

“Weaving a design: the irony of disguise in the *Odyssey*”

1. “Come, weave the design (*mētis*)” (13: 386). “I weave my own wiles” (19: 137). “Which of the immortals is weaving deception against me?” (5: 356)
2. Namelessness to recognition as hero; story-telling/singing as part of a plan (*mētis*) to achieve advantage and to control one’s own story. (For singing see also 8:479-81, 496-8. For *mētis* see below.)
  - 1st half: Odysseus goes from nothing (Book 6) to being asked to identify himself (end of Book 8), singing his own fame (Books 9-12), acknowledgement/recognition, and conveyance home with gifts.
 

“I am Odysseus son of Laertes, known before all men for the study of crafty designs” (9: 19).

Alkinoös: “We as we look upon you do not imagine that you are a deceptive or thievish man (...), making up lying stories from which no one could learn anything. You have a grace upon your words, and there is sound sense within them and expertly, as a singer would do, you have told the story of the dismal sorrows befallen yourself and all of the Argives [Greeks]. But come now, tell me this (...): Did you see any of your godlike companions, who once with you went to Ilion [Troy] and there met their destiny?” (11: 363-72).
  - 2nd half: from nothing to disguise, telling stories of the real Odysseus, revelation, recognition and restoration of order.
 

Eumaios: “Such stories he tells! he would charm out the dear heart within you... [A]s when a man looks to a singer, who has been given from the gods the skill with which he sings for delight of mortals, ... so he enchanted me in the halls as he sat beside me” (17:514-21).

“He knew how to say many false things that were like true sayings” (19:203).

“So the suitors talked, but now resourceful Odysseus, once he had taken up the great bow and looked it all over, as when a man, who well understands the lyre and singing, easily, holding it on either side, pulls the strongly twisted cord of sheep’s gut, so as to slip it over a new peg, so, without any strain, Odysseus strung the great bow. Then plucking it in his right hand he tested the bowstring, and it gave him back an excellent sound like the voice of a swallow. (...) and Zeus showing forth his portents [signs] thundered mightily.” (21: 404-13)

Odysseus: “Here is a task that has been achieved, without any deception” (22: 5).
3. Odysseus in disguise:
 

using his two qualities of cunning intelligence/*mētis* and endurance;  
testing appearances, the reality behind appearances.

“You did badly to hit the unhappy vagabond: a curse on you, if he turns out to be some god from heaven. For the gods do take on all sorts of transformations, appearing as strangers from elsewhere, and thus they range at large through the cities, watching to see which men keep the laws, and which are violent.” (17:483-7)
4. Truth, disguise and wandering:
 

truth = *alētheia*, literally ‘unconcealed’; wandering = *alēteia*.  
a wandering beggar is expected to lie

Eumaios: “Old sir, there is none who could come here, bringing a report of him [i.e. of the true Odysseus], and persuade his wife and his dear son; and yet there are vain and vagabond men in need of sustenance who tell lies, and are unwilling to give a true story; and any vagrant who makes his way to the land of Ithaka goes to my mistress and babbles his lies to her, and she then receives him well and entertains him and asks him everything.... So you too, old sir, might spin out a well-made story, if someone would give you a cloak or tunic to wear for it.” (14:122-132)

wanderings: first half of the *Odyssey* versus the second half.
5. Background issues:
  1. Heroism: fame, reputation, name; being a Somebody vs. being a Nobody.  
contrast Achilles (dying on the field of battle, see 5:306, 11:489);  
contrast Agamemnon (tragic homecoming, killed by wife’s lover Aigisthos, who is later killed by Agamemnon’s son Orestes – contrast Odysseus’ son Telemachos with Orestes, and Odysseus’ wife Penelope with Agamemnon’s wife Klytimestra).
  2. Telemachos’ coming of age (1:296-300)  
effect on suitors: they come into the open and plot to kill him (4:667-72);  
effect on Penelope: she decides the time has come for her to remarry, and to hold the bow contest.  
Odysseus to Penelope 20 years earlier: “When you see our son grown up and bearded, then you may marry whatever man you please, forsaking your household” (18:269-70).  
Penelope to Odysseus-in-disguise: “Now I cannot escape from this marriage; I can no longer think of another plan (*mētis*); my parents are urgent with me to marry; my son is vexed as they eat away our livelihood; he sees it all; he is a grown man now, most able to care for the house.” (19:157-61)

3. Gift-giving, hospitality, hereditary friendship, “guest-gifts”:
    - building up fame/a reputation in peacetime, through
      - (1) upholding Zeus’ laws of hospitality (6:206-8, 8:542-7, 9:266-71, 14:56-8),
      - (2) establishing alliances and being given gifts (15:54-5, 19:332-4),
      - (3) raiding & plunder (14:83-6, 230-4);
 contrast Polyphemos’ bad hospitality & bad guest-gifts (9:370, 517), for which he is punished by Odysseus (9:479; see 22:413-7 where Odysseus is the instrument of Zeus punishing the suitors); contrast other bad guest-gifts (20:296, 22:290).
    - 4. Order: cosmic, social and personal balance
      - “giving way to force and violence” in oneself (13:143, 18:139) leads to recklessness (1:7, 34 etc., 20:169-71, 370) & wrongdoing (20:394);
      - social disorder in absence of ruler (17:320-3, 19:314)
        - Eumaios: “Serving men, when their masters are no longer about, to make them work, are no longer willing to do their rightful duties.”
      - ideal government (19:109-14, cf. 4:690-1)
      - the ideal of moderation and balance: “In all things balance is better” (15: 71, see also 7:309-10).
    - 5. Trials and contests (8:186-98; 13:333; 21:323-8)
      - Athene to Odysseus: “Anyone else come home from wandering would have run happily off to see his children and wife in his halls; but it is not your pleasure to investigate and ask questions, not till you have made trial of your wife” (13: 333-5).
      - A suitor: “We are ashamed to face the talk of the men and the women, for fear some other ... might say: ‘...They are not even able to string his bow. Then another, some beggar man, came wandering in from somewhere, and easily strung the bow...’ ...that would be a disgrace on us all.” (21: 323-9)
      - Odysseus revealing himself: “Here is a task that has been achieved without any deception.” (22:5)
    - 6. Poetic skill: dramatic irony.
6. Book 19, the encounter of Odysseus-in-disguise with Penelope:
- dreams, waking visions, sleep, death; wandering from reality; revelation.
  - Eumaios: “A bashful vagabond makes a bad beggar” (17:578).
  - “He knew how to say many false things that were like true sayings” (19:203).
  - “As she listened her tears ran and her body was melted, as the snow melts along the high places of the mountains ... and as it melts the rivers run full flood. It was even so that her beautiful cheeks were streaming tears, as Penelope wept for her man, who was sitting there by her side.” (19: 204-9)
  - Odysseus’ “eyes stayed (...) steady under his lids” (19: 210-11)
  - “Stranger, while before this you had my pity, you now shall be my friend and be respected here in my palace” (19: 253-4).
  - “I say to you without deception, without concealment, that I have heard of the present homecoming of Odysseus” (19: 269-270).
  - “There are none to give orders left in the household such as Odysseus was among men – if he ever existed” (19: 315).
  - “Friend, I will stay here and talk to you, just for a little. To be sure, it will soon be the time for sweet rest, for one delicious sleep takes hold of, although he may be sorrowful.” (19:509-12)
  - “Do not fear... This is no dream, but a blessing real as day. You will see it done. The geese are the suitors, and I, the eagle, ... am your own husband, come home, and I shall inflict shameless destruction on all the suitors’.” (19:546-50)
  - “Lady, it is impossible to read this dream and avoid it by turning another way, since Odysseus himself has told you its meaning, how it will end. The suitors’ doom is evident.” (19:555-7)
  - “Sleep is the oblivion of all things, both good and evil” (21: 85).
  - “This very night, there was one who lay by me, like him as he was when he went with the army [i.e. like Odysseus], so that my own heart was happy. I thought it was no dream, but a waking vision” (21: 88-90).
7. Deception and truth: Homer’s story vs. the disguised Odysseus’ stories, poetic skill and *mētis*.

Note on *mētis*: Athene to Odysseus about their common quality of cunning intelligence (*mētis*): “You and I both know sharp practice, since you are far the best of all mortal men for counsel and stories, and I among all the divinities am famous for wit [*mētis*] and sharpness.” (13:296-9) Note that Athene is the daughter of Zeus when he swallowed up the goddess *Mētis*, as a result of which, according to Hesiod, an earlier Greek poet than Homer (*Theogony*: 886-900), Zeus is assured that the Olympian order will remain intact. The quality of *mētis* is contrasted with that of purely physical skill; either quality might enable a mortal, especially a hero, to overcome difficulties and hence perhaps threaten the gods. It is Odysseus’ *mētis* (9:414 & 20:20) – punning with *mē-tis* meaning Nobody (9:405, 406, 410) – that gets him out of the cave of the Cyclops (= uncivilized physical strength personified). Odysseus succeeds as a hero by exercising intellectual skill, while Achilles had succeeded by exercising physical skill and force. [See J.S. Clay, *The Wrath of Athena*, 1983.]