

# Structural Symmetry at the End of the *Odyssey*

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ACCORDING to tradition,<sup>1</sup> the Alexandrian critics Aristarchus and Aristophanes regarded *Odyssey* 23.296, the point at which Odysseus and Penelope come to their bed, as the terminus of the poem. On the basis of the poem's direction W. B. Stanford has argued<sup>2</sup> "that ethically and morally the *Odyssey* cannot end at 23, 296, and that the poem makes this clear, consistently and constantly."<sup>3</sup> A structural analysis of the last two books of the *Odyssey* reveals patterns perhaps relevant to the question of where the poem may in fact terminate.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of our discussion we shall refer to diagrams in which we have sought to illustrate the presence of structural symmetry at the end of the *Odyssey*. By structural symmetry we mean a special arrangement of the poem's content. In this arrangement elements, chiefly of action, stand over against each other by virtue of analogy or contrast and seem thereby to counterbalance one another. In our diagrams solid lines connect elements which clearly correspond, while broken lines connect elements that may possibly correspond. Square brackets enclose elements which do not seem to participate in the poem's structure.

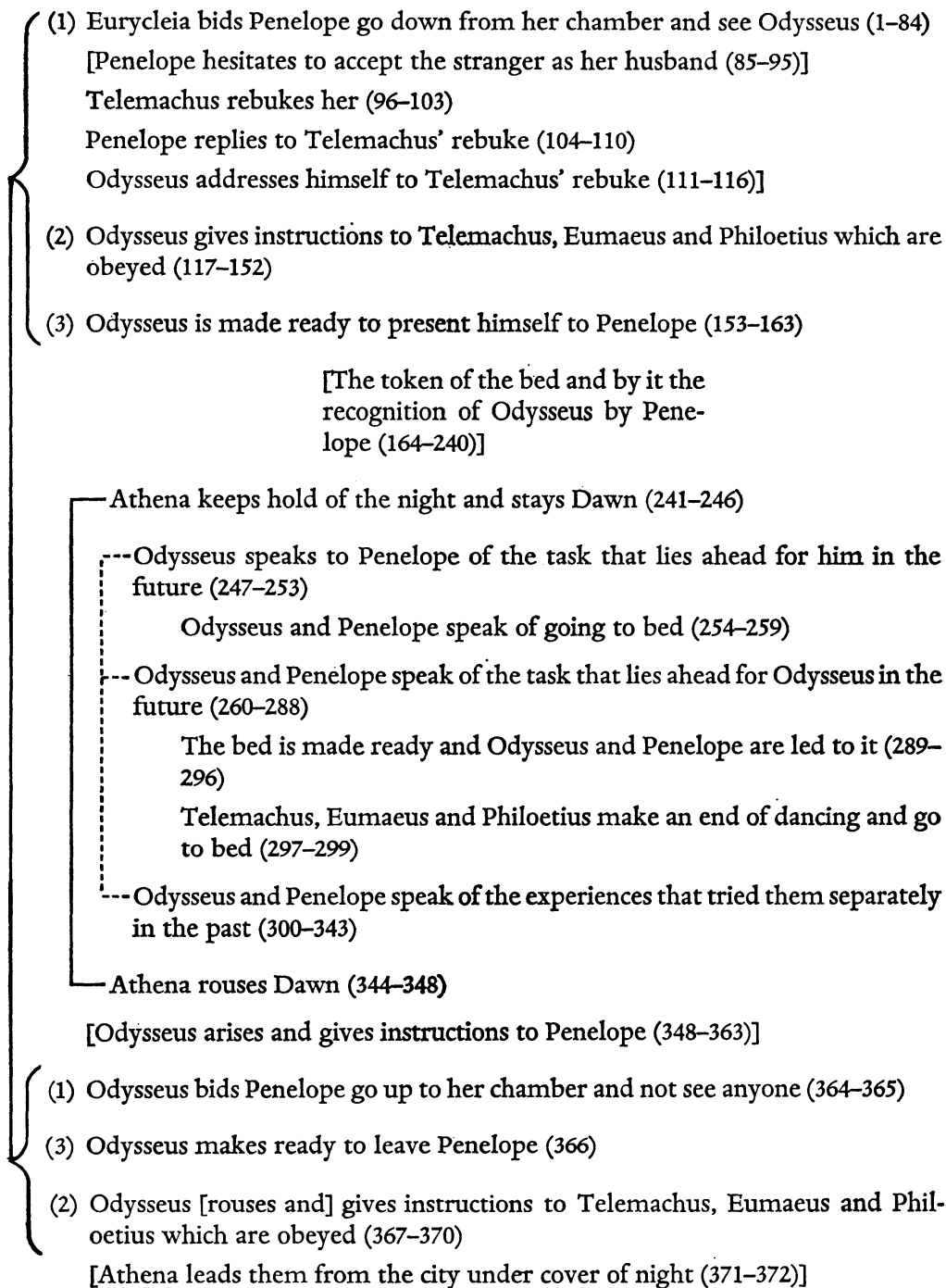
In the first diagram the structure of Book 23 is illustrated.

<sup>1</sup> Scholia M V Vind.133 (cf. Eustathius on 23.296) and H M Q, where the verse is spoken of as the *πέρας* or *τέλος* of the poem.

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Stanford, "The Ending of the *Odyssey*: an Ethical Approach," *Hermathena* 100 (1965) 5–20. For a unitarian argument on other grounds see Dorothea S. Wender, *The Last Scenes of the Odyssey: a Defense* (unpublished diss. Harvard 1965; summary in *HSCP* 70 [1965] 274–76).

<sup>3</sup> Stanford, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.2) 16f.

<sup>4</sup> Our structural analysis addresses itself to the proposition that *Od.* 23.296 marks the end of the poem; the analyses by Stanford and Wender (*supra* n.2), both to that proposition and to one which would take *πέρας* and *τέλος* to mean 'principal climax' or 'consummation'. For a discussion of the meaning of the Greek terms and the implications of their meaning for criticism of the poem see Stanford, *op.cit.* 5ff with notes, and 17 ("Postscript").



At the beginning and end of the diagram we see two large matching sections. Each consists of three elements contained within a brace. In each section Penelope is instructed to go up to or down from her

chamber; Odysseus gives instructions to the same set of individuals, who then carry out his orders; and Odysseus prepares to present himself to Penelope or to leave her presence. Thus the content at the beginning of the book matches to a considerable extent the content at its end. These two matching sections may be thought of as a structural frame within which the rest of the book's content is contained.

Within this outer frame we can also see an inner frame consisting of two elements (241-246 and 344-348) which stand in contrast to each other. In the former element we read how the goddess Athena kept Dawn from coming; in the latter, how she roused Dawn.

Within this inner frame we find a section (247-343) that contains two subjects: one (247-253, 260-288 and 300-343) concerns things that must be undertaken in the future and things that were undergone in the past; the other (254-259 and 289-299) concerns the going to bed of Odysseus and Penelope, and of others in the poem. These two subjects are presented alternately and may perhaps for this reason be regarded as forming a pattern at the structural center of this book.

One passage which does not seem to play a rôle in the architecture of Book 23 is an important one dramatically, the scene in which Penelope recognizes Odysseus by the token of the bed Odysseus had made (164-240). It is possible, however, that this passage anticipates the pattern of alternation at the center of the book by standing as the first of those elements which refer to bed.

From our outline of Book 23 we have seen evidence of a symmetrical and unifying structure, a structure which consists of an outer and then an inner frame enclosing what may be termed a centerpiece. This structure can be described as concentric in form. If we were to use letters of the alphabet to denote the parts of this structure, their sequence would be as follows: A B C B A.

In part c would be found the verse (296) where according to tradition the Alexandrian critics believed the *Odyssey* terminated. This verse stands near the half-way point in the plan of Book 23; the portion of the book which follows it is in its action a mirror-image, albeit imperfect, of the portion which the verse concludes. Were either half removed, an asymmetrical body of content would remain. The significance of this fact emerges when we observe that the symmetrical structure of the book is consonant with a symmetry that pervades the remainder of the *Odyssey*: the poem would seem to possess throughout all its other books an architecture at once highly detailed

and comprehensive, an architecture symmetrical in style.<sup>5</sup> As it now stands, Book 23 is in structure an organic part of the *Odyssey*, but such would not be the case if verse 296 marked its end.

Further evidence of structural symmetry at the end of the *Odyssey* exists in Book 24. This book would seem to consist of three separate architectural units, each of which is symmetrical in style. The first of these units (1–204) consists of two matching parts.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| { | (1) Hermes leads the spirits of the suitors (1–18)                                     |
|   | (2) Agamemnon with the spirits of those slain in his house approaches Achilles (19–22) |
|   | (3) Achilles speaks with Agamemnon (23–97)   |
| { | (1) Hermes leads the spirits of the suitors (98–100)                                   |
|   | (2) Agamemnon and Achilles approach the spirits of the suitors (101)                   |
|   | (3) Agamemnon speaks with Amphimedon (102–204)   |

The first element in each part tells how Hermes led the spirits of the suitors to the region of the shades. The second element in each describes the congregation of the spirits, including those of Agamemnon and Achilles. The third element in each is a dialogue between the spirit of Agamemnon and another spirit. The acquisition of a good reputation is the major subject of each dialogue, even as each dialogue has as its minor subject the absence of a good reputation or the presence of a bad reputation in the house of Agamemnon. The dialogues are alike also in that each closes with mention of Clytaemnestra.

<sup>5</sup> See S. Bertman, *A Study of Analogy and Contrast as Elements of Symmetrical Design in the Structure of the Odyssey* (diss. Columbia 1965; University Microfilms, Ann Arbor 1966); cf. *DissAbs* 26.7 [January 1966] and "The *Telemachy* and Structural Symmetry," *TAPA* 97 (1966).

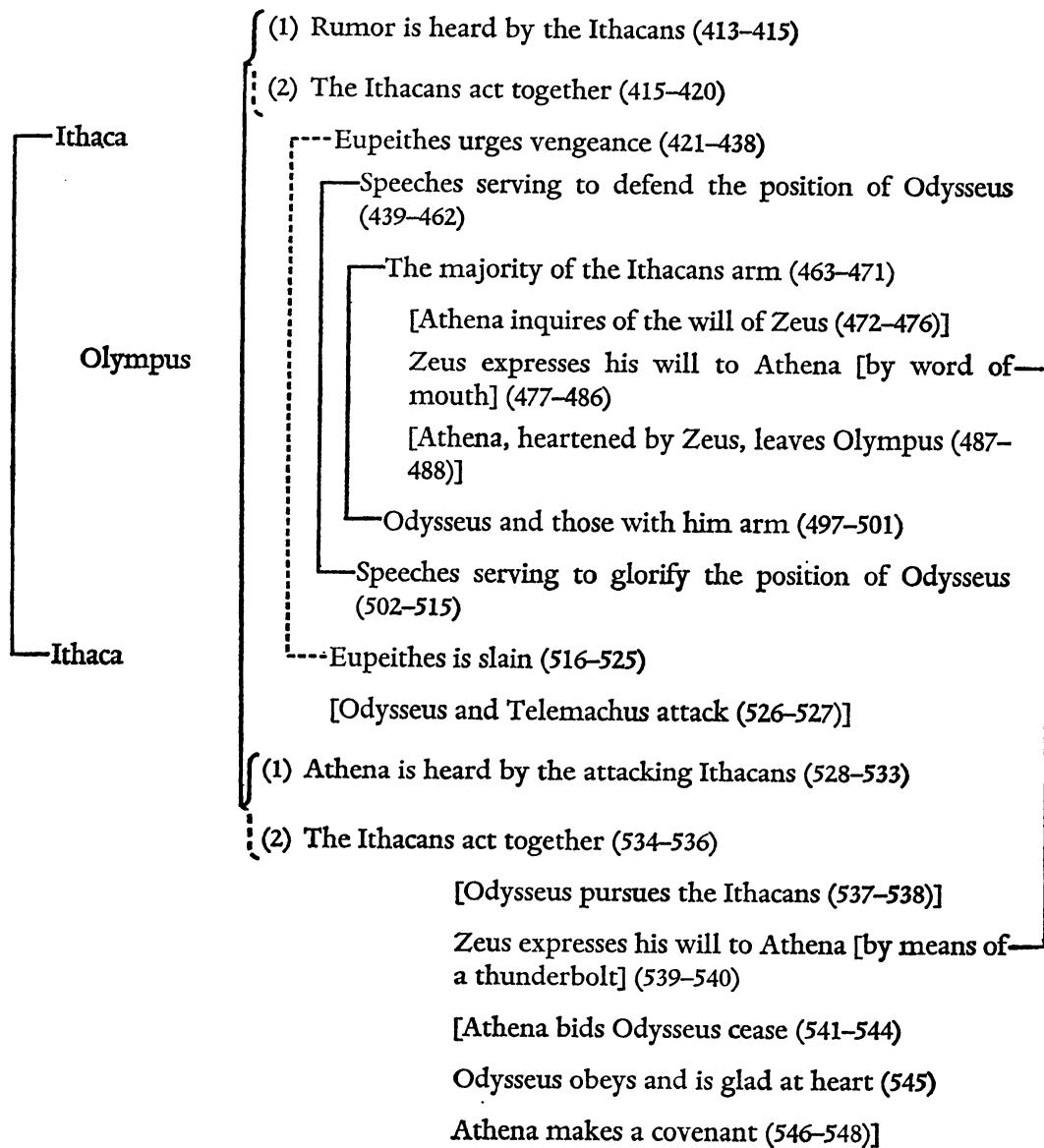
The plan of the second unit is as follows:

- (1) Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus and Philoetius come to the farmhouse (205-206)  
[Description of the farm (206-210)]
- (2) Mention of the Sicilian servant-woman (211-212)
- (3) Odysseus instructs Telemachus, Eumaeus and Philoetius to prepare the mid-day meal (213-215)  
[Odysseus says that he will go and make trial of his father (216-218)  
Odysseus gives the servants his battle-gear (219)  
Telemachus, Eumaeus and Philoetius go into the house (220)  
Odysseus draws near the vineyard (220-221)]
- (4) Odysseus does not find Dolius, the other servants, or Dolius' sons in the vineyard (222-225)
- (5) Description of the wretched appearance of Laertes; in grief Odysseus weeps (226-234)
- (6) Recognition of Odysseus by Laertes (235-348)  
Laertes tells Odysseus of his fear concerning the Ithacans; Odysseus comforts him and urges that they go to the farmhouse (349-360)
- (1) Odysseus and Laertes come to the farmhouse (361-362)
- (3) Telemachus, Eumaeus and Philoetius are preparing the midday meal (363-364)
- (2) Mention of the Sicilian servant-woman (365-367)
- (5) Laertes is bathed, anointed and given fresh raiment and is made god-like in appearance; Odysseus marvels; [Laertes makes response] (365-383)  
[All sit down to eat (384-386)]
- (4) Dolius and his sons return from the fields (386-388)
- (2) Mention of the Sicilian servant-woman (388-390)
- (6) Recognition of Odysseus by Dolius and his sons (391-411)  
[They busied themselves with the meal (412)]

In this plan two large sections composed of many elements seem to enclose or frame a smaller section in which Odysseus allays the fears of his father. Note the contrast between the elements numbered 5 in

the two sections: in the former, Odysseus weeps over the wretched appearance of his father; in the latter, he marvels at Laertes' transformation.

The final structural unit of Book 24 may be diagrammed as follows:



Here we see an elaborate concentric pattern in which events on Ithaca enclose events on Olympus. At the core of this pattern, the will of Zeus is expressed (477-486); a second and coordinate expression of

Zeus' will lies outside the concentric frames (539–540).<sup>6</sup> In the setting of antagonists opposite each other structurally (463–471 and 497–501) we see form expressing a dramatic aspect of content.

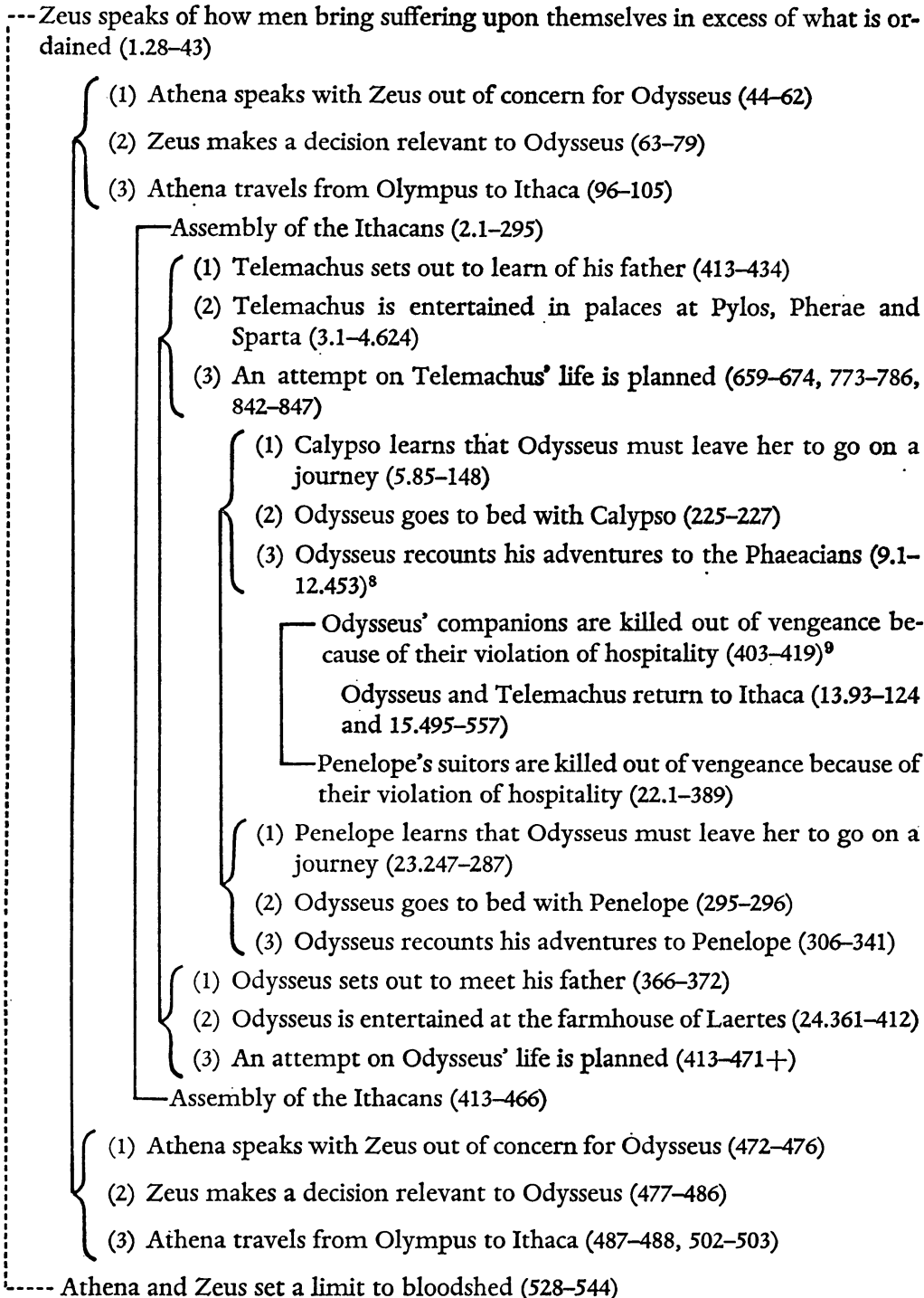
The symmetry in the structural units of Book 24 is comparable to the structural style of Book 23. It is, moreover, like the symmetry of Book 23, compatible with that architectural style found in the remainder of the poem.

It is possible, in addition, that Books 23 and 24 participate in a single, unifying design that embraces the whole of the *Odyssey*, as illustrated in the diagram on the following page.

The concern Zeus expresses through action in the last book of the poem (24.528–544), that Odysseus and his allies should not inflict excessive hurt upon the relatives of the slain suitors, is consistent with his view expressed near the beginning (1.28–43), that man brings more suffering upon himself than is ordained. These two elements may be regarded as constituting the outermost frame of an overall structural pattern.<sup>7</sup> Combining to form a second structural frame are two interviews between Zeus and Athena, interviews each of which is followed by Athena's departure (24.472–503 and 1.44–105). In a similar manner the assembly of Ithacans in 24.413–466 may match the Ithacan assembly described in 2.1–295, even as the journey of Odysseus to find his father Laertes (23.366–471) may be coupled with Telemachus' more extensive search for his father Odysseus (2.413–4.847). Likewise one may regard 5.85–12.453 and 23.247–341 as complementary architectural components: in these sections Calypso and then Penelope are told that Odysseus must leave them; Odysseus goes to bed with each; and Odysseus recounts his adventures, at first (to the Phaeacians) in full detail and later (to Penelope) in résumé. Near the center of the plan we read how men lost their lives as punishment for having abused hospitality: in the former case (12.403–419) it is Odysseus' comrades who are killed out of vengeance; in the latter (22.1–389) it is Penelope's suitors. Between the components of this innermost frame we read of the safe return of Odysseus and then of Telemachus to Ithaca, actions which may perhaps be regarded, by reason of their

<sup>6</sup> In this final section of the final book, Zeus is thus in schematic terms both central to human affairs (477–486) and structurally external to them (539–540). Here we may see poetic form expressing a theological conception.

<sup>7</sup> Quite literally, then, the poem possesses a theological and ethical framework within which the human affairs it depicts are presented.



<sup>8</sup> Though the diagram would suggest that this element immediately follows upon 5.225-227, the two elements are in fact separated by a considerable space of almost three and a half books.

<sup>9</sup> This element and the one which precedes it (9.1-12.453) overlap somewhat. We have, however, kept them separate in our diagram for the sake of typographical clarity.



coming at the heart of the structure, as the dramatic centerpiece of the poem.<sup>10</sup> We cannot, however, be certain of this, since the content of some nine books falls within the limits of this innermost frame.

By virtue of their participation in this overall plan, Book 24 and the second half of Book 23 would seem to be integral to the poem as it now stands. In addition, as we have noted, the internal structural style of these books is consonant with that found in the rest of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, as we have observed, the internal symmetry and hence the stylistic conformity of Book 23 to the *Odyssey* as a whole depend upon the inclusion of its second half.

Our structural analysis, therefore, suggests that the portion of the *Odyssey* which follows the going to bed of Odysseus and Penelope is in fact an organic part of the poem as it now stands. Should this portion represent an addition to an earlier *Odyssey*, it is one that was made with great sensitivity to the symmetry and structure of the original poem, for in the architecture of the *Odyssey* beginning, middle and end stand as a harmonious whole.

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<sup>10</sup> If this be so, the poem as a whole would be structurally anthropocentric, in contrast to the theocentric structure of the last book's concluding portion (24.413-548).