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THE FATHERS OF TELEMACHUS

ABSTRACT

The poet of the Odyssey *exhibits great artistic flexibility in his handling of the highly conventional elements of early Greek epic: larger themes and narrative patterns, character and episodic doublets and triplets, type-scenes, and even short formulaic phrases. The poet's presentation of a sequence of 'just as a father to his own son' formulas over the course of the* Odyssey *is examined here, with a view to illustrating how they interact with one another to convey sentiments that are at first genuinely pathetic, arousing in the audience sadness and sympathy, but then increasingly ironic and even sarcastic.*

Keywords: Homer; *Odyssey*; Telemachus; fathers; sons; formula; irony; oral poetics

INTRODUCTION

Young Telemachus cuts a rather pathetic figure in the first four books of Homer's *Odyssey.* His first reference to his long-absent father is illustrative: he does not even mention Odysseus by name but simply refers to him as 'a man whose white bones rot somewhere in the rain, as they lie upon the land, or a wave rolls them about in the sea' (1.161–2):

> ἀνέρος, οὗ δή που λεύκ' ὀστέα πύθεται ὄμβρῳ
> κείμεν' ἐπ' ἠπείρου, ἢ εἰν ἁλὶ κῦμα κυλίνδει.

Yes, Telemachus continues, if Odysseus were to return to Ithaca he would quickly put all the suitors to flight, but, even though there are occasional reports that he will return, he has in fact already met an evil fate and lost his day of return (1.163–8). Telemachus' expression of doubt and despair here is reiterated so often in the early books of the *Odyssey* (1.163–8, 354–5, 396, 413–16; 2.96; 3.240–2) that it becomes a leitmotif that serves as a counterpoint to the prospect of an eventual return home for Odysseus.

Telemachus' lament about the death of his father (1.161–2) introduces his conversation with the newly arrived visitor, Athena, disguised as Mentes, an old guest-friend of Odysseus' family from the island of Taphos, who is about to inform Telemachus that Odysseus is still alive and to predict that he will soon return home (1.179–205). Athena–Mentes will also provide reassurance to Telemachus, who appears to have doubts even about his kinship with Odysseus (1.214–20), by mentioning that he resembles his father in appearance, here specifying that he looks like his father in his head and in his beautiful eyes (1.206–11). Later, during Telemachus' quest to discover news of his father in Pylos and Sparta, Nestor will remark that Telemachus resembles his father in the manner of his speech (3.120–5), Helen will exclaim that based on his looks the newly-arrived visitor must indeed be Telemachus, the son of Odysseus (4.138–46), and Menelaus will concur that the visitor resembles Odysseus in his feet and hands, the glancing of his eyes, and his head and hair (4.148–54). Surely, these observations about Telemachus' similarity in appearance and demeanour to Odysseus by those who know Odysseus best are certain to dispel any doubts about Telemachus' kinship with his father.

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For the time being, though, Telemachus' response to Athena–Mentes is once again full of pathos: 'My mother says that I am his [Odysseus' son], but I myself do not know, for never has anyone been certain of his own parentage' (1.215–16):

> μήτηρ μέν τέ μέ φησι τοῦ ἔμμεναι, αὐτὰρ ἐγώ γε
> οὐκ οἶδ'· οὐ γάρ πώ τις ἐὸν γόνον αὐτὸς ἀνέγνω.

Moreover, Telemachus continues, I would not be so stricken with grief had Odysseus died with his companions in Troy, in which case he would have been honoured with a funeral mound, and he would have won great glory for his son. But in fact the storm winds have snatched him away without glory, and he has left me only pain and lamentation (1.231–44).

Athena–Mentes is greatly disturbed by Telemachus' dour disposition and dire circumstances: she relates to Telemachus an anecdote about once meeting Odysseus, expresses to him her wish that his father return and drive out the suitors, suggests that he call a meeting of the Ithacan assembly and order the suitors to disperse, and advises him meanwhile to go in search of his father to Pylos and Sparta (1.253–305). Telemachus again responds pathetically by remarking that she has spoken these words with kind intentions 'just as a father to his own son', ὥς τε πατὴρ ᾧ παιδί (*Od*. 1.307–8). In the absence of his real father, Telemachus is latching onto a stranger as a surrogate.

A FORMULAIC PHRASE

Pathos, irony and sarcasm, all Greek words, were features of Greek literature from its beginnings. One of the most pathetic and, later, ironic and sarcastic expressions in Homer's *Odyssey* is when Telemachus—or the external narrator, in one case—asserts his regard for someone as a surrogate for his absent father. In these expressions a Homeric formula recurs that epitomizes Telemachus' reality: 'just as a father (speaks to/loves/cares for) his own son', ὥς τε πατὴρ ᾧ παιδί / ὡς δὲ πατὴρ ὃν παῖδα / ὡς εἴ τε πατὴρ ἐὸν υἷα / πατὴρ ὡς ... υἱος.

The formula occurs six times in Homer, twice in the *Iliad* and four times in the *Odyssey*. In its most often attested form, it fills the section of the dactylic hexameter verse between verse beginning and third-foot feminine caesura. The poet of the *Iliad* describes how Achilles mourns for the dead Patroclus just as a father mourns for his own son (23.222):

> ὡς δὲ πατὴρ οὗ παιδὸς ὀδύρεται ὀστέα καίων

At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, as we have just observed, Telemachus responds to the prudent advice of Athena, disguised as Mentes, by asserting that she has spoken to him with kind intentions just as a father to his own son (1.308):

> ὥς τε πατὴρ ᾧ παιδί, καὶ οὔ ποτε λήσομαι αὐτῶν

Much later in the *Odyssey* the poet describes how the swineherd Eumaeus fervently welcomes Telemachus, recently returned from his voyage abroad, just as a father with kind intentions displays his love for his own son (16.17):

> ὡς δὲ πατὴρ ὃν παῖδα φίλα φρονέων ἀγαπάζῃ

As we can see from these three examples, even in this fossilized form the formula has the flexibility to accommodate the word πάϊς in the genitive, dative and accusative cases.

The formula shows even greater flexibility in its occurrence in a slightly different form and in a different section of the dactylic hexameter verse, between the second-foot

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and fifth-foot caesurae, in Phoenix's account in the embassy to Achilles about how Peleus received him kindly and loved him just as a father loves his own son (*Il*. 9.481):

καί μ' ἐφίλησ', ὡς εἴ τε πατὴρ ὃν παῖδα φιλήσῃ

A version of the formula with υἱός rather than πάϊς occurs twice in the *Odyssey*, between the third-foot caesura and the end of the dactylic hexameter verse. To her queries about what he has learned on his voyage Telemachus responds to his mother that Nestor received him and showed great affection toward him just as a father toward his own son (*Od*. 17.111):[1]

ἐνδυκέως ἐφίλει, ὡς εἴ τε πατὴρ ἑὸν υἱα

Finally, to the suitor Antinous' professed concern about the well-being of the house of Odysseus Telemachus responds that Antinous surely cares for him just as a father for his son (17.397):

Ἀντίνο', ἦ μευ καλὰ πατὴρ ὣς κήδεαι υἱος

The substitution of υἱός for πάϊς serves a prosodic function, to be sure, allowing the formula to be placed at the end of the verse without posing metrical difficulties in the fifth foot, but it also serves a semantic function: in both cases Telemachus is elevating his own role from that of a πάϊς 'child' to that of a υἱός 'son', for he has now been reunited with his father and is plotting with him the destruction of the suitors and the repossession of his home and kingdom. Young Telemachus is growing up.

FOUR INSTANCES OF THE FORMULAIC PHRASE IN THE *ODYSSEY*

Just as the formula enjoys metrical flexibility at the level of verse-form, and verbal flexibility at the level of diction, it also enjoys flexibility in how it relates to its larger narrative context—genuinely and pathetically or ironically and sarcastically—as we shall see in the following survey of the formula's usage over the course of the narrative of the *Odyssey.* In all four instances of the 'just as a father to his own son' formula in the *Odyssey* it is Telemachus who is the son, but in none of the four instances is Odysseus the father. In the absence of his father four different figures serve as surrogate fathers in the formula: Athena–Mentes, Nestor, Eumaeus and Antinous.[2] To add to the pathos, in three of the four instances Telemachus himself is the narrator of the passage, so we

[1] This appears to be the least conventional version of the formula: πατήρ occurs 418 times in Homer in its various forms, and in many positions in the dactylic hexameter verse, but only here does it fill this metrical space; πατήρ here is also a rare case of a two-syllable word with an iambic shape and an acute accent on the second syllable occurring in this metrical space. On the latter, see A. Abritta, 'On the role of accent in ancient Greek poetry', *Mnemosyne* 71 (2018), 539–54, at 551–2; Abritta's contention that the verse is also metrically unusual inasmuch as it violates 'Hermann's Bridge' is not very pertinent in this case, as the feminine caesura in the fourth foot is accompanied by a masculine caesura in the same foot, as happens many hundreds of times in Homer. The verse apparently puzzled ancient scholars as well: a scholium on *Od.* 17.111 (W. Dindorf, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Odysseam, Volume II* [Oxford, 1855], 686) observes that Zenodotus recorded at the end of the verse an unmetrical ἑὸν παῖδα.

[2] The formula is not used of Odysseus' Ithacan friend Mentor, although he too appears to function as a surrogate father while Odysseus is abroad. Odysseus had apparently turned over to him complete responsibility over his house (2.225–7). On Mentor as a father figure see S. Dova, '"Kind like a father": on mentors and kings in the *Odyssey*', in D. Elmer, D. Frame, L. Muellner and V. Bers (edd.), *Donum Natalicium Digitaliter Confectum Gregorio Nagy Septuagenario a Discipulis Collegis Familiaribus*

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witness the surrogacy through his eyes. Also adding to the pathos is the fact that Odysseus is indeed likened to a father elsewhere in the *Odyssey*, three times in a slightly different formulaic phrase, but never with respect to his relationship to his own son: Telemachus, Mentor and Athena all assert that Odysseus 'was gentle like a father' πατὴρ δ' ὣς ἤπιος ἦεν (*Od*. 2.47, 234; 5.12), but always with respect to his relationship with his Ithacan subjects rather than with his own son.

1. As noted, the first instance of the 'just as a father to his own son' formula occurs already in the first book of the *Odyssey*. Telemachus has been imagining his own father in his mind, wishing that he would return and bring order back to the house, when he spies Athena, disguised as Mentes, at the gate (1.113–20). Athena–Mentes assures Telemachus that Odysseus is still alive and will soon return home and drive out the suitors; she observes how closely he resembles his father; and she advises him to call a meeting of the Ithacan assembly, order the suitors to leave and then go in search of his father (1.179–305). Telemachus responds thus (1.307–8):

> ξεῖν', ἦ τοι μὲν ταῦτα φίλα φρονέων ἀγορεύεις,
> ὥς τε πατὴρ ᾧ παιδί, καὶ οὔ ποτε λήσομαι αὐτῶν.
>
> Guest-friend, surely you speak these things with kind intentions,
> just as a father to his own son, and I will never forget them.

In this first instance of the formula—also the first simile in the *Odyssey*—we see the poet using the phrase in a straightforward manner, with a heavy dose of pathos that arises naturally from its meaning. In the absence of his real father, Telemachus grasps onto a stranger as a surrogate. This straightforward usage of the formula early in the *Odyssey* prepares the way for the three subsequent instances of the formula in which the poet appears to use the formula ironically and even sarcastically.

Additional pathos is elicited in this scene by the recognition of the true identity of the newly-arrived stranger. The external audience of the epic has known all along that the stranger is not Mentes but the goddess Athena. Telemachus himself is at first oblivious to the true identity of the stranger, but when he witnesses her miraculous departure as a bird flying up through the roof, he supposes that she is a god (θεόν, 1.319–23), and shortly thereafter, when Eurymachus enquires about the identity of the stranger, Telemachus replies publicly that the stranger is an old guest-friend named Mentes, but he knows privately that she is an 'immortal goddess' ἀθανάτην θεόν (1.417–20). Athena and Odysseus enjoy a close symbiotic relationship throughout the *Odyssey*, a relationship already developed in the narrative leading up to this scene (1.44–305): Athena, most prominently of the gods, is tormented by the wretched fate of Odysseus and regards it as fundamentally unfair; she pleads with Zeus to allow his return home; she arrives at the door of Odysseus' palace, in the likeness of a man, claiming that she has come from abroad on a ship with her companions (much as Telemachus must have hoped that Odysseus himself would arrive someday); Telemachus greets the stranger and places her spear in the case where Odysseus' own spears are stored; the stranger claims that Odysseus is alive and will soon return home, and she advises Telemachus about what to do next. The audience understands that Athena is speaking to Telemachus very much as his real father would be speaking if he were present. In other words, as a father-figure Athena is here acting as a doublet, or an extension, of Odysseus. The fact that the stranger

Oblatum (Washington, DC, 2012), https://chs.harvard.edu/stamatia-dova-kind-like-a-father-on-mentors-and-kings-in-the-odyssey/.

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is not in fact the real Odysseus makes the scene all the more pathetic, and Telemachus' assertion that she has spoken to him 'just as a father to his own son' elicits particular sympathy from the audience for the lad.[3]

2. The three other instances of the 'just as a father to his own son' formula appear in close proximity toward the end of the *Odyssey.* At the beginning of Book 16 Telemachus avoids the trap laid by the suitors, arrives safely back to Ithaca and goes straight to the hut of Eumaeus where the swineherd and the recently-arrived Odysseus are preparing breakfast. Eumaeus greets Telemachus excitedly, kissing his head, eyes and hands, and shedding a tear 'just as a father with kind intentions displays his love for his own son who has come in the tenth year from a foreign land' (16.17–18):

> ὡς δὲ πατὴρ ὃν παῖδα φίλα φρονέων ἀγαπάζῃ
> ἐλθόντ' ἐξ ἀπίης γαίης δεκάτῳ ἐνιαυτῷ

Eumaeus then proceeds to address Telemachus with endearing terms commonly used by a parent of a child: 'sweet light' (γλυκερὸν φάος, 16.23); 'dear child' (φίλον τέκος, 16.25); and Telemachus reciprocates by addressing the swineherd with an equally endearing term for 'father' (ἄττα, 16.31).

This scene is richly ironic, since Telemachus' true father Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is seated right there in the hut witnessing the scene. Instead of Eumaeus' warm and fatherly welcome of his young master, the audience understandably expects the much-anticipated reunion of father and son after twenty years apart. In other words, this touching scene should be describing the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus. But for the moment, at least, the figure of Odysseus has faded into the background while Telemachus and his surrogate father Eumaeus hold an intimate and leisurely conversation.

When Odysseus and Telemachus do finally acknowledge each other's presence their interaction is cursory: Odysseus humbly yields his seat to Telemachus, but Telemachus responds that he can find a seat somewhere else in the hut (16.42–5). Such is the extent, for the moment at least, of the much-anticipated reunion of father and son. Only after they have all taken some food and drink does Telemachus ask Eumaeus, not Odysseus directly, who the stranger is. The two then converse for some time discussing what to do with the stranger, whom they speak about in the third person (16.56–89). Telemachus' recognition of his father must wait; meanwhile, the scene makes for a rather cold reunion.[4]

[3] On Athena as a doublet of Odysseus in this scene, see A.J. Podlecki, 'Some Odyssean similes', *G&R* 18 (1971), 81–90, at 81–2. The close relationship between Athena and Odysseus throughout the *Odyssey* is traced by M. Müller, *Athene als göttliche Helferin in der Odyssee* (Heidelberg, 1966), 36–7, who discusses this passage briefly, noting that the presence, and inspiration, of Odysseus is detectable in the scene, even in his physical absence.

[4] Many modern commentators have observed the irony of the situation in this scene: C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems* (Göttingen, 1977), 132–4, 141–5; R.B. Rutherford, 'The philosophy of the *Odyssey*', *JHS* 106 (1986), 145–62, at 157; I.J.F. de Jong, 'Between word and deed: hidden thoughts in the *Odyssey',* in I.J.F. de Jong and J.P. Sullivan (edd.), *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature* (Leiden, 1993), 27–50, at 37; G. Wöhrle, *Telemachs Reise: Väter und Söhne in Ilias und Odyssee* (Göttingen, 1999), 133–5; I.J.F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the* Odyssey (Cambridge, 2001), 388–9; T.P. Wright, 'Eumaeus as Odysseus' double in the *Odyssey*', *QUCC* 121 (2019), 11–31, at 25–7; D. Beck, *The Stories of Similes in Greek and Roman Epic* (Cambridge, 2023), 39–41; J.S. Clay and D. Mendelsohn, 'Three Homeric puzzles', in M. Aloumpi and A. Augoustakis (edd.), *Lux: Studies in Greek and Latin Literature in Honor of Lucia Athanassaki* (Berlin, 2024), 1–22, at 7–8. On the reversal in the simile in this passage (it is the son rather than the father who is described returning from abroad in the tenth year), see Podlecki (n. 3), 89; H.P. Foley, 'Reverse similes and sex roles in the *Odyssey*', *Arethusa* 11 (1978), 7–26, at 7.

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3. The two remaining instances of the 'just as a father to his own son' formula occur shortly in Book 17. Upon Telemachus' return to the palace in Ithaca from his journey to Pylos and Sparta, Penelope asks her son if he learned anything about his father's status. Telemachus responds that Nestor had shown great affection toward him, 'just as a father toward his own son, who has recently arrived from elsewhere after a long time', but that Nestor knew nothing of Odysseus (17.111–13):

> ἐνδυκέως ἐφίλει, ὡς εἴ τε πατὴρ ἑὸν υἱὸα
> ἐλθόντα χρόνιον νέον ἄλλοθεν· ὣς ἐμὲ κεῖνος
> ἐνδυκέως ἐκόμιζε σὺν υἱάσι κυδαλίμοισιν.

As in the scene of Athena–Mentes and Telemachus in Book 1, there is genuine pathos here. Telemachus had witnessed in Pylos an idyllic scene of King Nestor as a father accompanied by his six named sons working cooperatively to offer a proper sacrifice and provide a proper feast in front of their palace (*Od*. 3.404–72). Telemachus, on the other hand, is the only son of a father whom he does not remember. It is understandable, then, that in the absence of any word about his own long-absent father, Telemachus would substitute Nestor as a father figure.

But perhaps there is some irony in this scene as well, since by the time Telemachus' conversation with Penelope takes place in Book 17, he is fully aware that his true father is following right behind him and will soon arrive at the palace. Ithaca will soon experience its own version of a 'sacrifice' and 'feast'.[5]

4. The fourth and final instance of the formula soon follows. Odysseus has finally arrived at his palace, disguised as a beggar, and taken a place at the threshold. Telemachus sends him some food and instructs him to beg in turn from all the suitors. The other suitors pity the beggar and give food to him, but Antinous upbraids the swineherd for bringing a beggar to his master's house to devour its possessions. Telemachus responds to Antinous' professed concern about the well-being of the house by addressing him with the formulaic words 'Antinous, surely you care for me well just as a father (cares for) his son' (17.397):

> Ἀντίνο', ἦ μευ καλὰ πατὴρ ὣς κήδεαι υἱὸς

Telemachus' simile drips with irony and sarcasm, since Antinous, the most blatantly sinister of the suitors, is striving to gain Penelope as his wife and thereby become Telemachus' 'step-father', while Telemachus' real father, in disguise as a beggar, is the object of Antinous' fury. Telemachus subsequently makes clear his true feelings by exposing Antinous' intentions: 'You yourself would much rather eat than give to another' (17.404). Telemachus' use of irony and sarcasm here could even be viewed as his way of goading Antinous to commit a reckless act of violence against the beggar (17.405–87). The boy is developing some of the traits of his πολύμητις and πολυμήχανος father.

The irony of Telemachus' application of the 'just as a father to his own son' formula to Antinous did not escape the notice of some ancient commentators on Homer. A rhetorical

[5] 20.390–4; 21.428–30; 23.129–51. As in the scene of Eumaeus and Telemachus in Book 16, there is a reverse simile in this passage, inasmuch as it is once again the son in the simile who is returning from abroad after a long time, while in the external narrative it is the father who has been long absent. Although not using the term 'reverse simile', Podlecki (n. 3), 82 suggests that the poet's use of the simile goes against the audience's expectations here, introducing an element of surprise, thereby raising interest in the development of the story. Abritta (n. 1), 551–2 also observes that the simile reverses the situation of Odysseus and Telemachus. Foley (n. 4), 7–26 does not mention this simile.

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handbook titled Περὶ τρόπων, *Concerning Rhetorical Figures*, attributed to the first century B.C.E. Alexandrian grammarian Tryphon, uses this Homeric verse (17.397) as a paradigm of εἰρωνεία, since, in reality, 'Antinous did not care for Telemachus as a father, but, on the contrary, wished to kill him'.[6] Similar comments on the irony embedded in this particular verse occur in works titled Περὶ τρόπων attributed to an otherwise unknown Cocondrius (or Concordius) and to the Byzantine grammarian Gregory of Corinth, and also in a work titled Περὶ Ὁμήρου attributed to Plutarch.[7] In his commentary on the *Odyssey* Eustathius (on 17.397) sums up the matter succinctly: 'Telemachus is being altogether sarcastic', εἰρωνευόμενος ὁ Τηλέμαχος παντοῖος γίνεται. Although, in general, ancient commentators were keener than modern ones to apply such terms as 'ironic' and 'sarcastic' to formulaic phrases in Homer, the irony of this particular scene has not been lost on some modern commentators as well.[8]

It is today widely recognized that the poet of the *Odyssey* demonstrates control over long stretches of narrative in his use of larger type-scenes, such as in the many interactions between type-scenes of feasting that occur in the long sequence of hospitality episodes (doublets, foils, elaboration, crescendo).[9] The same can be said about the poet's control over long stretches of narrative in his use of leitmotifs, such as in the descriptions of the three increasingly ineffective throws by the suitors against Odysseus, which are spread over four books: Antinous throws a footstool at Odysseus and hits him on the right shoulder (17.462–3); then Eurymachus throws a footstool at him but hits the wine steward instead (18.394–7); finally, Ctesippus hurls an ox-foot at him but misses entirely and hits the wall (20.299–302).[10] Here, in the sequence of the four instances of the 'just as a father to his own son' formula in the *Odyssey*, the poet demonstrates a similar control over a long stretch of narrative. As is often the case with type-scenes and leitmotifs, the poet offers a straightforward example first, as though to educate his audience in the standard form and thereby to prepare them for modifications upon that form in what is to follow. This may seem like a sophisticated device that would be comfortable only in the hands of a deliberate and self-conscious writer who had the leisure to think through, record and then review the details of his work, but, in fact, this is a regular feature also of oral poetry that had its origins in extemporaneous composition.[11]

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[6] The handbook has been edited by L. Spengel, *Rhetores Graeci,* Volume III (Leipzig, 1856; reprinted Frankfurt am Main, 1966), 191–206, at 205 and more recently by M.G. Sandri, *Trattati greci sui tropi* (Berlin and Boston 2023), 156–211, at 192–3.

[7] The Περὶ τρόπων attributed to Cocondrius (or Concordius) has been edited by Spengel (n. 6), 230–43, at 235 and more recently by Sandri (n. 6), 92–117, at 102–3. The Περὶ τρόπων attributed to Gregory of Corinth has been edited by M.L. West, 'Tryphon *De Tropis*', *CQ* 15 (1965), 230–48, at 243. The Περὶ Ὁμήρου attributed to Plutarch has been edited by J.F. Kindstrand, *[Plutarchi] De Homero* (Leipzig, 1990), 7–117, at 35.

[8] So H. Fränkel, *Die homerischen Gleichnisse* (Göttingen, 1921), 90–1; A.F. Dekker, *Ironie in de Odyssee* (Leiden, 1965), 208–10; Moulton (n. 4), 144; J. Russo, M. Fernández-Galiano and A. Heubeck (edd.), *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Volume III* (Oxford, 1992), 39; Clay and Mendelsohn (n. 4), 10.

[9] S. Reece, *The Stranger's Welcome: Oral Theory and the Aesthetics of the Homeric Hospitality Scene* (Ann Arbor, 1993), 189–206.

[10] On the resonance and symbolism of this sequence of throws, as well as of the increasingly assertive responses to them by Telemachus, see Reece (n. 9), 176–9.

[11] So S. Reece, 'Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: from oral performance to written text', in M. Amodio (ed.), *New Directions in Oral Theory* (Tempe, AZ, 2005), 43–89, at 54–6.

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