

## Is the Main Character of the *Odyssey* Really the Odysseus from the *Iliad* Himself?

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*In the Odyssey the figure of Odysseus appears very different from the one outlined in the Iliad, in which he is not an archer. Also considering many other details of the Odyssey narrative – for example, the concomitance between the journey of Telemachus in search of news of his father and the unexpected return of Odysseus after twenty years, not to mention Odysseus's strange departure from Ithaca after the massacre of the suitors – it is reasonable to assume that who could hide behind the character of Odysseus could be an expert fighter engaged by Telemachus to prevent Penelope's impending marriage (which might have jeopardized his aspiration to become king of Ithaca). Actually, all the characteristics of the protagonist of the Odyssey correspond in an extraordinary way to those of a hero of the Iliad, the Cretan Meriones, who during the Trojan War had distinguished himself as a very strong and shrewd warrior and archer: it was he who won the archery competition in the games on the occasion of Patroclus's funeral. One can assume, therefore, that Telemachus on his journey to Pylos and Sparta met that veteran of the Trojan War who put his experience as a fighter at the disposal of the son of his former comrade in arms, helped him solve his problems and left soon after. However, later the poet of the Odyssey would have twisted the reality of the facts in order to transform the final massacre of dozens of unarmed men into a heroic and morally acceptable act. One should also consider that in this new interpretation the journey of Telemachus gains a fundamental importance, while in the traditional reading of the Odyssey it appears completely irrelevant.*

**Keywords:** *Odyssey, Odysseus, Meriones, Homer, Ithaca*

By carefully examining the figure of Odysseus, as it appears in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, we realize that various features of this character completely change from one poem to another. Not only that: the protagonist of the *Odyssey* has many characteristics that strangely make him appear extraordinarily similar to Meriones, the young hero who according to the *Iliad* was the deputy commander of the Cretan contingent in the Trojan War. Why? What intrigue could be hidden behind the story of Odysseus' return to Ithaca twenty years after his departure for the war? This is what this article will try to clarify, using a methodology consisting of a new critical examination of the sources, in particular the episodes of the two poems that involve the main characters of this singular story.

However, before examining the intricate question of the real identity of the protagonist of the *Odyssey*, a premise is needed, namely that in this poem it is reasonable to assume that there is a part of historical truth and a part of invention,

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as in a novel (Montiglio 2005). If there is a part of historical truth (of which we cannot be sure, but it is possible), it is found in the events of Odysseus in Ithaca, while the vicissitudes of his return to Ithaca after the Trojan War – not to mention the characters he meets in these adventures (Aeolus, Polyphemus, Calypso, Circe, Tiresias, and so on) – cannot be considered a true story, that is, a story that reflects reality (Courtieu 2019).

Let us first examine the beginning of the *Odyssey*. It shows the difficult situation of Ithaca twenty years after his departure for the war: nothing is known about the fate of Odysseus, and his son Telemachus, given his young age, does not have the authority to succeed him as king of Ithaca. In this power vacuum, the suitors of Penelope, who have long since settled in her house and devoured her husband's wealth, squander his riches (Steinrück 2008).

In reality Penelope is near to her second marriage, probably with Eurimachus, as a passage of the poem seems to imply: “By now her father and brothers are forcing her/ to marry Eurimachus, who surpasses all/ suitors with gifts”<sup>1</sup>. This could cost Telemachus kingdom and riches: in fact he would inherit Odysseus' γέρας, that is, the “royal dignity”, only on condition that Penelope did not remarry, as is clear from Odysseus' conversation with his mother's soul in Hades: “Tell me about my father and my son that I left:/ is my γέρας still theirs? Or maybe/ another of the nobles got it and they no longer believe that I will return?/ Tell me the will and the thoughts of my wife,/ if she stays with our son and she keeps everything faithfully,/ or if the noblest of the Achaeans has already married her?/ I asked this and my mother replied:/ Absolutely not! She remains faithful/ in your home [...] no one has your beautiful γέρας”<sup>2</sup>. So Telemachus decides to leave secretly, naturally without telling his mother, to go and ask for help from his father's old friends: Nestor in Pylos (Wathelet 2020) and Menelaus in Sparta (Castiglioni 2020).

In the *Odyssey* there is an explicit reference to his intention of seeking help in the worried words of the suitors, when they discover that he has left: “Ouch, ouch! Telemachus wants to plot our death!/ Certainly he will bring defenders from the sandy Pylos/ or from Sparta”<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, shortly before, he himself had threatened them: “You will die in this salon, without revenge!”<sup>4</sup>.

Afterwards, when Telemachus returns to Ithaca, his father's return, after twenty years, happens almost at the same time: this singular coincidence – which is the basis of the sequence of events in the poem – could give rise to many doubts about the real identity of this revived Odysseus. The two meet in the hut of the faithful swineherd Eumaeus (Roisman 1990, Newton 2014–2015), a secluded

<sup>1</sup> Ἦδη γάρ ῥα πατήρ τε κασίγνητοί τε κέλονται/ Εὐρυμάχῳ γήμασθαι· ὁ γὰρ περιβάλλει ἅπαντας/ μνηστήρας δώροισι (Od. XV, 16–18).

<sup>2</sup> Εἰπέ δέ μοι πατρός τε καὶ υἱέος, ὃν κατέλειπον,/ ἢ ἔτι πᾶρ κείνοισιν ἐμὸν γέρας, ἧέ τις ἦδη/ ἀνδρῶν ἄλλος ἔχει, ἐμὲ δ' οὐκέτι φασὶ νέεσθαι;/ Εἰπέ δέ μοι μνηστῆς ἀλόχου βουλὴν τε νόον τε,/ ἧέ μένει παρὰ παιδί καὶ ἔμπεδα πάντα φυλάσσει/ ἢ ἦδη μιν ἔγημεν Ἀχαιῶν ὅς τις ἄριστος;/ Ὡς ἐφάμην, ἢ δ' αὐτίκ' ἀμείβετο πότνια μήτηρ-/ ‘Καὶ λίην, κείνη γε μένει τετληότι θυμῷ/ σοῖσιν ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν· [...] σὸν δ' οὐ πῶ τις ἔχει καλὸν γέρας (Od. XI, 174–184).

<sup>3</sup> Ἡ μάλα Τηλέμαχος φόνον ἡμῖν μερμηρίζει./ Ἡ τινας ἐκ Πύλου ἄξει ἀμύντορας ἡμαθόεντος/ ἢ ὅ γε καὶ Σπάρτηθεν (Od. II, 325–327).

<sup>4</sup> Νήπιοινοὶ κεν ἔπειτα δόμων ἐντοσθεν ὄλοισθε (Od. II, 145).

place outside the city, from where afterwards they separately reach the house of Odysseus to carry out the massacre of the suitors. In reality, everything happens as if Telemachus had returned from his journey with a “someone” who then helped him to get rid of the suitors and foil his mother’s marriage which would have crushed his ambition to become king of Ithaca.

We find a first confirmation in an odd, unexpected event that occurs at the end of the poem: this Odysseus – whom significantly no one recognizes, except his old dog<sup>5</sup> and his nurse<sup>6</sup> (Mueller 2016, Scheid–Tissinier 2015), but who several times in the course of the poem presents himself as a Cretan, before declaring himself as the hero returned after many years – after the massacre declares that he will have to leave immediately to go in search of “people unaware of the sea,/ who do not eat foods seasoned with salt”<sup>7</sup>. This is absurd behaviour for a man who has finally returned to his home after a very long absence! However, this oddity can be easily explained by a substitution of person. In short, at first glance there is no lack of reasons to suspect that the protagonist of the *Odyssey* does not actually identify himself at all with the cunning character who fought against the Trojans in the *Iliad*.

Moreover, there is another very significant fact: the characteristics of the would-be Odysseus who arrives in Ithaca at the same time as Telemachus’ return correspond in an extraordinary way to a hero of the *Iliad*.

In fact, the protagonist of the *Odyssey* in order to hide his identity systematically declares, on several occasions, to be a Cretan, also claiming to have been in contact with Idomeneus, the king of Crete: “Then they bade me and glorious Idomeneus/ to lead the ships to Ilium”<sup>8</sup>. But this corresponds to the fact that, according to the Catalog of Ships, the Cretan contingent in the Trojan War actually had two commanders: the elderly Idomeneus and the young Meriones (“of all these was Idomeneus, famed for his spear, captain,/ and Meriones, the peer of Enyalios, slayer of men”)<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>5</sup>“Yet even now, when he marked Odysseus standing near,/ he wagged his tail and dropped both his ears” (δὴ τότε γ’, ὡς ἐνόησεν Ὀδυσσεῖα ἐγγυς ἐόντα,/ οὐρῆ μὲν ῥ’ ὄ γ’ ἔσηνε καὶ οὐατα κάββαλεν ἄμφω, *Od.* XVII, 301–302).

<sup>6</sup>“This – the reference is to the wound inflicted on him by a boar above the knee, while he was hunting on Mount Parnassus with Autolicus’s sons – scar the old dame, when she had taken the limb in the flat of her hands,/ knew by the touch, and she let fall the foot” (τὴν γρηῦς χεῖρεςσι καταπρηγέσσι λαβοῦσα/ γνῶ ῥ’ ἐπιμασσαμένη, πόδα δὲ προέηκε φέρεσθαι, *Od.* XIX, 467–468).

<sup>7</sup>Οἱ οὐκ ἴσασι θάλασσαν/ ἀνέρες, οὐδέ θ’ ἄλεσσι μεμιγμένον εἶδαρ ἔδουσιν (*Od.* XXIII, 269–270).

<sup>8</sup>Δὴ τότε ἔμ’ ἤνωγον καὶ ἀγκαλυτὸν Ἰδομενεῖα/ νήεσσ’ ἠγήσασθαι ἐς Ἴλιον (*Od.* XIV, 237–238). On the juxtaposition between this important character and Meriones it is instructive (Haft 1984). In particular, on Idomeneus linger (Federico 1999, Valverde Sánchez 2005, 2016). Camerotto (2010) proposes the interpretation of the myth as an open weaving system: the character disappears from the epic tradition from Hesiod to Lycophron and the examination of his role in the Homeric poems and of the different traditions of his νόστος, also thanks to the targeted comparison with the five false Cretan stories presented in the *Odyssey* (XIII, 256–286; XIV, 192–359, 462–506; XVII, 415–444; XIX, 165–202; XXIV, 303–314), allows to note the crucial importance of the island of Crete as a bearer of “other” traditions and cultures compared to the Greek world.

<sup>9</sup>Τῶν μὲν ἄρ’ Ἰδομενεὺς δουρὶ κλυτὸς ἠγεμόνευε/ Μηριόνης τ’ ἀτάλαντος Ἐνυαλίῳ ἀνδρειφόντη (*Il.* II, 650–651). In this regard, a recent thematic study proposes the comparison between a XI century BC tomb in Knossos, rich in exceptional weapons for both Greek archaeology and Homeric

The *Iliad* presents Meriones as a very gifted young man, who on many occasions stands out for his skill and courage, to the point of being even compared to Ares, the god of war<sup>10</sup>: in the course of the poem he kills seven Trojans in combat, where he is very fast (Homer calls him “quick foot”, as Achilles is called), very athletic (he jumps “like a hawk”), even acrobatic (when with a leap he manages to dodge the spear of Aeneas), extremely courageous (he does not hesitate to challenge Hector to a duel and fights like a lion, in one of the most fierce battles of the poem, to recover the corpse of Patroclus). Furthermore, his victory in the archery competition corroborates his eclecticism as a fighter, skilled with all types of weapons.

But Meriones in the *Iliad* also stands out for his intelligence and perspicacity, to the point of being called “wise”, “sagacious” (πεπνυμένος)<sup>11</sup>: in fact he is often entrusted with tasks of great responsibility, such as, for example, assisting Idomeneus in the deployment of the Cretan contingent before the battle<sup>12</sup>, taking care of the guard service of the Achaean camp at a very critical moment<sup>13</sup>, organizing the collection of wood for the stake of Patroclus, a very risky operation<sup>14</sup>.

He also has an uncommon dialectical ability, as emerges from his discussion with Idomeneus<sup>15</sup>, nor fails to give a biting answer to Aeneas<sup>16</sup> in the duel in which his very prestigious opponent defines him “valiant” (ἔσθλός)<sup>17</sup>. In short, Meriones has all the characteristics of warrior ability, intelligence, organizational ability, promptness of spirit, courage and sangfroid that we find in the protagonist of the *Odyssey*. So it is not by chance that Meriones is mentioned more than fifty times in the *Iliad*.

Furthermore, another precise indication that the Cretan Meriones is identifiable with the one who helps Telemachus to get rid of the suitors, is found in a sentence that the *Odyssey* attributes to Odysseus: “Only Philoctetes excelled me with the bow/ in the land of the Trojans, when we Achaeans shot”<sup>18</sup>. Now, at least until

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poems, and the tradition relating to Cretan tales in the *Odyssey*, highlighting their significant impact on the art and literature of subsequent eras (Kotsonas 2018).

<sup>10</sup>“The peer of swift Ares” (θεῶ ἀτάλαντος Ἄρηϊ, *Il.* XIII, 328).

<sup>11</sup>*Il.* XIII, 254; 266.

<sup>12</sup>*Il.* IV, 253–254.

<sup>13</sup>*Il.* IX, 80–85.

<sup>14</sup>*Il.* XXIII, 110–124.

<sup>15</sup>*Il.* XIII, 248–273.

<sup>16</sup>*Il.* XVI, 620–625.

<sup>17</sup>*Il.* XVI, 627.

<sup>18</sup>Οἷος δὴ με Φιλοκτῆτης ἀπεκαίνυτο τόξω/ δῆμῳ ἔνι Τρώων, ὅτε τοξαζοίμεθ’ Ἀχαιοί (*Od.* VIII, 219–220). According to Mackie (2009), the examination of the role played by the mythical archer in the first Greek sources, and in particular in the Homeric tradition (*Il.* II, 716–728; *Od.* III, 190 and VIII, 215–228), highlights his role in both poems, although in neither of them he was a central or particularly enterprising character. On the importance of archery, and not only in this scene of the *Odyssey*, it is enough here just to refer to Walcot (1984) (on the decisive and statutory centrality of the rite in ancient civilizations, especially in the Egyptian and Mycenaean tradition); Crissy 1997–1998 (when Odysseus gets the bow, Heracles also appears, despite the anachronism inherent in the fact itself: but the fact can be justified by thinking of the blurred outlines of the age of heroes, since Heracles appears two more times in the poem – respectively in *Od.* VIII, 219–225 and XI, 601–608 – and it is clear that his presence before the massacre of suitors contributes to increasing the

Philoctetes recovered and returned from Lemnos, the most talented archer of the Achaean army was Meriones, who in fact won the archery competition at the Patroclus's funeral<sup>19</sup> defeating Teucer with a feat worthy of Robin Hood! On the contrary, Odysseus in the *Iliad* is by no means an archer, which is also shown by the fact that on that occasion he participated in two of those competitions (running and wrestling) but not in archery.

It is therefore reasonable to suppose that – assuming that the *Odyssey* was based on a historical reality – Telemachus met in Sparta this veteran of the Trojan War (who in the *Iliad* appears on excellent terms with Menelaus) who, by now a middle-aged man, put his experience as a fighter at the disposal of the son of his former comrade in arms, accompanied him to Ithaca and helped him solve his problems, leaving immediately after finishing his “job”. However, the first cantor of the *Odyssey* could have thought that a much better and above all more morally acceptable conclusion of his poem was a massacre of many unarmed men carried out by Penelope's husband (Figure 1), suddenly reappeared after conquering an impregnable city and after living extraordinary adventures.

**Figure 1.** *Odysseus Shooting an Arrow at Suitors.* Red-figure Attic Skyphos by the Penelope Painter, Ca. 440 BC, from Tarquinia (Berlin, State Museums)



emphasis and solemnity of the event); Ready (2010) points out, in particular, the similarity, which in the Homeric interpretation can be considered completely self-referential, between the hero who strings his bow and the singer who repairs his lyre: *Od.* XXI, 401–409. What has been revealed so far has converged in the recent highly original reconstruction proposed by Grethlein (2019), according to which Odysseus's attention to the arch, or to the bed (*Od.* XXIII) and the orchard itself, proceed in perfect harmony with modern Thing Theory (a branch of New Materialism).

<sup>19</sup>*Il.* XXIII, 870–882. Cfr. Edwards (1986) (the Homeric descriptions of the funerals represent archetypal scenes, as shown by those relating to Achilles in *Od.* XXIV, 43–92, Patroclus in *Il.* XXIII and Hector in *Il.* XXIV), and Tarenzi (2005) (the attestation of the recurrences of this attribute, referring to Patroclus in the *Iliad*, allows us to hypothesize a link with the rituals of the ancient Near East, which facilitates the understanding of the Homeric account of the warrior's funeral).

For this purpose the poet – perhaps on request of some descendants of Odysseus and Telemachus, annoyed about the bad name that this grim affair had brought to his family – would have manipulated the whole story, making it much more politically correct through a series of amazing fake news cleverly constructed and distributed throughout the poem: for example, the episodes of the dog Argos and the old nurse (the only ones who recognize Odysseus), the structure of the bed built around a tree, the goddess Athena who often addresses the protagonist directly and so on.

Furthermore, this hypothesis fits very well with a passage from Book X of the *Iliad*, which alludes to a close relationship between Odysseus and Meriones: the latter, in fact, just before Odysseus' nocturnal incursion into the Trojan camp, "gave him a bow and a quiver/ and a sword, and about his head he set a helm"<sup>20</sup>, which was initially donated by Odysseus' grandfather to a friend of Meriones' father and then arrived, passing through hand in hand, up to the Cretan hero<sup>21</sup>.

Now, it is well known how important the bonds of friendship were in Homeric society, which were handed down from one generation to the next and expressed themselves through exchanges of gifts, favours and hospitality. Not only that: behind this passage of arms from Meriones to Odysseus one could glimpse a symbolic overlap between the figures of the two heroes, perfectly consistent with what has emerged so far. In fact, for an archaic mentality the weapons of a warrior, in particular the helmet, in a certain sense represent his identity. In this regard, according to the scholars there is a unity of heroes and weapons, for which weapons are the form of the hero (Snodgrass 1964). Therefore, any request for help from Telemachus to his father's ancient comrade in arms could not possibly go unheard.

On the other hand, the book X of the *Iliad* (which, we recall, tells of an incursion by Odysseus and Diomedes into the Trojan camp) presents many points of contact with the episode, reported in the XIV book of the *Odyssey*, of the raid of a group of Achaeans under the snow up to the walls of Troy in a frozen night<sup>22</sup>. In fact both episodes refer to nocturnal operations with few men in enemy territory to gather information, require skill and uncommon courage, have among the protagonists Odysseus, and are not found in other episodes of the *Iliad*. All this seems to suggest that Book X – in which Odysseus is armed with a bow (and not a spear) – was initially part of a primitive version of the *Odyssey*, perhaps in terms of memory of the past events of the Trojan War (as is the episode of the frozen night), which "floated" in the oral tradition; then it was eventually inserted, with the necessary adaptations, in the text of the *Iliad*, perhaps on the occasion of the writing of the oral songs from which the two poems would have been born, when the various episodes of the Homeric *epos* were rearranged to form the two poems as we know them today. Hence its extraneousness with respect to the *Iliad*, noted

<sup>20</sup>Μηριόνης δ' Ὀδυσῆϊ δίδου βῖον ἠδὲ φαρέτρην/ καὶ ξίφος, ἀμφὶ δὲ οἱ κυνέην κεφαλῆφιν ἔθηκε (*Il.* X, 260–261).

<sup>21</sup>*Il.* X, 266–271.

<sup>22</sup>Νύξ δ' ἄρ' ἐπῆλθε κακὴ Βορέαο πεσόντος,/ πηγυλῖς· αὐτὰρ ὕπερθε χιῶν γένετ' ἠὔτε πάχνη, ψυχρὴ, καὶ σακέεσσι περιτρέφετο κρύσταλλος (*Od.* XIV, 475–477).

since ancient times. In confirmation of this, according to scholars, Book X of the *Iliad* shows some aspects reminiscent of the *Odyssey*<sup>23</sup>.

Moreover, in this new key, Telemachus' trip to Pylos and Sparta to get news of his father<sup>24</sup> acquires a very precise meaning, while in the traditional reading of the *Odyssey* it appears completely useless for the purposes of subsequent developments. Yet the strategic importance of this trip emerges at the very beginning of the poem, in a sentence that Athena addresses to Telemachus: "I will give you wise advice, if you want to listen to me"<sup>25</sup>. Here the goddess urges him to go to Pylos and Sparta and then, on his return, to resolve the question of Penelope's suitors, also resorting to murder: "Therefore take thought in mind and heart/ how you can slaughter suitors in your home whether by guile/ or openly"<sup>26</sup>.

In reality, this "wise advice" in itself has no relevance for the purposes of the current *Odyssey*, in which this trip is completely irrelevant: Telemachus could have stayed quietly at home without changing anything in the unfolding of subsequent events! Instead, in this reconstruction the initial intervention of the goddess becomes strategically fundamental, indeed, it represents the true opening of the poem, because it sets off that journey whose final outcome is the massacre of the suitors and Odysseus' victory. On the other hand, the Homeric gods never intervene without reason in human affairs. Therefore, the new hypothesis presented here fits very well into the plot and structure of the *Odyssey*, making it much more united, coherent and consequent.

In any case, the important convergences emerged between the Odysseus of the *Odyssey* and the Meriones of the *Iliad* make the question of the genesis of the two poems and their relationships even more intricate and intriguing than we have been allowed to think so far. It is an almost Pirandello-like situation, with a sort of complicated game of mirrors and backgrounds between the lies of Odysseus, who in the *Odyssey* pretends to be a Cretan, and those of the cantor who sings his deeds, who in turn seems to want to present to us, passing it as a lie, what may have been the truth! At this point one would almost wonder if the origin of the so-called "liar paradox" (the famous phrase, attributed to a Cretan, "Cretans are all liar", which can be neither true nor false) was the intuition of someone who already in ancient times had decrypted this juxtaposition between the "Cretan" Meriones and the "liar" Odysseus. In these sophisticated games of exchanges the maximum of ambiguity is probably reached when, in the story of the nocturnal incursion under the walls of Troy, the poet has his Cretan Odysseus say that "the leaders were Odysseus and Menelaus,/ the third commander was me"<sup>27</sup>. In this passage, this pronoun "me" (ἐγών in Greek) could actually be subtly "true": in fact, behind the disguises of the "false Odysseus" Meriones could be hiding, in the

<sup>23</sup>According to Haft (1990), although the *Iliad* makes no explicit reference to the wooden horse or to the decisive role of Odysseus in the capture of Troy, they would both be concealed in II, 1–483 and in the X book.

<sup>24</sup>In *Od.* I–IV e XV (Rose 1967).

<sup>25</sup>Σοὶ δ' αὐτῷ πικινῶς ὑποθήσομαι, αἶ κε πίθηται (*Od.* I, 279).

<sup>26</sup>Φράζεσθαι δὲ ἔπειτα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν/ ὅπως κε μνηστῆρας ἐνὶ μεγάροισι τεοῖσι/ κτείνῃς (*Od.* I, 294–296).

<sup>27</sup>Ἠγείσθην δ' Ὀδυσσεύς τε καὶ Ἀτρεΐδης Μενέλαος,/ τοῖσι δ' ἅμα τρίτος ἄρχον ἐγών (*Od.* XIV, 470–471).

act of recounting a fact of which he had actually been the protagonist together with the “true” Odysseus, the one of the *Iliad*. In short, the poet of the *Odyssey* was no less astute and subtle than his character!

It also seems significant to us that the “Odysseus” of the events set in Ithaca is a great archer, while the protagonist of the adventures told in the first person to the Phaeacians is not an archer at all: for example, when he has to defend himself from Scylla<sup>28</sup>, or when he kills a deer on the island of Circe<sup>29</sup>, we see him acting with the spear (and not with the bow, as, given the circumstances, it would have been more natural).

In short, the image of Homeric Odysseus seems to arise from the juxtaposition of even three different characters: that of the *Iliad* (who is not an archer, with the exception of Book X, on whose origin we have already focused); that of the events of the *Odyssey* set in Ithaca (who is a great archer, behind whom the Cretan Meriones is hiding); and, finally, that of the adventures of the *Odyssey*, who, like the first, prefers the spear to the bow (maybe the latter had originally been the protagonist of some ancient saga of seafaring adventures, reused and appropriately adapted by the poet of the *Odyssey* to justify the very long absence of Odysseus from Ithaca).

As for poor Penelope (who had been kept strictly in the dark about the plot hatched by her son, and saw the feast of her second marriage changed into a horrible carnage), she would eventually find herself with the cold comfort of going down in history as the prototype of a perfect wife!

Still on Penelope<sup>30</sup>, here one naturally wonders what was the real motivation that pushed the young scions of Ithaca and the nearby islands – who are systematically called “young” (νέου) or “boys” (κοῦροι), being almost the same age as Telemachus – to court her despite her middle age.

Telemachus himself gives the answer when he mentions Eurimachus, who “is the noblest prince, and most of all desires/ to marry my mother and get Odysseus’s royal dignity (γέρας)”<sup>31</sup>. The post at stake, therefore, was the γέρας, closely connected to the marriage with Penelope, as we saw earlier in the illuminating dialogue between Odysseus and his mother.

This word, γέρας, has the specific meaning of “royal dignity”, or “exercise of sovereignty”: we also find it in the *Iliad*, where the γέρας is the name of the “power” that Priam holds, and which he obviously intends to transmit to his

<sup>28</sup>*Od.* XII, 223–259.

<sup>29</sup>*Od.* X, 156–184.

<sup>30</sup>About her it is good to offer some targeted bibliographic details. The starting point can undoubtedly be identified in the motif of the web, which Christol (2015), ingeniously compared to an Indo-European cosmic myth, adapted to the ideology of the heroic Greek world, in which weaving is an essential stage in the process of Odysseus’ regaining of Penelope: hence the triple re-proposition of the motif in the poem (*Od.* II, 93–109; XIX, 149–150; XXIV, 139–140). Based on a more general structure, but still attentive to the aspect of weaving, even in its declination within the various literary civilizations, are Gualerzi (2007) and Nenci (2015). Other texts with an original perspective cut are, on a comparative level, Helleman (2009), and about the compositional technique Grethlein (2018) (Penelope’s actions are not dictated by psychological reasons, but rather by plot-related needs).

<sup>31</sup>Καὶ γὰρ πολλὸν ἄριστος ἀνὴρ μέμονέν τε μάλιστα/ μητέρ’ ἐμὴν γαμέειν καὶ Ὀδυσσεύος γέρας ἔξειν (*Od.* XV, 521–522).



descendants<sup>32</sup>. On the other hand, there is no lack of clues that even Odysseus had achieved the kingship of Ithaca by the same way: Penelope was the daughter of Icarus<sup>33</sup>, her “most powerful father”<sup>34</sup>, “glorious”<sup>35</sup> and “magnanimous”<sup>36</sup>; she was also Iphtime’s sister, Eumelus’s<sup>37</sup> wife, the king of Pherae whom the Catalog of Ships mentions with great emphasis: “Eumelus, whom a divine woman bare to Admetus,/ Alcestis, Pelias’s most beautiful daughter”<sup>38</sup>.

We also note that the γέρας was transmissible to the descendants. In fact, Telemachus is considered to be of “royal lineage”<sup>39</sup>, as the soothsayer Theoclimenus reminds him: “There is no other blood more royal than yours/ among the people of Ithaca: and you will have power forever!”<sup>40</sup>, not to mention Antinous himself, who shortly thereafter will try to eliminate him by betrayal: “May the son of Cronos never make thee king in sea-girt Ithaca,/ which thing is by birth thy heritage!”<sup>41</sup>.

Instead, Odysseus’s father, Laertes, according to the *Odyssey* is a poor old man, relegated to the fields in miserable conditions: “He, they say, comes no more to the city,/ but afar in the fields suffers woes attended by an aged woman/ as his handmaid, who sets before him food and drink,/ after weariness has laid hold of his limbs,/ as he creeps along the slope of his vineyard plot”<sup>42</sup>; but perhaps even more painful is a portrait of him at the end of the *Odyssey*: “He was clothed in a foul tunic/ patched and wretched [...] and on his head a goatskin cap;/ and he nursed his sorrow”<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>32</sup>“Nay, but though thou slayest me,/ not for that shall Priam place his kingship in thy hands” (ἀτὰρ, εἴ κεν ἔμ’ ἐξεναρίξῃς,/ οὐ τοι τοῦνεκά γε Πρίαμος γέρας ἐν χειρὶ θήσει, *Il.* XX, 181–182).

<sup>33</sup>On this mythical figure, probably introduced in the poem with the precise intent of consolidating the ties between Sparta and the heroic world, we suggest the insights of Marozzi (1998) and Nobili (2009).

<sup>34</sup>Πατρὸς μέγα δυναμένοιο (*Od.* I, 276).

<sup>35</sup>Τηλεκλειτοῖο (*Od.* XIX, 546).

<sup>36</sup>Μεγαλήτορος (*Od.* IV, 797).

<sup>37</sup>Τὴν Εὐμηλος ὅπιε Φερῆς ἐνὶ οἰκίᾳ ναίων (*Od.* IV, 798).

<sup>38</sup>Εὐμηλος, τὸν ὑπ’ Ἀδμήτῳ τέκε δῖα γυναικῶν/ Ἄλκηστις Πελῖαιο θυγατρῶν εἶδος ἀρίστη (*Il.* II, 714–715).

<sup>39</sup>Γένος βασιλῆϊον (*Od.* XVI, 401).

<sup>40</sup>Υμετέρου δ’ οὐκ ἔστι γένος βασιλευτέρων ἄλλο/ ἐν δήμῳ Ἰθάκης, ἀλλ’ ὑμεῖς καρτεροὶ αἰεὶ (*Od.* XV, 533–534). A detailed description of the figure of the soothsayer, the protagonist of *Od.* XX, 345–383, and its divinatory faculties, is due to Broggiato (2003) and Brillante (2014) (and in any case formerly Muñoz Valle 1969).

<sup>41</sup>Μὴ σέ γ’ ἐν ἀμφιάλῳ Ἰθάκῃ βασιλῆα Κρονίων/ ποιήσειεν, ὃ τοι γενεῇ πατρώϊον ἐστίν (*Od.* I, 386–387). Davies (2001) dwells on this prominent character of the poem, described in the first book as the most handsome but at the same time haughty among the suitors, and probably for this same reason destined to fall first under the blows of the avenger Odysseus.

<sup>42</sup>Τὸν οὐκέτι φασὶ πόλινδε/ ἔρχεσθ’, ἀλλ’ ἀπάνευθεν ἐπ’ ἀγροῦ πῆματα πάσχειν/ γρηὶ σὺν ἀμφιπόλῳ, ἧ οἱ βρῶσιν τε πόσιν τε/ παρτιθεῖ, εἴτ’ ἂν μιν κάματος κατὰ γυῖα λάβῃσιν/ ἐρπύζοντ’ ἀνὰ γουνὸν ἄλωγος οἰνοπέδιοιο (*Od.* I, 189–193).

<sup>43</sup>ῤυπόωντα δὲ ἔστο χιτῶνα/ ῤαπτὸν ἀεκέλιον [...] αὐτὰρ ὑπερθεν/ αἰγείην κυνέην κεφαλῇ ἔχε, πένθος ἀέζων (*Od.* XXIV, 227–228; 230–231). The accentuation of vacillating features in Laertes’ figure clearly alludes to the future recovery of power by Odysseus: so Sauzeau 2003. Other useful elements are offered by Sels (2013): the last canto of the *Odyssey* highlights the virtuous restoration of good values in the community as well as the recovery of the leading role by the protagonist, also thanks to the solidity of parental love.

In short, it does not seem at all that Odysseus could have received his “royal dignity” from such a pathetic figure: instead, one could suspect that what opened the way to the aristocratic marriage of our cunning hero with the daughter of the “most powerful” Icarus was wealth he had accumulated before the war, to which the *Odyssey* makes explicit reference: “So truly does Odysseus beyond all mortal men know many gainful ways,/ nor could any mortal beside vie with him”<sup>44</sup>. This is corroborated by the fact that this precursor of the capitalist mentality – which, not surprisingly, in the *Iliad* is scornfully defined as “greedy for wealth”<sup>45</sup> by Agamemnon – “verily had an immeasurable wealth, so much/ has no lord either on the dark mainland or in Ithaca itself; nay, not twenty men together/ have wealth so great”<sup>46</sup>.

Incidentally, the idea of the “royal dignity” that Odysseus had acquired through his marriage to Penelope could also explain the hidden meaning of the abduction of Helen and her possessions, which Homer always indicates as the only reason for the Trojan War<sup>47</sup>: in this regard, one should just consider that, according to Greek mythology, the young Menelaus, orphaned Atreus’s son, had been able to access the throne of Sparta by virtue of his marriage to Helen, the daughter of King Tindareus (who in turn was the brother of Penelope’s father, the “most powerful” Icarus).

In fact, one wonders if the abduction of Helen – as well as her subsequent marriage to Paris, who in the *Iliad* is her second husband to all effects – could be exhausted in the context of a sentimental, family, private dimension, or if instead, apart from the obvious negative reflections on Menelaus’ “public image”, this did not compromise his title to be the king of Sparta – which he had acquired precisely by virtue of marriage – with the risk of opening in his reign what nowadays would be called an “institutional crisis”, with unpredictable developments. Incidentally, one should try to imagine what political and military turmoil would have occurred in Europe a few centuries ago if a Queen of England had fled to Moscow with the Tsar’s son.

In short, this could have resulted in the determination of the other Achaean kings – and above all of Menelaus’s elder brother, Agamemnon, who also had become king following his marriage to Clytemnestra, Tyndareus’ eldest daughter – to recover Helen at all costs (not because she was beautiful, but because she was the Queen of Sparta), the only way both to resolve the situation created with the abduction, and to avert a dangerous precedent. On the other hand, even in the *Odyssey* the main point of action is the dispute over a woman, Penelope, disputed among her suitors and her husband. In short, in both the Homeric poems what

<sup>44</sup>Ως περι κέρδεα πολλά καταθητῶν ἀνθρώπων/ οἷδ’ Ὀδυσσεύς, οὐδ’ ἄν τις ἐρίσσειε βροτὸς ἄλλος (*Od.* XIX, 285–286).

<sup>45</sup>Κερδαλέοφρον (*Il.* IV, 339).

<sup>46</sup>Ἡ γὰρ οἱ ζῶν γ’ ἦν ἄσπετος· οὐ τι νι τόσση/ ἀνδρῶν ἠρώων, οὔτ’ ἠπείροιο μελαίνης/ οὔτ’ αὐτῆς Ἰθάκης· οὐδὲ ξυνεείκοσι φωτῶν/ ἔστ’ ἄφρονος τοσσούτων (*Od.* XIV, 96–99).

<sup>47</sup>*Il.* XXII, 116. On Helen’s abduction and its remarkable anthropological implications, see Calame (2009, 2015). The myth was constantly reformulated according to the different political and religious contexts: this is demonstrated by the poems of Alcman (fr. 1 P.–D. = 3 Cal.), Sappho (fr. 16 V.), Alcaeus (fr. 42 V.) and Stesichorus (fr. 192 P.–D.).

really is at stake is Power, which has always moved, and often turned into drama, history as well as the stories of men.

In any case, the whole Homeric tale seems to indicate that the kingdom of Ithaca was the inheritance that Penelope had had from her father Icarius. But all of this is contrary to what we know about the ancient Greek kingdoms, whereas it suggests that the Homeric epos could refer to an earlier epoch, which is congruent with the fact that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were created without the help of writing by a poet, or by poets, who were completely ignorant of the techniques of writing (Savino 1989, p. 78). This so archaic characteristic of the two poems, underlined by Geoffrey Kirk of the University of Cambridge, gives us a fundamental key to understanding their content.

As a matter of fact, the scholar gives us another very important piece of information, when he underlines that “a recent linguistic analysis puts forward the hypothesis that the Homeric tmesis, that is the use of detaching adverbial or prepositional elements which in the later language would have constituted an integral part of compound verbs, belongs to a stage of Greek prior to that documented by the Linear B tablets: in this case, the elements of the Homeric language would have to retreat in time, a leap of five hundred years or more compared to the poet’s time” (Savino 1989, 88 f.). This too fits very well with the survey that is emerging now.

In turn, Fritz Graf points out that “the epic tale of myths among the Greeks has its roots in the middle of the third millennium BC, long before the flourishing of the Mycenaean civilization” (Graf 1997, 56), which is corroborated by the fact that “some locations, very important from a mythical point of view, have no background in the Mycenaean past: among them there are the cities of Argos and Sparta, for example, or Ithaca, where Schliemann had in vain searched for a palace of Odysseus; moreover, Mycenaean settlements or palaces without recognizable myths, for example Gla in Boeotia, Asine in Argolis or Miletus; the myth speaks of the Mycenaean colonization of the Ionian Sea as little as the Mycenaean conquest of Minoan Crete. So, Myth and Epos do not draw any reliable portrait of the Mycenaean world” (Graf 1997, p. 52).

Furthermore, Finley states that “the world of Odysseus is not the Mycenaean age of five, six or seven centuries earlier, but neither is it the world of the eighth or seventh century BC” (Finley 1992, p. 30).

All this proves the great antiquity of the oral tradition that was at the origin of the two poems. Not only that: remembering that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were created without the help of writing by a poet, or by poets, who were completely ignorant of the techniques of writing, the difficulty of dating their origin in the eighth century BC, when in Greece alphabetic writing was already in vogue, becomes even more evident, by considering that this was the time when the ancient oral songs from which the two poems had originated were put in writing.

At this point, we are also able to understand why the figure of Homer appears vague and elusive to the point that we know nothing about him and his life: the image of the poet (or, perhaps, of the two poets) hidden behind the two works seem to be shrouded in the mists of prehistory, and their outlines vanish in the dimension of myth. In this regard, Fausto Codino observes that, “if it were

possible, we would follow the classic scheme of any preliminary investigation of a literary work: historical background, sources, biography and personality of the author. Unfortunately, we ignore all these things” (Codino 1990, p. 11).

On the other hand, the question of the true identity of the protagonist of the *Odyssey* also fits well into this picture that appears so problematic and full of uncertainties<sup>48</sup>. The Homeric world has very little to do with the much more recent Greek one, where from the very beginning Odysseus’s myths were well known: for example, not only Hesiod speaks of Circe, but in the so-called “cup of Nestor”<sup>49</sup> there is an inscription that could refer to the “beautiful cup [...] adorned with gold studs”<sup>50</sup> of the Achaean hero<sup>51</sup>.

The world of Homer and that described by the Mycenaean tablets have convergences, but do not identify at all: as Moses Finley states, “the deciphering of the tablets in Linear B and archaeology have destroyed the old orthodoxy” (Finley 1992, XVIII). Such considerations, of course, in our opinion could pave the way for further research on the real origin of the Homeric poems, in particular the *Odyssey*.

In conclusion, a great many congruent and convergent clues seem to substantiate the fact that the true identity of the protagonist of the *Odyssey*, who suddenly reappeared in Ithaca almost twenty years after the beginning of the

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<sup>48</sup>Furthermore, according to a controversial hypothesis, exposed and debated in a conference held at the “Sapienza” University of Rome in 2012, the Homeric world would be previous, and not subsequent, to the descent of the ancestors of the Hellenes in the Aegean Sea and to the origin of the Mycenaean civilization: in this case, it would go back to at least the first half of the second millennium BC, and it would have had as its original set the Baltic–Scandinavian area, whose geographical, morphological and climatic characteristics could be able to explain many of the contradictions found in the traditional Mediterranean location (Vinci 2013). This is corroborated by the astonishing affinity of the Mycenaean civilization with the Nordic Bronze Age, to the point of having led an archaeologist to define the latter as “a specific and selective Nordic variety of Mycenaean high culture” (Kristiansen and Suchowska–Ducke 2015, p. 371). All of this is also consistent with the fact, noted by all scholars, that the civilization described in the Homeric poems is more rustic and more archaic than the Mycenaean civilization: “the deciphering of the texts in Linear B has shown that between the Mycenaean and iliadic societies there was an absolute difference in size and quality: that one has great wealth, a complex political, administrative and military apparatus, a population divided among many dozen different professional activities, while in the *Iliad* the social division of the work is just beginning to take shape” (Codino 1990, IX). Not surprisingly, the sons of King Priam lead the sheep to pasture “in the gorges of the Ida” (“Ἴδης ἐν κνημοῖσι, *Il.* XI, 106) and before the doors of Odysseus’s palace there was “a large quantity of mule and oxen manure” (*Od.* XVII, 297–298).

<sup>49</sup>An archaeological find (*CEG* 454) dating back to the VIII century BC and found in 1955 in the necropolis of San Montano in Lacco Ameno on the island of Ischia.

<sup>50</sup>Δέπας περικαλλές [...] χρυσεῖοις ἥλοισι πεπαρμένον (*Il.* XI, 632–633).

<sup>51</sup>However, according to Dettori (1990–1993), several reasons would lead us to believe that the inscription, consisting of an iambic trimeter and two dactylic hexameters, rather bears the typical features of symposial poetry. See Buchner and Russo (1955), Guarducci (1961), Jourdan–Hemmerdinger (1988), Buchner and Ridgway (2012, reprint from 1993), Valerio (2017). The hypothesis of a great antiquity of the Homeric epos, linked to an oral tradition prior to the introduction of writing in Greece, could also explain the difference between the pantheon of Homer and that of Hesiod, which instead appears insurmountable if one is based on the current chronologies, according to which the two poets are almost contemporaries. On the other hand, all this seems congruent with the observation (also difficult to explain on the basis of current chronologies) that the Homeric world appears much more archaic than the Mycenaean one.

Trojan War, does not correspond at all to the character of Odysseus as he appears in the narrative of the *Iliad*, but is instead identifiable with the Cretan hero Meriones, who in that war stood out as a formidable fighter and a great archer. So it was this comrade in arms of Odysseus who most likely organized and carried out the slaughter of the suitors at the request of Telemachus, who in fact had left Ithaca shortly before in search of help among his father's old friends to try to solve the problem of Penelope's imminent marriage – which would have compromised his aspiration to become king of Ithaca – by any means. However, subsequently the poet of the *Odyssey* completely misrepresented the facts to make the slaughter of the suitors seem more morally acceptable.

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