

Phemius Suite*

Abstract: This article examines four connected aspects of Phemius' performance in *Odyssey* 1. The first section examines the poet's unusual technique in relating Phemius' music to other, simultaneous sounds in the 'soundscape' of Odysseus' hall. The second argues that the suitors' initial dancing develops into a theme of appropriate and inappropriate nimbleness which, in particular, creates significant connections between books 1 and 22. The third section shows that the poet is suggestive but studiously vague on the politics of Phemius' first song which, in the final section, I interpret as a self-reflexive and open-ended 'lesson' in how to read epic.

Scholarship on the *Odyssey* has long been concerned with how the poet used inset songs to reflect on his own poetic procedures. However, Demodocus' three songs in book 8 have dominated attention to the point of leaving Phemius' performance at *Odyssey* 1.153-5, 325-7 somewhat in the shade, despite its more prominent position in the epic. This article therefore aspires both to contribute to and to rebalance ongoing discussion of the *Odyssey*'s implicit poetics.

As my title suggests, I shall make a 'suite' of arguments (in sections 1, 2, and 3-4), which might seem largely independent, especially when summarised in an abstract. However, these arguments belong together not merely through their shared theme of Phemius, but because the first two sections ground points made in the latter half of the essay. First I discuss the unusual narratology by which Phemius' music is introduced, abandoned, then reintroduced. My focus is on how the presentation of sound goes beyond scene-painting to affect issues such as sympathy and characterisation. However, my contention that the abrupt reintroduction of Phemius is striking enough to demand explanation will recur in support of a new suggestion I make in section 3 about how Phemius' song is ominous in its performative setting. Section 2 argues that the word ἐλαφρότεροι in 1.164 not only alludes to the suitors dancing to Phemius' songs in the background, but sets in train a theme of contrasting culturally esteemed and inappropriate forms of nimbleness, which I trace in diverse parts of the *Odyssey*. The fact that this theme constructs significant connections between books 1 and 22 returns in section 4 as underpinning the relationship of Phemius, Odysseus and the *Odyssey*-tradition as creators of Odysseus' κλέος. The second half of the essay returns from nimbleness to book 1. First, in section 3, I examine a range of ancient and modern responses to how Phemius' song engages with the situation on Ithaca, and argue that the poet remained studiously vague both about Phemius' intentions and about whether the suitors and Telemachus identify such engagement. This lays the groundwork for the fourth section, where I read the episode as a self-reflexive 'lesson' in interpretation, and one which is remarkable for its open-ended nature.

1. Prelude: Soundscaping

When Athena comes, disguised as Mentès, to inspire Telemachus to seek news of his father, he welcomes her to lunch but seats her away from the main group of tables, for two reasons (*Od.* 1.132-5):

παρ δ' αὐτὸς κλισμὸν θέτο ποικίλον, ἔκτοθεν ἄλλων
μνηστήρων, μὴ ξεῖνος ἀνηθείς ὀρυμαγδῶι
δείπνῳ ἀδήσειεν, ὑπερφιάλοισι μετελθόν,
ἦδ' ἵνα μιν περὶ πατρὸς ἀποιχομένοιο ἔροιτο.

And [Telemachus] himself set an ornate chair alongside, outside the area of the others – the suitors – in case the guest should be annoyed by their din and get

fed up with the meal, having come among arrogant men; and so that he could ask him about his absent father.

Telemachus' arrangement creates a sonic buffer-zone, sheltering 'Mentes' from the suitors' words, and the suitors from his own quieter ones. Telemachus is already envisaging the hall as a complex 'soundscape'. By this I mean a space containing plural sources of potentially simultaneous sounds, whose effects vary according not only to the distance of each from a hearer, but also to the hearer's decisions about what noise to 'tune in to'.¹ The ensuing scene does indeed build on these foundations, and demonstrates how a Homeric narrator can conduct us around a soundscape artistically.

Several scholars have briefly noted the startling manner in which Phemius' song is introduced after the description of lunch.² However, the effects can be probed more deeply. Phemius is presented with his lyre (1.150-5) but, just as he is about to begin, the primary narrator directs our attention towards the conversation of Telemachus and 'Mentes' (1.155-7):

ἦτοι ὃ φορμίζων ἀνεβάλλετο καλὸν ἀεΐδειν,
αὐτὰρ Τηλέμαχος προσέφη γλαυκῶπιν Ἀθήνην,
ἄγχι σχὼν κεφαλὴν, ἵνα μὴ πευθοῖαθ' οἱ ἄλλοι...

He struck up to sing beautifully to the lyre, but Telemachus addressed bright-eyed Athena – after moving his head close so that the others would not hear.

Unlike the similar introduction to Demodocus' second song, the ἀναβολή does not here lead straight into an announcement of the theme.³ Rather, Phemius' playing is suddenly reduced to an indistinct background level. As we imagine the soundscape, we must suddenly cross the room to join Telemachus and Athena, and are made privy to their conversation even though it is conducted in hushed tones with heads held close together. Indeed, other than a hint at 1.164 (discussed in the next section), Phemius' music is kept firmly out of earshot throughout the conversation which unfurls for 168 lines. Even when Athena marvels at the suitors' behaviour at 1.224-8, and when Telemachus responds to this at 1.250, the focus is on their eating him out of house and home, rather than their present musical activities.

However, after Athena leaves, the narrator suddenly 'turns up the volume' on Phemius, as we follow Telemachus back to the main party. We are finally given Phemius' topic, and forcefully reminded that he has played continuously, and has been continuously relegated to the background, during the preceding conversation (1.324-7):

αὐτίκα δὲ μνηστῆρας ἐπώιχετο ἰσόθεος φῶς.
τοῖσι δ' αἰοῖδος ἄειδε περικλυτός, οἳ δὲ σιωπῆι
ἦατ' ἀκούοντες· ὃ δ' Ἀχαιῶν νόστον ἄειδεν

* My thanks to Tom Phillips for discussion, and to the referees for their constructive advice. Translations are my own.

¹ More sophisticated senses of 'soundscape' exist in e.g. musicology and urban geography, where the term can embrace the distinctive modes of production and perception of noises in a particular setting or community. I thank the *JHS* referee who pointed me to Samuels et al. (2010) for a survey of usage and of how soundscapes might interest the anthropologist. Much of that article is very suggestive for how one could pursue the representation of sound in ancient literature.

² E.g. Krischer (1971) 120, Segal (1994) 127-8, De Jong (2001) 34-5.

³ 8.266-7 αὐτὰρ ὃ φορμίζων ἀνεβάλλετο καλὸν ἀεΐδειν | ἄμφ' Ἄρεος φιλότητος ἐνστεφάνου τ' Ἀφροδίτης, 'But he struck up to sing beautifully to the lyre, concerning the love of Ares and fair-garlanded Aphrodite'.

λυγρόν, ὄν ἐκ Τροίης ἐπετείλατο Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.

The godlike man went straight back towards the suitors. The famous bard was singing for them, and they sat listening in silence. He was singing of the miserable return of the Achaeans from Troy which Pallas Athena had ordained.

The narrator draws our attention to two simultaneous noises which Telemachus has deliberately tried to separate – the din of the suitors' meal followed by the music of Phemius, versus his quiet and concerned conversation. This reinforces with precision the sense that Telemachus and Athena form a separate, numerically weaker group which opposes the suitors. But moreover the text has been focalised for us through Telemachus and Athena, who deliberately blocked out the suitors' hubbub. This focalisation both signals Telemachus' earnest concentration, and uses sound to make a claim on our sympathies, as we are drawn in to his private concerns. These effects are set off by the much more common narratological use of sound which occurs shortly afterwards, where the noise is followed 'naturalistically' up to Penelope's chamber, where she is listening, in order to manage the entry of a new character.⁴

This discussion of our first sight of Phemius is intended to stand independently as a case-study of how the narrator can use a soundscape to position narratees, and how such positioning is implicated in questions of characterisation and evaluation. It does, however, also raise an issue which will return at the end of the third section of this essay. The Homeric narrators rarely present simultaneous events in both foreground and background; the sense here that the 'background' events are being forcibly suppressed *into* the background strikes me as particularly unusual.⁵ There is therefore a strong narratological prompt to consider a question normally approached through content alone: how are the latter stages of Athena's discussion with Telemachus to be related to Phemius' simultaneous *Nostoi*?

2. Gigue: Nimbleness

According to the preceding section, we are invited to focus intently on Telemachus and Athena, to the exclusion of musical activity around Phemius. In this section I shall give a new interpretation of an adjective in book 1 which can enhance our sense of that musical activity. More significantly, it also sets up a theme of contrasting types of nimbleness (dancing, running, running away), which I shall pursue through the *Odyssey*. This will help us understand some precise aspects of how the climactic fight in book 22 recalls book 1, which will in turn lay the foundations for my subsequent arguments about the relationship of Phemius' song to the *Odyssey* as a whole.

The process of blocking out Phemius' music during the conversation between Athena and Telemachus has an abrupt end, as we saw. But its start is more gradual, given Telemachus' comment at 1.163-5:

εἰ κείνόν γ' Ἰθάκηνδε ἰδοίαιτο νοστήσαντα
πάντες κ' ἀρησαίαιτ' ἐλαφρότεροι πόδας εἶναι
ἢ ἀφνειότεροι χρυσοῖο τε ἐσθῆτός τε.

⁴ 1.328. For this technique see Richardson (1990) 113, De Jong (2001) on 1.328-9.

⁵ In 8.433-52, a bath is prepared in the background while Arete presents a gift to Odysseus, who then goes for his bath. The structure is similar, though on a much less striking scale. Homeric narrative, as is well known, frequently presents simultaneous events as if they had been sequential, rather than revisiting one moment in time twice: Zielinski (1899-1901), Bassett (1938) 38-42 (focusing on the *Odyssey*'s use of τόφρα 'meanwhile'), Krischer (1971) 91-129, Richardson (1990) 90-5, Scodel (2008).

If they were to see *that* man [i.e. Odysseus] returned to Ithaca, every one of them would pray to have nimble feet rather than to be rich in gold and clothing.

Their nimbleness would, within this fantasy, be that of a coward in the normative, militaristic heroic world which Odysseus' return would reinstate. However, I suggest that since the narrator has characterised Phemius' performance as involving dance (1.151-2 τοῖσιν μὲν... μεμήλει | μολπή τ' ὀρχηστὺς τε), the nimbleness envisaged may also contrast with that concurrently being displayed on the dance-floor, which belongs to the improperly decadent society which the suitors have established on Ithaca.⁶

My interpretation of this fleeting glimpse, both of the suitors' dancing and of a contrast between heroic and decadent forms of nimbleness, can be supported by later passages of the epic which develop the contrast. The lives of the Phaeacians and the suitors are connected in a number of ways, not least the presence of a prominent minstrel.⁷ Alcinous' statement of Phaeacian ideals (8.241-55) makes a contrast between their ἀρετή (8.244) and Odysseus' ἀρετή (8.237), and centres on 8.248-9:

αἰεὶ δ' ἡμῖν δαίς τε φίλη κίθαρις τε χοροὶ τε,
εἵματά τ' ἐξημοιβὰ λοετρά τε θερμὰ καὶ εὐναί.
Banqueting is ever dear to us, and the lyre, dances, changes of clothes, warm
baths, and bed.

This is also the leisured life which the suitors have created at Odysseus' expense, and may evoke Telemachus' comment about it in the passage we have been considering (1.159-60):

τούτοισιν μὲν ταῦτα μέλει, κίθαρις καὶ ἀοιδή,
ῥεῖ' ...
These people concern themselves with this – the lyre and singing – at ease...

Unlike the suitors' indulgences, the Phaeacians' pampered lifestyle is justifiable given their exotic situation, blessed with resources and far from threats. However, it is not straightforwardly an ideal, as is shown by another pastime they share with the suitors: sport. The games in book 8 contrast the Phaeacian model of athletics as a pleasant pastime with Odysseus' more traditionally Greek model of competitive athletics as quasi-military training.⁸ Odysseus beats the Phaeacian dilettantes at the discus; though his superiority is hampered in running, at least, by his poor current condition, he suggests that on form he would outstrip them (8.204-6, 230-3). In response Alcinous, while insisting proudly on the Phaeacians' prowess with their feet (247 ποσὶ κραιπνῶς θέομεν), diplomatically lets athletics cede to a rather different proof of it – a dance-show. The suitors too engage in athletic training merely as a hobby.⁹ Hence book 8 opposes Odysseus and the Phaeacians on the issue of ('Greek' versus 'pampered') ἀρετή in nimbleness, just as, on my reading, Telemachus' use of ἐλαφρότεροι set the suitors' nimbleness in the contrasting perspectives of Odysseus' military

⁶ One of *JHS*'s referees ingeniously suggested that Telemachus' reference to rich clothes and gold ornaments could also allude to the suitors' dances, comparing *Il.* 18.595-8, *Od.* 6.62-5.

⁷ E.g. Rüter (1969) 228-46, Louden (1999) 1-30, Steinrück (2008) 34. For the intratexts between Odysseus' ἄεθλοι among the Phaeacians and those among the Ithacans, see e.g. Garvie (1994) on 8.22-3, 104-32, 215-28.

⁸ See Dickie (1983), De Jong (2001) on 8.147-8, 241-9. Significantly, for example, the Phaeacians appear neither to specialise nor to compete for prizes.

⁹ 4.626-7 = 17.168-9 δίσκοισιν τέρποντο... ὡς πάρος, 17.174 ἐτέρφθητε φρέν' ἀέθλοις (~ 8.131). τέρπησις is not part of the athletics in *Iliad* 23.

world and their own decadent one. The parallelism is supported by phrasal similarities, and the broader connections between the suitors and the Phaeacians.

Odysseus importantly reactivates this nexus of ideas at 21.430. After stringing the bow, he calls for dinner and entertainment

μολπήι καὶ φόρμιγγι· τὰ γάρ τ' ἀναθήματα δαιτός
with song-dance and the lyre: for these are the ornaments of a banquet.

Odysseus grimly suggests that the evening will continue with the suitors' usual entertainments. A particular connection to the presentation of the suitors in book 1 is forged by the second half-line, which occurs elsewhere in epic only at 1.152, when Phemius is introduced.¹⁰ But Odysseus has very different ingredients in mind for the party of book 22. First, instead of feasting Antinous is doomed to 'taste' (21.98 γεύεσθαι) Odysseus' first arrow. He is shot in the throat, which spurts blood over the cup from which he was about to drink a different red liquid (22.8-21). Secondly, Odysseus implies a contrast between the suitors' song and dance (μολπή), and their shrieks and (eventually) flight in the fighting.¹¹ Thus, as in Telemachus' use of ἐλαφρότεροι at 1.164, we find a contrast between the nimbleness of dancing while the suitors control their activities, and that of fleeing when Odysseus restores a need for heroism. Book 8, as we saw, expanded on such a contrast, to include not only Phaeacian dancing but also more leisured versus more competitive forms of athletics.

The final implication of Odysseus' words at 21.430 brings us back to Phemius: his lyre-playing will be replaced by the twanging of Odysseus' bow. Indeed, this is already portended by the famous simile when Odysseus strings the bow as a bard restrings a lyre, and tests it with a pluck (21.404-11).¹² This substitution has its own logic, in that Odysseus' future κλέος rests on a complementary pair: victory in this fight, for which the bow's vibrations will prove instrumental, and future reperformances of his glory by lyre-playing minstrels.¹³ And the question of whether Phemius' music will be recuperated from the suitors' world into Odysseus' new order is given due weight when, at the end of the fighting, Phemius supplicates Odysseus and advertises his ability to sing beside him 'as beside a god' (22.348-9), i.e. to celebrate his κλέος after the bow has been put back in its storeroom.

For now, I hope to have drawn out the thematic logic of Telemachus' use of ἐλαφρότεροι, shown that that logic comes to a head in book 22, and suggested how it forms the groundwork for interpreting the shift in Phemius' role, from performing for the suitors in book 1 to performing for Odysseus after book 22. I shall return towards the end of the article to this last point, but first we must explore in more detail what kind of performance Phemius gives in book 1.

3. Theme and Variations: Phemius' *Nostoi*

Even if the suitors have been dancing at first, by the time Telemachus re-enters their world they are sitting in rapt attention (1.325 σιωπῆι). As cited above, Phemius 'was singing of the

¹⁰ Similarly Marg (1957) 14, Said (1979) 25.

¹¹ Stanford (1965) on 21.428-30 observes the implicit contrast of dinner and war in Odysseus' words. For Iliadic passages suggestive of the dipole dance-war, see e.g. *Il.* 3.392-4, 7.238, 16.745-50; cf. Dickie (1983) 268. For armed dances in Greece see Ceccarelli (1998).

¹² For Odysseus as a minstrel-like *speaker*, see *Od.* 11.368, 17.518.

¹³ As is well known, the nature of Odysseus' final κλέος is problematic given that he antagonises a large proportion of the Ithacan population, that it assimilates him to a lion in the amount of gore produced (22.402), that he wants to fight on even after Athena instructs him to stop (24.537), and so on. This need not detain us here.

miserable return of the Achaeans from Troy which Pallas Athena had ordained'. This song produces contrasting responses in Penelope, for whom the content is too close to the bone, and Telemachus, who might be expected to share Penelope's position but instead defends the theme with a depoliticised model of how Phemius is interacting with his audience – namely that the 'newest' song is always popular (1.350-2).¹⁴ This discrepancy prompts two questions already addressed in ancient scholarship. First, did Phemius intend to engage with Ithacan politics, and hence, secondly, what did the song contain?¹⁵ I will address these points in reverse, beginning with how an audience's knowledge of *Nostoi* traditions might prime it to understand Phemius' topic. Then I will consider various interpretations of Phemius' 'message', and suggest that it is more instructive to focus on why the poet left things open-ended. The section ends with the differing internal responses to the song and the sense in which they are ideal or limited.

What associations could a *Nostos*-song have brought to the minds of Phemius' audience and of the *Odyssey*'s early audiences? A significant preliminary remark is that Penelope presently implies that this is one of Phemius' standard themes (341-2, the theme αἰεὶ... κῆρ | τείρει). We can therefore attribute to the internal audience – as to the ancient external audience – a broad competence in the whole *Nostoi* tradition, even if the present performance is only a partial rendition. This competence makes the whole tradition cognitively available as one interprets Phemius' specific path through the material.¹⁶

We are explicitly told that Phemius' song involves Athena (1.327). Her role as presented in later sources was probably already traditional at the *Odyssey*'s date, as implied in 4.502 when her anger is directed particularly at the Lesser Ajax: she punished the Greeks for the rape of Cassandra and the theft of the Palladion.¹⁷ But the *Odyssey* also presupposes other significant events in the *Nostoi* traditions of its day, which can legitimately be posited in the interpretative framework of Phemius' audience, even if not explicitly mentioned as Athena is. These further episodes include Menelaus' wanderings (as incorporated at length into books 3-4) and Orestes' vengeance on Aegisthus. The latter was – at least according to Proclus' summary – the culmination of the Cyclic *Nostoi*. Already in the divine meeting at *Od.* 1.26-95, Zeus's apparently off-topic thoughts about Aegisthus' come-uppance are twisted by Athena back towards the gods' unfair treatment of Odysseus. This will develop into the 'Atreid paradigm' whereby the relationships Agamemnon-Clytemnestra-Aegisthus-Orestes are recurrently compared with Odysseus-Penelope-suitors-Telemachus, all the way to book 24.¹⁸

An obvious further speculation is what role, if any, Odysseus played in Phemius' songs. With whom does he leave Troy, does he get separated, and how does his story proceed

¹⁴ The contrast between Telemachus' and Penelope's 'readings' of Phemius is also developed by Pucci (1987) 195-208.

¹⁵ Such ἀπορήματα are sidestepped in Σ_{DE} 1.327(j) Pontani, according to which the song is motivated purely οἰκονομικῶς, to introduce Penelope and her continued hopes. Certainly it does this, and affords an opportunity to present Telemachus' new confidence in asserting κράτος in front of her (1.359). However, such introductory functions do not exclude other interpretative moves. For the other ancient sources see below.

¹⁶ The importance of Phemius' 'reperformativity' is mentioned by Pucci (1987) 197 n. 18, Lombardo (1990) 107-8.

¹⁷ 4.502 Αἴας... ἐχθόμενός περ Ἀθήνηι. Less clear allusions are 3.135, 145, 5.108-9. For later sources see e.g. *Il. Pers.* arg., Alcaeus fr. 298 Voigt, *E. Tro.* 70.

¹⁸ See e.g. Olson (1995) 24-42.

thereafter?¹⁹ Such speculation has a long heritage. According to Σ_{HIS} 1.325(g) Pontani, the suitors listened

καραδοκοῦντες ἦν τι ἀκούσωσιν περὶ θανάτου τοῦ Ὀδυσσέως.
expectant to see if they would hear anything about Odysseus' death.

Conversely Penelope intervened to avoid just that, according to Σ 1.340(b-c):

ταύτης δ' ἀποπαύε' ἀοιδῆς] δέδιε γὰρ ἡ Πηνελόπη μὴ θάνατον Ὀδυσσέως
ἄισας ἀναπερώσῃ τοὺς μνηστῆρας. EHM^aN | τῆς τῶν Ἀχαιῶν ὑποστροφῆς
καὶ τῆς τοῦ Ὀδυσσέως πλάνης. H
'leave off this song': Penelope was afraid that by singing of the death of
Odysseus he would excite the suitors' hopes. | Namely the return journey of the
Achaean and the wandering of Odysseus.

More recently, Svenbro in particular was sure that Phemius sang of Odysseus' death, a corollary of which would be that the *Odyssey* ironically refutes its own inset song.²⁰ In fact, Svenbro's position is hardly compatible with Telemachus' complaint that Odysseus has vanished without record (1.235, 241-2) and Penelope's continuing hopes for his return.²¹ Nevertheless, the living Odysseus may well be imagined to feature in Phemius' accounts.

In recent decades Homeric scholarship of both neoanalytical and 'oralist' persuasions has repeatedly demonstrated how brief allusions to important parts of the epic tradition invite and reward exploration. The penumbra of resonances I have mentioned therefore play an important role as we next consider how to interpret Phemius' choice of topic, even though we cannot know exactly what he sang that particular afternoon. When Phemius chooses his theme, his audience consists of the suitors: Telemachus is still talking to 'Mentes', while Penelope is out of sight upstairs.²² But what 'message' does Phemius have for them? A remarkable range of interpretations are possible, from Phemius pandering to the suitors' assumption that Odysseus is dead, all the way to Phemius relishing their inability to understand his implicit criticisms of them.

At one end of this spectrum stands the view which focuses on the similarity between the disastrous Greek returns and that of Odysseus. It is this similarity which upsets Penelope (1.340-4), and several scholars have argued that any *Nostoi*-song has a natural appeal for the suitors, whose present lifestyle is premised on Odysseus' failure to return safely.²³ Penelope's complaint certainly suggests the question of what Phemius was thinking in choosing an

¹⁹ See 3.162-3 for Nestor's account: Odysseus left with Nestor and Diomedes, then turned back to rejoin Agamemnon. The beginning of the *Apologoi* suggests that Odysseus' contingent were already alone. Cf. Clay (1983) 46-50.

²⁰ Svenbro (1976) 18-21, as part of a broader search for evidence of Homeric bards being constrained by social control exercised by the audience. Bowie (1993) 16-17 also infers that Phemius sings of Odysseus' death. Pucci (1987) writes confusedly on the point: on pp. 197-8 it is unknowable whether Odysseus is mentioned, but on pp. 202-3 the song involves Odysseus' death. Danek (2001) 59 infers from Penelope's response, equally unsafely, that Phemius plans to sing of Odysseus' *disappearance*.

²¹ Scodel (2002) 82-5, Biles (2003) 195. D'Angour (2011) 185 also thinks Odysseus' fate goes as yet unsung, but more optimistically thinks this lack of resolution offers hope to Telemachus.

²² Pace Most (1990) 40-1, who asserts that Phemius chooses a topic which will allow him to please the suitors with a story of disastrous return, and to please Telemachus and Penelope with a story of theodicy.

²³ So e.g. Pucci (1987) 197-8. One should say 'natural appeal for *the majority* of the suitors', since at least Eurynomus had a lost brother among Odysseus' men (2.17-22).

obviously sensitive topic.²⁴ And it is tempting to relate this to the explicit pressure Phemius is under in performing for the suitors (1.154 ἤειδε παρὰ μνηστῆρσιν ἀνάγκη), which might affect his choice of themes. Svenbro compares Phemius in this respect to the bard tasked with preserving Clytemnestra's chastity. The latter resists Aegisthus, who forcibly removes him to a deserted island (3.267-71). The comparison was probably made already in the Hellenistic period, as the implicit background to the claim (ascribed to one Timolaus) that Phemius was this singer's brother.²⁵ Moreover, book 22 raises the possibility that Odysseus himself assumes Phemius' culpable implication in the suitors' activities. Phemius immediately follows the seer Leodes in supplicating Odysseus, and shared formulas prompt us to compare and contrast the two. Despite Leodes' protestations, Odysseus plausibly assumes that he has been cursing him at the suitors' rituals (22.310-29). Phemius then bases his plea on three factors: his potential to 'sing beside Odysseus as beside a god', his having performed for the suitors under duress, and an appeal to Telemachus. The effect of the first two points is left in doubt, while the last works: Telemachus intervenes for Phemius and Medon, whom Odysseus frees 'because he has rescued and saved you' (22.372). Odysseus refers to Phemius only with the periphrastic name-play πολύφημος ἀοιδός (22.376), which in performance could be either light-hearted or acerbic. The whole scene, therefore, leaves us wondering whether Odysseus, without Telemachus' intercession, would have imagined Phemius' involvement any more positively than Leodes'.²⁶

There are thus various cues for reading Phemius' theme as one chosen to keep the suitors feeling secure. Yet equally an opposing political 'message' has been perceived since antiquity (Σ_{DHMaO} 1.327(f), Athenaeus *Epitome* 1 14b-d):

ταῦτα δὲ ἤειδε νουθετῶν τοὺς μνηστῆρας ἐκ τῶν περὶ Κασάνδρας καὶ Αἴαντος μὴ ὀρέγεσθαι ἀσεβῶν γάμων.

In singing this he was advising the suitors, based on the episode concerning Cassandra and Ajax, not to aim at an impious marriage.

τοὺς ἐφεδρεύοντας τῇ Πηνελόπῃ ἐβδελύττετο... τοῖς μνηστῆρσιν ἄδει πρὸς τὴν αὐτὴν βουλὴν [= ἀποτρέπων αὐτοὺς παρανόμων ὀρέξεων] ὁ Φήμιος νόστον Ἀχαιῶν.

He loathed those besieging Penelope. ... Phemius sings the *Return of the Greeks* to the suitors with the same intention [= diverting them from transgressive desires].²⁷

The context in Athenaeus shows that such interpretations came from philosophers arguing for a consistent didactic, proto-philosophical purpose for poetry within and by 'Homer'. As mentioned above, Athena almost certainly appeared in Phemius' songs to punish the Greeks for, among other things, the rape of Cassandra. This role has an obvious similarity to her role in punishing the lustful suitors. Ironically, the suitors have just ignored Athena initiating this role in the very same room as them. A second strand of relevance along these lines is the possibility that Phemius' *Nostoi*-songs generally headed towards Aegisthus' death (see above) – a second instance of what the scholiast calls 'impious marriages' going wrong,

²⁴ Similarly Grandolini (1995) 105-6, Olson (1995) 30-1.

²⁵ Svenbro (1976) 31, 35-8. For Timolaos: Σ_{EHMa} 3.267(e) with Pontani (2010); Bartol (2007) 235 n. 28.

²⁶ Besslich (1966) 102-4 reads Odysseus' pun and the fact that he does not address Phemius in person as contemptuous; cf. Svenbro (1976) 19-20.

²⁷ αὐτὴν is Wilamowitz's emendation for αὐτῶν, and is justified by the parallel idea expressed in the scholia that singers within the *Odyssey* have admonitory intentions.

though this time with less involvement from Athena.²⁸ Hence one ancient interpretative tradition saw Phemius' song as admonitory, suiting a particular view of the social function of poetry. However, if one accepts that Phemius 'loathed' the suitors, a more consistent interpretation is that instead of giving potentially beneficial advice to them, he was revelling in their lack of perspicacity and foretelling their punishment without them realising it.

We have seen two basic ways to read the contents of Phemius' song as relevant to the Ithacan situation, with contrasting implications for Phemius' characterisation. Despite their apparent opposition, it is possible to combine the pair: Bartol (2007) 240-1 suggested that Phemius favours the theme precisely because its dual relevance allows him to negotiate between the different interest-groups within his audiences. Rather than exclude any of these approaches, I would prefer to focus on what their diversity signals, namely the vagueness about Phemius' intentions constructed by the primary narrator. This matches how, as we saw, the statement of Phemius' theme evokes a wide field of epic traditions without defining his handling of a particular path within it.

I shall return in my final section to consider the reasons for this vagueness, but not before considering the crucial importance of the actual receptions of Phemius' song as constitutive of its meanings. This is the necessary complement to the discussion so far of *possible* ways to interpret the song's relevance to Ithacan politics. Moreover, one use the primary narrator makes of Phemius' song is to introduce us to the three key modes of audience response presented within the *Odyssey* – *τέρψις* (roughly, 'pleasure'), enchantment, and distress. The usually rambunctious suitors are reduced to listening in silence (1.325); Penelope connects such silences to the fascinating power of songs, which she calls *θελκτήρια* (1.337-40).²⁹ However, she herself is not bewitched but upset, since the subject matter is personally emotive. Telemachus, thirdly, figures Phemius as someone succeeding in the task of providing pleasure (1.347 *τέρπειν*).³⁰

Certainly, pleasure and enchantment are often found together. Indeed, the suitors take pleasure from Phemius' playing just minutes later (1.422). But enchantment has a distinctive emphasis. The suitors' positive response to the song seems, given their normal dislike of criticism, to preclude any perception of the unsettling relevance of lusty men getting punished (by Athena in the case of Ajax, or otherwise in the case of Aegisthus). Several possible reasons for their delight spring to mind: Phemius' musicianship, self-satisfaction at their chance to enjoy this aspect of high society, the idea that the *Nostoi* suggest Odysseus' death, and so on.³¹ But the fact that they of all people 'were seated in silence' does seem to support Penelope's analysis of the situation, namely that Phemius' songs are *θελκτήρια*. This power is ascribed to song and story several times in the *Odyssey*, and implies a shut-down of certain critical faculties. The converse of Penelope being immune to it because she has 'unforgettable grief' (1.342 *πένθος ἄλαστον*) is that the suitors are able to 'forget' everything during the song.³² Similarly the Sirens' *θέλξις* makes one forget urgent present concerns, such as getting

²⁸ The external audience, at least, has reasons to think that Athena approves of Aegisthus' death: 1.46; *cf.* Orestes' exile in her city at 3.307, if that line is genuine.

²⁹ For the idea that Phemius' ability to charm the rowdy suitors is particularly impressive see e.g. West (1988) on 1.325-7, Lombardo (1990) 107. Rüter (1969) 233 and Segal (1994) 127-8 wrongly assert that the suitors pay boorishly little attention to Phemius.

³⁰ At 1.346 Telemachus describes him as *ἐρίηρος*, probably 'doing many services' (*ἤρα*); at 22.330 his patronymic is *Τερπιάδης*.

³¹ Bartol (2007) 240. Olson (1995) 30-1 thinks the *external* audience might wonder whether Athena will be opposed to Odysseus too. In fact, the external audience knows otherwise, but the suitors might indeed adopt this interpretation, with extra irony.

³² Pucci (1987) 200 usefully compares this discourse of song and forgetfulness with Hes. *Th.* 98-103, for which *cf.* Halliwell (2011) 13-19, along with 45-53 on *θέλξις* and *τέρψις* in Homeric poetics.

home to one's family, or eating and drinking (12.39-46). Odysseus interrupts his Apologoi to suggest bed (11.328-82), whereas the Phaeacians 'gripped by κηληθμός' are not tired and prefer to continue listening. θέλξις therefore would impede the suitors from applying even basic features of their present situation to their interpretation of the song, in contrast to the durable scholarly focus on the song's relevance explored in the earlier parts of this section.

Telemachus' response to the song at 1.346-55 is harder to assess. It is introduced after Penelope has explicitly raised one point of situational relevance, namely the similarity of its content to Odysseus' conjectured fate. Unlike his mother, Telemachus asserts the ideal of song as a source of τέρψις (1.347) *while acknowledging* its emotive content. Indeed, he unconvincingly converts the similarity of the Greeks' fate into the consolatory trope that Penelope is not the only Greek wife to have lost a husband (1.353-5). This conception of τέρψις is compatible with emotional investment in a song's relevance, and so distances itself from pleasurable θέλξις, which appeared to distract one from that relevance.³³ However, Telemachus' analysis leaves it mysterious *how* τέρψις and emotional investment are compatible, and why Penelope fails to feel τέρψις. More problematically, Telemachus might not really believe or feel what he says, given the rhetorically charged situation in which he has particular reason both to conceal his new confidence about Odysseus, and to assert his social confidence towards the suitors. Both factors affect how he projects his response to the song.

While Telemachus' response to the relevance of the *Nostoi* to Odysseus' fate is knotty, there is silence about whether he sees the potential relevance of Phemius' theme for the suitors' behaviour.³⁴ One aspect of this silence seems not to have received enough attention. The Cyclic *Nostoi* culminated in Orestes' vengeance on Aegisthus, and this episode is of great significance in the tradition projected by the *Odyssey* itself. It is, indeed, introduced to Telemachus just a few moments before he hears Phemius' song, in Athena's closing advice (1.298-300):

ἢ οὐκ αἴεις οἶον κλέος ἔλλαβε διὸς Ὀρέστης
πάντας ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους, ἐπεὶ ἔκτανε πατροφονῆα,
Αἴγισθον δολόμητιν, ὃ οἱ πατέρα κλυτὸν ἔκτα;
Or are you unaware of what repute illustrious Orestes acquired among all
humankind, after he killed his father's slayer – scheming Aegisthus, who killed
his famous father?

In the intervening lines, Athena has refused to stay for further hospitality, then vanished by flying through the chimney-hole (1.319-20). While it is not certain how clearly Telemachus perceives this departure, he does appreciate the epiphanic nature of the experience. In 1.323 he only 'suspected' (οἴσατο) that 'Mentes' was a deity. However, after Eurymachus asks about the stranger's identity, commenting with dramatic irony on the sudden departure (1.410 οἶον ἀναίξας(!) ἄφαρ οἴχεται, 'How he leapt up and is suddenly gone'), Telemachus gives a deceptive response and 'recognised the immortal goddess in his mind' (1.420).³⁵

³³ Contrast Pucci (1987) 202-3, for whom Telemachus is naively distracted by a proto-Romantic aesthetics of pleasure from poetic creativity. My position is closer to that of Halliwell (2011) 1-4.

³⁴ As asserted by e.g. Most (1990) 40-1, *contra* e.g. Pucci (1987) 199.

³⁵ He applies this recognition at 2.262, where he appeals to ὁ χθιζὸς θεός, i.e. he has not identified the deity as feminine. The 'hazy' epiphany contrasts with the much clearer, confirmatory one at 3.371-2, which also involves Athena flying off after conversation, there as a φήνη (probably Gypaetus barbatus, though see Arnott (2007) 188) – a bird reputed to look after abandoned chicks, and as grey as Mentor (Arist. *HA* 592b5-6, 619b23-6; cf. Σ_{Ma} *Od.* 3.372b1).

Telemachus thus enters Phemius' performance soon after numinous advice to emulate the κλέος of Orestes. Phemius' song is in vogue, so Telemachus knows as well as the external audience that it belongs to the tradition within which Orestes' κλέος lies. The song thus confirms Athena's argument that Orestes is a valuable model of κλέος.³⁶ Reinforced by the numinous context, it therefore falls into a category of Greek omen where another's words have an unintended significance for one's own situation – a κληδών or φήμη. Both these words occur in the *Odyssey* (20.105-22 of the bread-maker's prayer; 2.35). Plausibly, the poet is punning on Phemius' name, whatever its actual etymology.³⁷

There is no sign that Telemachus appreciates Phemius' φήμη, and doubtless he has the excuse that Phemius is not necessarily singing about Orestes at this point – only singing the song whose end is Orestes. Nevertheless, for us to see this interpretative possibility is both significant and coherent with the other ideas in this section. For one thing, we find a further meaning which seems to be lost on the characters but is made possible by audience competence in epic traditions. Secondly, we find a further area of overlap between the content of Phemius' song and the background situation. Thirdly, we can see the temporal 'coincidence' of Phemius' song and Athena's advice as integral to her strategy for inspiring Telemachus with confidence. When she asks 'οὐκ ἄϊεις;' (1.298) she may refer both to Telemachus' general lack of awareness of Orestes' fame, and to the current possibility of hearing it from where he is sitting. With her advice, she primes him to interpret the song in particular ways, including as a confirmatory omen born of temporal contiguity. This observation may help to explain the question I raised at the end of my first section, namely why the simultaneity of song and advice is emphasised with such unusual narratology.

4. Counterpoint: Phemius and the *Odyssey*

We have seen that the poet leaves both the contents and motivations of Phemius' song tantalisingly vague; he prompts us to explore them without providing the materials for an answer. We have also seen that the song, in its reception by the internal audience, contains a number of mixed and missed messages. Despite the availability of various interpretations of its relevance to them, the suitors appear not to think in such terms at all. Telemachus' response appears more critical than mere θέλις, but is complicated particularly by the possibility that it may be an act of self-presentation. In fact, he too appears (*ex silentio*) not to pursue any interpretation based on the song's connection to his own life, and in addition he seems not to perceive a possible φήμη in the topic which Athena has engineered. In all this discussion, the primary narrator's motivations have only been treated in passing (e.g. n. 15), and it is with these that we end.

³⁶ Olson (1995) 30-1 assumes that Telemachus does interpret the song through Orestes' role in it, but does not develop the idea. For the much broader role of κλέος in the *Odyssey*, and how this is set up in book 1, see e.g. Segal (1994) 85-109, Goldhill (1991) 93-108.

³⁷ Morphologically, it is more likely that 'Phemius' derived from φῆμις than from φήμη: *Lfgre*, Higbie (1995) 12, Bakker (2002) 142; *contra* Nagy (1999) 17. Indeed, Σ_M 1.338(d) may pun on the former derivation with its gloss κλείουσιν· φημίζουσιν, and it probably underlies Odysseus' name-play at 22.376 where he calls Phemius πολύφημος. Nevertheless, synchronically a relationship to φήμη remains available. Zeus Phemius and Athena Phemia at Erythrai are probably to be connected to oracles: *IEryth.* no. 201, with e.g. Graf (1985) 203, Bakker (2002) 139 n. 6. At *Od.* 2.150 the πολύφημος ἄγορά may be simply 'abundant in talk', but the eagle-omen there might 'bring out' the φήμη in πολύφημος.

Of particular importance is that Phemius' song forms an inset refracting lens on the *Odyssey* as a whole.³⁸ Indeed, it is the first such inset song, and the one most obviously cognate with the outer poem in content. The *Odyssey* is itself the final part of the song-tradition of the Greeks' returns – a tradition with which it engages at some length, especially in books 3-4 and the 'Atreid paradigm' mentioned above. Its narrative begins by situating itself with reference to the other returns (1.11-12):

ἔνθ' ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες, ὅσοι φύγον αἰπὸν ὄλεθρον,
οἴκοι ἔσαν

Then all the others who escaped sheer destruction were home...

The poet much later confirms the impression that Phemius' song arises, at the level of authorial motivation, from the *Odyssey's* relationship to the *Nostoi*. When Odysseus eventually returns to his palace, he is met by nothing other than the sound of Phemius tuning up to play for the first performance mentioned since book 1 (17.260-3).³⁹ In this sense, Odysseus' return is presented as the 'sequel' to Phemius' account of the other returns. As my discussion of nimbleness showed, intratexts mark the grotesque 'feast' of book 22 as a sequel to that of book 1, and when Phemius supplicates Odysseus he offers to sing Odysseus' praises in the future (22.348-9):

ἔοικα δέ τοι παραεῖδεν
ὥς τε θεῶν: τῷ μὴ με λιλαίεο δειροτομῆσαι.

I am like to sing beside you as for a god, so do not be so urgent to cut my throat.

Earlier I pointed out that the substitution of Phemius' lyre for a bow in book 22 evokes the role of musicians in spreading κλέος, and now we can take the point further. Phemius will sing 'as for a god', i.e. poems celebrating the addressee. Phemius will hence complete his *Nostoi* repertoire and establish the *Odyssey's* own tradition.⁴⁰ Such an interpretation may lie in part behind the ancient biographical tradition in which Homer was the pupil and heir of a Smyrnaean musician called Phemius (Ps.-Herodotean *Life* 5).

As usual, however, the inset song does not straightforwardly reflect the outer. A particular place where the lens seems to distort is in the matter of hermeneutics.⁴¹ It may already seem subversive, as Ahl and Roisman (1996) 31 note, for an Odyssean character to ask for *Nostoi*-songs to stop. Certainly, the *Odyssey's* audience-members will not call a halt, like Penelope, on the grounds that it is personally distressing, nor defend it, like Telemachus, for concerning itself with popular recent history.⁴² Furthermore, the dramatic irony of missed

³⁸ I say 'lens' not 'mirror'; Most (1990) 42 comments usefully on the risks of taking Phemius and Demodocus as 'models' of a poet who worked in the early stages of Greek literacy but constructed a past of purely oral song.

³⁹ Phemius has been mentioned once in between, at 16.252.

⁴⁰ Similarly Ahl and Roisman (1996) 31.

⁴¹ Pucci (1987) 196 begins his discussion with the comment that 'this scene evokes by a play of mirrors – that is, of mimetic substitutions – our position as readers of Homer's *Odyssey*'. However, he later confuses the issue by asserting both that 'Telemachus' response is the one Homer proposes as the ideal response of the reader' (204), and that it is exposed as a simplified misreading (203).

⁴² For νεωτάτη as 'concerning recent events', and consequently emotive, compare Miller (1982) 112-13 on P. N. 8.20; see also D'Angour (2011) 184-9. For the discrepancy with *Od.*'s own subject-matter see e.g. Ford (1992) 109. *Od.* may claim a different type of newness through innovation: Scodel (2002) 53-4. De Jong (2001) suggests on 1.351-2 that the *Odyssey* would count as 'newer' than Phemius' song just because Odysseus returns later, but this still leaves it far from 'newest'.

messages creates a disjunction between the wealth of possible interpretations of Phemius' theme, versus on the one hand the escapist enchantment felt by the suitors (and Penelope, to the extent that she requests a 'different θελκτήριον') and on the other the under-articulated τέρψις of which Telemachus speaks. The discrepancy suggests that these responses of pleasure and astonishment, however idealised they are within the narrative, are not ideals for the *Odyssey's* external audience. One might compare the argument that, by persistently revealing to us the risks of θέλξις within its narrative, the *Odyssey* itself cannot make a straightforward claim to coax us into θέλξις.⁴³ Like Phemius' song, the *Odyssey* has more articulate messages for an alert audience.

Meanwhile, by leaving Phemius' engagement with Ithacan politics underdetermined, the poet acknowledges and indeed stresses the role of audience-members in determining meaning according to their individual perspective.⁴⁴ Similar, though with a further level of framing, is the situation in book 8 where the inset song of Ares and Aphrodite includes divergent internal interpreters of events: some gods comment that crime doesn't pay; Hermes jokes that Ares has gained more than he has lost; Poseidon finds nothing funny.⁴⁵ To return to book 1, further support for the 'acceptability' of plural interpretations lies in my identification of a φήμη which is distinctly beyond Phemius' control. Authorial intention, a traditional prop for those seeking an 'authoritative' interpretation, is removed from the picture.

However, the open-ended nature of how Phemius' song connects to its Ithacan context also serves as a warning that its connections to the *Odyssey* as a whole are equally open to plural interpretations. It is therefore worth being cautious rather than overconfidently theorising about exactly how inset songs such as this one generate significance for the *Odyssey's* poetics, and this seems like an apt place to draw a limit for my own argument.

Phemius enjoys less critical attention than Demodocus in discussions of Homeric poetics. This article has indicated that he is in fact very carefully presented from the moment he picks up his lyre. In a book full of introductory moves, his performance in *Odyssey* 1 initiates the motif of inset songs, and presents *in nuce* the three key terms for describing responses to song in the epic. As the inset song most closely connected to the outer poem in content, by the minstrel who seems to promise the first *Odyssey* in book 22, it has clear metapoetic potential. Yet there is a marked gap between the apparent multifaceted relevance of Phemius' song for the situation on Ithaca and the characters' actual responses. I have discussed the long tradition of speculations attempting to bridge the gap by attributing to Phemius and his audience interpretative moves which are never signalled in the text. I have suggested instead that contemplating the gap, and our temptation to fill it in for the characters' benefit, casts more light on how the *Odyssey* presents interpretation, and on the sense in which that presentation can guide an external audience grappling with interpretation of the *Odyssey* itself. On this reading we are justified in exploring the resonances and relevance of the traditional epic background, to form 'our side' of the gap with its impression that Phemius' song is open to various political readings. On the characters' side, by contrast, the silence about Phemius' intentions throws an interestingly modern focus on the essential role of the receiver in constituting a meaning which, the passage suggests, varies significantly from person to person. Yet of the characters' responses one (personal distress) is no longer possible, one (Telemachus' analysis of τέρψις) is unsatisfyingly vague, and the last (θέλξις) is repeatedly exposed as dulling and risky. The inset song thus implies no straightforward

⁴³ The need to beware θέλξις is clear internally with the Sirens, and also when θέλω is used of e.g. dangerous coaxing (3.264) or Circe's drugs (10.291). See also Halliwell (n. 32).

⁴⁴ Cf. Peponi (2012) 33-8. The indeterminacy of Homeric characters' responses to poetry, particularly in terms of emotion, is discussed throughout Halliwell (2011) 36-92.

⁴⁵ 8.329-44. See e.g. Most (1990) 41-2; Hunter (2012) 95-7.

model for our responses to the *Odyssey*, even the mode of pleasurable fascination which is often taken as the Homeric ideal.

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