Odysseus at sea

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The misfortunes of Odysseus after Poseidon notices him on his boat at Od. 5.282–90 constitute a bewildering sequence, especially the intervention of Ino-Leucothea, a divinity who plays no other part in the poem. Odysseus does not trust the goddess and follows her instructions only when he has no choice. The narrative sequence thereby ignores a common pattern of folktale: Ino-Lecuothea's instructions do not constitute an interdiction whose violation has negative consequences nor is it a test.[1] This part of the poem is also unusual because it includes an unparalleled series of monologues (although, of course, since Odysseus is by himself, monologue is the only plausible form of speech). This paper will attempt to elucidate the structure of this section, especially Ino's intervention. Most interpretations of the scene with Ino-Leucothea examine it for its symbolism and in isolation; this paper will argue that its basic shape needs to be understood within the entire narrative sequence in which it is located.[2]

The entire journey falls into a set of discrete episodes. (1) Poseidon, after delivering an angry monologue, causes a storm, and Odysseus reacts with a despairing monologue in which he wishes he had died at Troy (299–312). The raft is then hit by a wave that knocks Odysseus off and destroys the boat's rudder and superstructure. Though weighed down by Calypso's clothing, Odysseus makes his way back to the raft, which is driven around aimlessly. (2) Ino appears and tells him to strip, leave the raft, and swim, relying on the *krêdemnon* that she gives him.[3] She enters the water, and Odysseus' second monologue debates whether to trust the goddess or not. He decides to wait as long as the raft holds (356–64). But even as he thinks, Poseidon sends another great wave that breaks the raft into pieces. At this point, Odysseus removes the clothing, puts on the *krêdemnon*, and begins to swim. Poseidon, after a brief monologue expressing his continuing anger, drives to Aegae. (3) Athena calms the conflicting winds, so that Odysseus swims on for two days and

1 Propp 1968 discusses interdiction (26–7) and the pattern whereby the hero is tested and receives a magical agent (39–50).

2 The episode has sexual overtones according to Nagler 1974, 46, and Pucci 1987, 64–5; Newton 1984, 12, sees Odysseus' nakedness as part of a rebirth after his 'death' on Calypso's island (compare Holtsmark 1966, for whom the veil is 'umbilical'). Kardulias 2001 examines Odysseus' wearing of the *krêdemnon* as ritual transvestism.

3 Scholars have debated whether the gods in bird-epiphanies are only being compared to birds or actually take the form of birds (Dirlmeier 1967; Bannert 1978). It is unlikely that Ion-Leucothea is in bird form here, since in that shape she could hardly give Odysseus her veil.

nights. On the third day he sees land, but the coast is rocky and is being hit by pounding surf. Odysseus delivers a monologue debating whether to try to swim to land or try to find a more favourable spot, thereby exposing himself to Poseidon's further intervention. Even as he thinks, a wave drives him against the land, but Athena gives him an idea of how to save himself, by clinging to the rock until the wave retreats. (4) He almost drowns, but Athena then gives him the idea of swimming parallel to the shore, and he eventually reaches a river. Praying to the river, he swims upstream – the unnamed river god has answered his prayer by stopping its current – and comes to land. His final monologue debates whether to sleep by the shore or in the grove of trees, and he decides to enter the trees (465–73).

Certain repetitions emerge immediately from this summary; the sequence is an excellent example of the methods of elaboration available to Homer. Indeed, some ancient critics complained that the poet's φιλοτιμία led him to elaborate too much on Odysseus' sufferings (*Schol.* HP on *Od*. 5.401), and analysts assumed that one poet had incorporated and expanded the work of another.[4] It is immediately obvious that the entire sequence is composed of variants on a theme. First, although the first of Odysseus' four monologues is reflective, and the others deliberative, all are introduced by the same formula, ὀχθήσας δ' ἄρα εἶπε πρὸς ὃν μεγαλήτορα θυμόν (298, 355, 407, 464), and all four begin ὤ μοι (298 and 465 likewise both end with the otherwise unattested τί νύ μοι μήκιστα γένηται;).[5] The sequence is defined by waves: a wave knocks Odysseus from the boat; a wave breaks the boat into pieces; a wave drives Odysseus onto the rocks. The river god's current, held back in response to Odysseus' prayer, functions as the reversal of these dangerous waves. In the two central sections, Odysseus ponders what to do, but the wave comes before his decision can have any effect. Furthermore, each section presents a different interaction between Odysseus and the gods. In the first, Odysseus recalls the predictions of Calypso, but attributes his present difficulties to Zeus (following Jörgensen's rule that characters attribute the interventions of gods named by the narrator to Zeus or an unnamed god[6]). Then, when Ino intervenes to help him, he suspects deceit and hesitates to follow her directives. Only when the wave has shattered his boat does he obey her. When he sees land but realizes that there is no good place for him to swim ashore, his monologue is framed by his reference to Zeus, who has allowed him to reach land, and Poseidon,

4 Fenik 1974, 143–5 discusses the doublets as a typically Odyssean technique. One analytic treatment (Wilamowitz 1884, 135–9) imagines a Calypso-Leucothea poem and an Athena-poem that have been merged.

5 On these monologues, see de Jong 2001, 140–1.

6 Jörgensen 1904.

whose hatred he fears if he is pulled out to sea. Athena intervenes by giving him ideas, but does not appear herself, nor does Odysseus seem to recognize her interventions, although the narrator twice comments that he would have perished without her help (426–7, 436–7). Finally, Odysseus prays to the river-god and supplicates him, and his prayer is answered.

So there is actual development, marked by the monologues. The first monologue is simply an expression of misery. Odysseus has managed to save his life by clambering back on the boat, but his craft is no longer navigable – an implicit metaphor for his inability to control events. In the next two monologues, Odysseus deliberates, but his deliberations are entirely futile. When he considers whether to follow the instructions of the goddess, Odysseus reaches a conclusion (to stay on the broken boat as long as it holds together), while when he approaches land he has not yet decided whether to try to climb the rocks or risk being carried back out to sea when a great wave overwhelms him. Yet the same formula marks the pointlessness of his choice in each passage: εἷος ὁ ταῦθ’ ὥρμαινε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν (363, 424). The waves make his deliberations, whether he has made a decision or not, completely pointless. Finally, he makes a decision about where he should sleep, with the regular formula for ending a deliberation, ὧδε δέ οἱ φρονέοντι δοάσσατο κέρδιον εἶναι (474) – a formula which refers to Odysseus five times out of the seven it occurs in the *Odyssey* – and is able to carry it out. Similarly, only in the last section does Odysseus ask for a god’s help and receive it. Ino helps him spontaneously, because she pities him (336); Athena intervenes once Poseidon has left.

It is essential for the larger plot that Odysseus be wrecked, so that when he arrives among the Phaeacians he is exhausted and naked. It is not essential, however, that the difficulties he confronts take exactly this stylized form. It appears, then, that the entire sequence is at least in part designed to represent situations in which deliberation, a characteristic Odyssean behaviour, is or is not effective. Odysseus’ mistrust of Ino is not just typical of him, but is actually required by the sequence, because if he immediately followed her instructions, he would not deliberate, and part of the point of the sequence seems to lie in the futility of the deliberation. From the moment Poseidon raises the storm until he reaches the river, Odysseus is unable to plan effectively. He survives the first wave by swimming back to the remains of his boat, while he is able to survive the next two waves with the help of the goddesses. Odysseus’ inability to make and carry out a reasoned decision is a pointed demonstration of his broader inability to act effectively.

Divine help, the second theme of the sequence, is thus closely related to the first theme. Ino-Leucothea expresses her pity for Odysseus by asking why

Poseidon hates Odysseus so inordinately, ὠδύσατ' ἐκπάγλως (340). The echo of Odysseus' name marks the situation as particularly Odyssean.[7] Scholars have emphasized Ino's similarity to Athena and have treated her as an alternate form of Athena because she emerges and descends from the sea 'like a sea-crow' (αἰθυίῃ εἰκυῖα, 338, 353) and 'Aithuia'[8] was an epithet of Athena at Megara.[9] The narrator, however, clearly wants to mark Ino as very different from Athena. She intervenes before Poseidon departs; she does not recognize Odysseus or know why Poseidon is hostile to him.

The interaction with Ino emphasizes the individuality of Odysseus even as it renders it unimportant. The goddess puns on the hero's name without knowing it. Her special function as a goddess is to protect men at sea, and she helps Odysseus as she might help any man. At the same time, Odysseus' fear that he is being tricked is entirely characteristic of his shrewdness (he has already shown his suspicion of Calypso at *Od.* 5.178–9), but his mistrust is misplaced. Athena's help then enables Odysseus to act in a typically Odyssean way. We generally assume that such psychological intervention indicates an amplification of the character's own choices. In this passage, however, the narrator stresses twice in 10 lines that only Athena's mental intervention rescued Odysseus.[10] In the complex and rhetorically shifting balance between divine and human motivation, the narrator in this passage stresses the divine side. So instead of invoking 'double motivation' in a way that effectively makes Athena only a conventional way of emphasizing Odysseus' own cunning, we should treat this as a genuine divine intervention, even though Odysseus' actions are exactly what we would expect of Odysseus. The octopus-simile at 432–5 brings out this ambiguity. The self-camouflaging of the octopus makes it a natural and perhaps a traditional figure for the versatile Odysseus, but the octopus of the simile is not successfully hiding. It is being pulled from its lair; in this situation it is helpless.[11] In any case, Athena has also provided external aid by controlling the winds as soon as Poseidon departs (382–477). Odysseus

7 There is an extended discussion of the name in Perradotto 1990, 120–42, but this passage is not mentioned. Clay 1983, 63–4, points to the repeated play here and at 5.423.

8 Hsch. α 1892-3, Paus. 1.5.4, 1.41.6.

9 Vernant and Détienne 1978. Versions of this interpretation appear in Nagy 1985, 80; Murnaghan 1995, 66 and 79, n. 10; and Ahl and Roisman 1996, 45–6; cf. Bergren 1980, 119. According to *Schol.* HPQ on *Od.* 5. 337, the line was absent from most ancient texts (ἐν τοῖς πλείοσι) and Aristarchus considered athetizing it (διστάζει); the comparison recurs at 353.

10 Schmitt 1990, 49–50, cites this passage and 293 against the claim that the characters of the *Odyssey* are more independent of the gods than those of the *Iliad:* Schmitt, in accordance with his usual view of such interventions, sees Odysseus' particular capability here as the ability to pay attention to and receive Athena's help. Cairns 2001, 14–20 points out that the allocation of divine and human agency in particular passages is often rhetorically motivated.

11 Nagy 1985, 74–6, discusses Odysseus and the octopus as figures of versatility.

certainly demonstrates his endurance while at sea, but in the storm and its aftermath his intelligence cannot effectively be deployed.

Athena's help, then, belongs in a series of variants of the divine helper: Ino, the helper of men at sea, motivated by pity, provides a magical object; Athena, who requires no special motivation because she is Odysseus' patron, calms the winds that Poseidon has raised and provides Odysseus with ideas that enable him to survive; the river-god, unnamed, responds appropriately to Odysseus' supplication and calms his flow.

Formally, this series of episodes does not resemble a paradigmatic narrative at all. It is presented by the main narrator, not a character. Unlike a paradigm, it has no persuasive purpose for characters in the text. Its place in the chronology of the narrative is its place in the chronology of the story. Indeed, only the omniscience of the external narrator makes it a coherent story at all. However, in one respect it functions very much as character-narratives often do: it invites immediate interpretation from the external audience and encourages the hearer to treat it as exemplary for the narrative yet to come. The stories that Helen and Menelaus tell about Troy (*Od*. 4.240–64 and 269–89), for example, do not just disagree about Helen. They invite the audience to consider how far the ambiguity of Helen should be generalized to all women, and in particular they invite comparisons to Penelope; they create expectations about ways in which the main narrative could develop.[12]

Similarly, the storm-sequence, by offering a series of similar misfortunes, each of which Odysseus survives in a slightly different way, serves to invite the audience to wonder how much control even the cleverest man has over events. The earlier part of this book shows Odysseus at his most capable: he has demanded an oath from Calypso that she is not plotting against him; he has built his raft and navigated by the stars until he is within sight of the Phaeacians' land (*Od*. 5.160–281). At sea, his deliberation is useless. The episode thus serves the secondary, 'key' function of a paradigmatic insert – it serves as a sign of what is to come.[13]

The sequence at sea, like the stories about Helen and Odysseus, turns out to be mainly a misdirection. Only when Odysseus is at sea, the element of his enemy Poseidon, are his wits of no real use to him. His final deliberation about where to sleep is more typical of the rest of the narrative, where he will make decisions and carry them out.

12 Olson 1989.
13 On this function, see Andersen 1987, 5–7.

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