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Odysseus' trial of the bow as symbolic performance

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Odysseus' 'trial of the bow' follows a pattern commonly seen in world-wide epic, myth and folktale: contenders for the hand of a royal woman must compete in a near-impossible task requiring special skill or strength or both. In Greek tradition, numerous examples include the chariot race for Hippodameia, the footrace for Atalanta, and the archery contest for the hand of Iphitos' daughter Iole, among others. In the Odyssean rendering of this traditional motif, it is enriched through combination with four others: the recognition of the true hero, his transformation, and the exposure, and then punishment, of the false hero(es).¹

The trial of the bow itself consists of a two-part task: (1) stringing Odysseus' heroic bow and (2) shooting through a row of twelve axes. Homer's narrative in Book 21 makes much of the first, in which the Suitors' frustration, Antinoos' sly postponement, and Telemachus' clear capacity for success, are skillfully presented as emblematic of these characters' heroic worth vis-à-vis that of Odysseus. When discussing the second, the bowshot itself, the emphasis of commentators has always been on the nature of the physical act described as 'shooting through twelve axes' (*Od.* 19.578, 21.76), re-stated as 'shooting through iron' (19.587, 21.97). This must consist of making the arrow pass either through the twelve metal axe-blades or through an opening in the axes. This picture is further complicated when, as the shot is actually being performed, Homer adds the new detail that the arrow, in not missing the twelve axes, also did not miss 'the first *στειλειή*' – either 'handle' or 'socket'. The resulting ambiguity has led

¹ 'Recognition', 'Exposure', 'Transformation', and 'Punishment' were identified as components of the traditional tale in the famous work of Propp (1968), who labels them Functions 27, 28, 29, and 30, which normally maintain that sequence. In the *Odyssey*, transformation is strategically displaced to a more effective use in the recognition scene with Penelope in Book 23. Hölscher (1990: 70) notes that the entire preceding account of Odysseus' journey to retrieve the stolen mares, his encounter with Iphitos, and receipt of the 'special weapon', is also filled with traditional folktale motifs, which he refers (nn. 47-49) to other specific Proppian Functions. It is noteworthy that at this critical turning point in the *Odyssey's* plot, the structural elements of the traditional tale become especially prominent.

scholars to propose a variety of interpretations, with no consensus on what Homer meant his audience to imagine. We have, for example, the interesting argument of Walter Burkert (2001 [1973]) that the poet has inherited a traditional Egyptian visual motif – well-documented iconographically – of a royal arrow passing through sheets of metal, sheets originally of copper whose shape allowed them to be misinterpreted as axe-heads. In its transmission to Greece, this image was understood as ‘shooting through axes’ and adopted as sufficiently wondrous to suit the *Odyssey*’s need for a near-miraculous shot that only the rightful king can execute. Our awareness of ancient Near Eastern influence on Homeric epic has increased enormously in recent years, and this explanation has some attractive features; yet it is not fully compelling in all details. It requires us to believe that the axes became twelve in Homer through a vaguely conceived process of expansion (Burkert 2001: 79), and that Homer and his audience thought of Odysseus as the kind of hero who could perform literally miraculous feats of strength, on a level not seen elsewhere in the epic. Moreover, since Burkert remains convinced that *στειλειή* means ‘handle’, his picture of an Amenhotep-like Odysseus piercing metal axe-blades seems inconsistent with his belief that Odysseus’ target was actually the handles.

An alternative view is that argued most energetically by D. L. Page (1973: 93-113) who, taking *στειλειή* as ‘handle’, believes that Homer is referring to votive or cult axes, made entirely of metal with open loops (for hanging on a wall) at the end of their handles. Standing on end with handles straight up, the series of iron loops would offer a target for an arrow that must ‘pass through iron’.

A larger consensus of scholars explaining the arrow passing through iron is that the arrow passes through a small space in the iron axe-heads, a space named precisely as the *στειλειή* of the axe at *Od.* 21.422. The meaning of *στειλειή* is disputed, but a good argument has been made from antiquity – and revived by Stanford (1949: 3-6; 1958: 338-339), Fernández-Galiano (1992: 140-147) and others in this century – that the word is related to *στειλειόν* ‘handle’ in a masculine/neuter vs. feminine metaphorical opposition in which *στειλειόν* means ‘handle’ and *στειλειή* means ‘handle-hole’ or ‘socket’.² Thus the arrow would

² See also Pocock (1961: 346-357; 1965: 12-22) and Fernández-Galiano (1992) for further bibliography. This argument relies on the well-established pattern in the Greek language whereby a masculine (or neuter) noun has a closely related feminine counterpart with altered – and usually derivative – meaning. The pair *στειλειόν/στειλειή* would thus be analogous to *θάλαμος/θαλάμη*, *πέτρος/πέτρα*, *κοίτος/κοίτη*, *τόμος/τομή*, *ήλάκατα/ήλακάτη*, etc.

pass through the series of twelve empty sockets in perfect alignment: an extremely difficult shot, and although impossible according to the laws of physics, easily graspable by Homer’s audience as possible for a hero like Odysseus in the glorious world of the heroic past. For those, then, who seek a realistic basis for envisioning what Odysseus’ bowshot actually consists of, this is probably the best hypothesis.

I would myself offer still another variant on this interpretation: the poet’s decision to suddenly modify our picture of ‘shooting through iron’ at *Od.* 21.422 may be a deliberate and clever narrative strategy, designed to play with the audience’s expectations and fulfill them with a surprise. With the wording of *Od.* 19.578 *καὶ διοιστεύση πελεκέων δυοκαίδεκα πάντων* ‘and shoot through all twelve axes’, followed closely by 19.587 *διοιστεῦσαι τε σιδήρου* ‘to shoot through iron’, Homer prepared his audience for a physically miraculous shot, literally piercing the blades of twelve axes (a demonstration of *βίη* in the tradition of Oriental kings). Then Odysseus man of *μητις*, ‘cunning intelligence’, in the actual performance of the feat, demonstrated that there was a ‘trick’ to it: he shot through iron without the necessity of piercing iron. This strategic ability to balance – and at the right moment successfully *replace* – force with cunning, is the essence of Odysseus’ distinction as a hero. It is exactly the method he has habitually used in overcoming physically daunting obstacles like the Cyclops, Circe, Scylla and Charybdis, and the Sirens, characteristically relying on clever strategy more than mere force.

My larger point, however, is that we miss the essence of Homer’s artistry as a storyteller if we look too closely for the physical reality he describes. A narrowly literal approach is inadequate to this major moment of symbolic statement in the *Odyssey*. This near-impossible bowshot represents, in the most dramatic terms, the moment of Odysseus’ long-awaited return as king. It is an act of epiphany that must convey, with great symbolic force, that the rightful owner now possesses his special bow, a weapon that represents an heroic past in which Odysseus is legitimately rooted but from which the Suitors’ generation is separated by an unbridgeable gap. Their fundamental lack of such heroic qualities as distinguish Odysseus and his generation of Trojan heroes is a principal theme of the epic. The extended description of the hero’s old bow (*Od.* 21.11-41) called attention to this difference. Now, it is Odysseus’ use of the heroic bow to re-assert legitimate kingship that makes a symbolic statement of grand proportions. The true king is back, performing what only the true king can do.

Scholars have noted the fact that the Odysseus of the *Iliad* is not known for his bowmanship, and that the figure of the Greek hero skilled in the bow belongs to an earlier stratum of Greek tradition, where Philoctetes and especially Heracles are pre-eminent.³ Thus the use of a special, powerful bow at this juncture in the story – a bow whose origins go back to the archer Eurytos and are explained in the elaborate digression on Heracles' murder of his guest, Eurytos' son Iphitos – is Homer's way of emphasizing that here we are seeing not only the Odysseus known for his preeminent guile, the man of μῆτις, but also a more archaic aspect of Odysseus as Mycenaean king, a ruler who asserts his right to royal power by performing an unmatched act of physical prowess. And yet, while this performance is a demonstration of strength, it is crucial to understand that its true power resides in its symbolic content.

Symbolic use of the bow as a royal weapon is frequent in traditional narratives, but has a special place within Indo-European epic tradition. The theme of a prince or king proving his royalty by such an extraordinary shot is quite familiar in ancient India, and a surprising parallel to the bowshot of Amenhotep and Odysseus is found in the *Lalita-Vistara*, a hagiographic life of the Buddha (Germain 1954: 18). To demonstrate his worthiness to marry Gopa the daughter of Dandapani, the Buddha offers to show his skill with the bow. He shoots through five iron drums, seven palm trees, and a metal construction shaped like a boar through whose mouth the arrow successfully passes. This performance requires a combination of both force and skill, twin elements that are essential for the success of Odysseus' shot.

The Sanskrit epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* have been noted as offering even closer parallels with the *Odyssey*, with archery contests specifically framed as open competitions to win a royal bride.⁴ In the *Mahābhārata* the hero Arjuna

³ Clay (1983: 89-96) notes that Homer here invites comparison of Odysseus to Heracles, both for parallels and contrast. Danek (1998: 403-406) has a good discussion of the background story of Heracles' role in the siege of Oechalia, and the digressive account of how Odysseus obtained the bow from Iphitos son of Eurytos. Schein (2002), tracing the presence of Heracles throughout the *Odyssey*, explores in depth the complexity of his relationship to Odysseus, where both the similarity and the difference are made problematic.

⁴ Germain (1954: 14-54) cites parallels not only from India but from ancient Iran, Scythia, and China as well as nineteenth-century Russian oral poetry. Among more recent scholarship emphasizing the importance of the Sanskrit parallels see Gresseth (1979: 63-85) and Doniger (1999: 161-162). West (1997: 432-433) surveys the range of parallels from Egyptian, Hittite, and Sanskrit sources, and calls those from Sanskrit "more extensive". An interesting distinction is added by Sergent (1991: 223-226), who notes that the western Indo-European tradition (Germanic, Celtic, Italic) tends to play down the importance of the bow, while the eastern tradition emphasizes

wins his bride Draupadi with a near impossible bowshot: he shoots through a hole in a wheel, and not only pierces the target but knocks it down entirely.

This passage shows some remarkable similarities to Odysseus' achievement, and deserves full quotation. In *Mahābhārata* Book 1.176.5-10 we read about the contest for the hand of the beautiful Draupadi.⁵ Her father Draupada

had a very hard bow made, well-nigh impossible to bend. He had a contraption built in the sky, and onto the contraption [often translated: 'wheel'] he had a golden target fixed. Draupada said: the man who can string this bow, and when he has strung it, can shoot arrows all through the contraption into the mark, will have my daughter.

After five pages describing in fulsome detail the arrival of many suitors, the great catalogue of their names, the luxury of their equipment and dress, etc., we read at 1.179.15:

Then the hosts of kings one after another
Strode bravely about for Krishna's sake,
But so tough was that bow that with all their strength
They failed to cord that bow with its string.
The hardwood bow would recoil and fling
The wide-striding kings of men in the dust.

Eventually the hero Arjuna takes the bow:

In a twinkling of an eye he strung the bow
And took the arrows that counted five.
He pierced the target and brought it down,
Hit through the hole, and it fell with a might.

It is noteworthy that the narrative places similar emphasis, first, upon the repeated difficulty the rivals have with the bow, and then upon the ease with which the hero strings it. Even more significant for making sense of the *Odyssey* passage, Arjuna shoots his arrow through a hole in a presumably metal wheel. If we think in terms of possible Indo-European inherited thematics, there could well be a parallel for Odysseus shooting through a hole in iron axes.

it. He argues that Greek tradition occupies a curious middle position, where the bow is the special weapon of 'marginalized' figures, including heroic ones. The translation of *Mahābhārata* is from van Buitenen (1973: 548-553), and of *Rāmāyana*, from Shasti (1962: 133-134).

In the *Rāmāyana* 1.66-67 we also have a special bow, the bow of Shiva, that has been handed down across generations, now in the hands of King Janaka. He will give his daughter Sita in marriage to whichever prince has the strength to bend this bow. 'Five hundred men,' the text says, 'tall and of great strength, were barely able to draw the eight-wheeled cart on which the iron box containing the bow was placed.' There follows a list of kings, princes, and gods, even Great Serpents, who have not been able to bend the bow. When the hero Rama is shown the bow, he says:

"This celestial and excellent bow I shall take into my hand and endeavor to raise and even bend it!" [...] Thereupon Rama, as if in sport, raised the bow with one hand, the assembled multitude looking on from every side; and thereafter, smiling, with a slight effort, he prepared the bow and that mighty one drew it. By his immensurable strength, the illustrious Rama, bending the bow, broke it in two with a sound resembling the crash of thunder.

Here the parallel consists not in the bowshot, but in the detail of the hero finding it easy to do what was impossible for all other contenders.

It is commonplace knowledge among students of Sanskrit epic that the bow is by far the weapon most characteristic of royalty, and scholars have extended this claim to most cultures of the Middle East and Central Asia. When Attila the Hun died, his enemy the Emperor Marcien saw in a dream a broken bow. The Persian King Mithridates II was depicted seated on his throne with a bow in his hand, as was the Ottoman Selim II (Roux 1995: 199). One can multiply examples. Clearly the bow is the weapon par excellence of royalty, in both the Indo-European tradition and the culturally adjacent Near East, and the oral narratives of these lands contain a deeply embedded motif of the bow used by the returning king to reclaim his throne and his bride. I also note that the Zubeys, a Tatar people of Central Asia, had an oral epic about the hero Alpamysh who used a bow-contest to defeat his wife's suitors in exactly the same manner as Odysseus (Zhirmunsky 1966).

So, when Odysseus re-establishes his identity by mastery of his bow, this scene must resound, for any ancient audience, with deeply felt traditional meaning. Homer makes the most of this traditional motif by getting two great dramatic moments out of it in Book 21: first the drawn-out scene of stringing the bow, capped with the wonderful harper simile; and then the impossible shot itself. This leads immediately into Book 22, where Odysseus the archer-king pro-

claims he will now attempt a new target, one never tried before (in contrast to his characteristic and previously performed special shot): the throat of Antinoos.

Odysseus' bowshot contains still another symbolic element which has received surprisingly little attention in existing Homeric scholarship. I refer to the sexual – or so-called 'Freudian' – symbolism inherent in shooting the arrow through the axes, which is surprisingly overlooked in scholars' discussions of this scene. This king is returning to re-claim his wife from the sexual advance of one hundred and eight Suitors, who are eager to share her bed. The culminating moment of Odysseus' reunion with Penelope will be their return to the *thesmon* of their old bed in Book 23. Hence the competition over who can best string the bow and shoot through the narrow target, for the sexual possession of Penelope, must inevitably be read as a sexual metaphor. Such a reading seems easier for Sanskritists than for Hellenists. In the words of the eminent Indologist W. Doniger (1999: 162), speaking of the bowshots of Hindu epic: "The symbolism of the bow is primarily erotic: the blatant sexual metaphor of the arrow moving through the hole to pierce the target needs no Freudian to gloss it."

I would sum up the above argument by saying that Odysseus' extraordinary bowshot is to be appreciated as a 'multivalent' statement, an act that signifies on several levels. It doubles as both a physical achievement – the turning point of action in the narrative of the returned king – and a symbolic statement. And the symbolic content itself is doubly 'charged': it draws from ancient traditional concepts of the royal bowshot as proof of identity and entitlement to the bride, as well as from manifestly sexual symbolism of the phallic arrow successfully penetrating the narrow target. Thus the return of the true husband is as significant as the return of the true king, as the conjugal and symbolic planes are compressed into one and the same act.

The reunion with Penelope in Book 23 will constitute the final stage of the return, characterized by the emotional release shown in the tears shed by both husband and wife, a dissolution of the accumulated tension. But first that tension must be brought to its dramatic apex. The trial of the bow and successful shot create that apex. And they do so because their performance is not only physically difficult, it is symbolically charged.

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