra: the details and probability of this are discussed by both ancient and modern

In the literary and historical study of early Greek epic we must not make the assumption that it was addressed by courtly poets to courtly audiences: carefully examined, internal evidence suggests the contrary, and we may well prefer to find a model for the epic poets not so much in Phemius and Demodocus (whatever metres they used), more in Odysseus, who told his tales to king and swineherd and earned what he needed from each.⁶⁸ Epic concerns deserve to be seen less as the projection into a heroic past of the world view of eighth century aristocrats, more as the projection into wealthy society of the world view of quite humble people: 'Homeric society' is built on the perceptions of the poorest, the least aristocratic, the least powerful of eighth century Greeks. The actions, the possessions, the power and influence of 'the heroes' are not enlarged so that they will be larger than life. What we have seen as 'poetic exaggeration' and 'epic distance' are simply the most satisfactory means to depict the life of the rich in a kind of literature which is essentially a discourse among the people.

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editors. Aegisthus, her lover, killed him. *Odyssey* 3.267–72. I am impressed by much else in R. Seaford's *Reciprocity and Ritual* (Oxford, 1994), but not by his acceptance of the view that the perspective of the poems can be explained in terms of their origin in 'an informal and undeveloped stage of state formation' (p. 6 with references).

⁶⁸ The comparison, made by Alcinous at *Odyssey* 11.367–9, is, as Fränkel points out (*Dichtung und Philosophie*), a compliment both to poet and to audience—and it remains so whether the audience more resembles Alcinous's court or Eumaeus's men. On Odysseus as *αἰδῶς* see also Taplin, *Homeric Soundings*, pp. 30–31.