Odysseus as Slave: The Ritual of Domination and Social Death in Homeric Society

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Eumæus, in his first protracted exchange with Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*, goes a long way towards conveying what it means to be a slave in Homeric society.\(^1\) Disguised, Odysseus is a guest to Eumæus, but he is also a beggar who could become a dependent in the same way that Eumæus had. Emphasising that guests and beggars are sacred to Zeus (14.56-8), Eumæus talks about his role in Odysseus’ household. His labour (14.66) increased his master’s holdings, yet Eumæus’ focal point, the way in which he frames his speech is not labour, *per se*, but honour and power.\(^2\)

It is not right (*themis*) to dishonour a guest, but even so, ‘it is the habit of slaves always to be in fear, whenever young kings are in power’ (14.59-60). Eumæus links his master’s power, and the ability to take in a beggar who could become a slave, to the gods. Odysseus has come to a place where people respect standard social practice: gods come first, kings are kind, and dependants – guests, beggars, slaves – honour their lords. That is, people in Ithaca respected these practices until Odysseus left for Troy, when he ‘swore many things’ to his slave Eumæus, ‘had he grown old here’ (14.67). Odysseus of course has gone to Troy to fight for honour (14.70), and in his absence affairs have degenerated into chaos. Nevertheless, Eumæus wants his guest – Odysseus as beggar – to know what’s what.

The implications of the sleight of hand, so to speak, by which Odysseus is transformed here into beggar, and elsewhere into slave, as I will argue, have not been fully appreciated in Homeric scholarship. Odysseus’ false stories, which reiterate the possibility (introduced in earlier books of the *Odyssey*) that he could in fact become a slave, emphasise the slipperiness of social status in Homeric society, a slipperiness that makes individuals dependent on gods and kings. And yet no one has mined the text of the poem (or the texts of the period) for evidence of the shifts in social status, aside from Odysseus’ lies, whereby he might have become a slave. This is because the focus of scholarship on ancient slavery has been on ideology and iconography.\(^3\) Regarding the former, the slave belongs to the category of ‘other’, barbarian, or conquered, which, from the time of the Persian Wars onward, certainly is tantamount to *non-Greek*. Even inversions such
as Edith Hall discusses in connection with tragedy in *Inventing the Barbarian* (1989) depend on the construction of normative categories. Aristotle's theory of natural slavery reifies a dichotomy that we might trace to Aeschylus' *Persians* but that we impose on texts before the classical period. Despite our ideological constructs, however, slavery is at core a relationship to power and is not intrinsically linked to ethnicity or social background. Regarding iconography, Kelly Wrenhaven argues (in this volume) that Greek artists depicted slaves as other through labour, torture, and physiognomy. Yet one wonders, again, to what extent readers impose this classical iconography onto their view of the Homeric age. The result is an optical illusion that negates the possibility of seeing Greeks as slaves. That is, while the evidence of Odysseus as slave permeates the Homeric texts, the actuality is the furthest thing from the reader's mind. As Eumaeus converses with the beggar in front of him, the reader forgets that this same Odysseus *has* actually evaded slavery, through cunning (*mètis*), at various points in the poem.

In this essay, I read the evidence of slavery as a real possibility for Odysseus. 'Odysseus as slave' is an important reading of the text because it helps to remove the *Odyssey* from ideological and iconographical prisms that distort our understanding both of Homeric society and slavery. We are also, ultimately, able to compare slavery in the Homeric context to other periods, such as modern America, where freedom and slavery depend on optical illusions of a similar sort.

A comparative, sociological approach to slavery, such as that of Orlando Patterson, is useful for challenging entrenched ideological assumptions. Patterson sifts through many of the prevailing ideas about slavery to salvage its core components: the absolute domination of one person over another person, on the one hand, and on the other, the social death of the individual dominated. This approach is most compelling when we consider its counterparts. For example, Peter Garnsey offers the idea that 'a slave was property', but what, exactly, is property? Is Eumaeus simply Odysseus' property? Patterson sees the notion of property as one of the *post festum* ideas to which Marx points as having already 'acquired stability' by the time it is named. In Homeric society, a man recognises that he has 'stuff', *ktēmata*, but there is a clear distinction between the *inanimate* goods won in war, for example, and a slave. The discussion of Eumaeus with which I opened this essay certainly points to this distinction. In the *Iliad* Achilles elevates his slave Briseis to the level of wife. A slave is more than property and evokes deep emotional and ontological responses, as Page duBois (2003) suggests. For Patterson, saying a slave is property begs the question; property is a complex notion that develops over time (Greek practice, Roman law, and so forth). Slavery, moreover, is not specifically, in origin, a mode of production, although as the institution develops, it partakes in mass production (as with Athenian slavery of the fifth century BCE).
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If we accept Patterson’s broader, comparative approach, a component of slavery is the absolute domination of one party over another. It is ‘one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave’.9 According to Patterson, slavery as a mode of domination includes the threat of violence, a ‘psychological facet of influence’, which has a bearing on the slave and non-slave alike, and a ‘cultural facet of authority’, whereby members of the society who might not be slaveholders, nevertheless have a claim to domination. In Athens, where Solon ‘outlawed debt-bondage and other forms of dependent labour affecting the free residents of Attica’,10 to be a slave was certainly to be viewed, by an entire society, as an outsider and thus to be susceptible to certain abuses. (Garnsey also sees that such outlawing is in part what led to the need to import slaves.)11)

Since to be a slave was to be so thoroughly dominated, it will be useful to question why anyone would accept this status. Put otherwise, why is Eumaeus content with his circumstances? Here Patterson offers the idea of social death as a partial answer to this question.12 According to Patterson, the slave’s status always began as ‘a substitute for death, usually a violent death’.13 Nowhere is this fact better demonstrated than in the American context, where the institution of lynching immediately replaces slaveholding when the latter was abolished.14 Notwithstanding the potential productivity of slaves, slaveholding, equally importantly, bestowed noble status upon Southerners.15 Even American whites who did not own slaves shared in the privileged status of whiteness.16 Thus when slaveholding ended, white Southerners continued to exercise their domination over black bodies through such practices as lynching. Lynching, therefore, becomes part of a history of force – over bodies – that serves a similar purpose to slaveholding: namely, the illusion of fixed social categories, here black and white, noble and subservient. The rise of lynching after Abolition extends the role of slavery as a sign of a power that can lead to the death of the dominated.

In the ancient world, many of the slave’s kin – her husband, her child – have already been killed in war, and only the master’s will has saved the slave. ‘Social death’ means that the person of slave is kept alive within the society of his or her domination, but the social personality of the slave – his or her culture of origin, social relationships, in sum, his or her identity – is dead or vitally fragmented.17 The slave’s true identity is relegated to the realm of memory, to the past. Just as lynching showed in the American context, Eumaeus’ comments about fearing the domination of young kings reveal slavery’s harshness; Eumaeus is a bodily extension of even the ‘kind king,’ and he recognises the extent to which his life depends upon this kindness.

A few other aspects of Patterson’s analysis demystify slavery in the ancient world and allow us to imagine Odysseus as a slave. In the first place, our knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East corrobo-
rates the view that slavery was not widespread during the eighth to sixth centuries BCE. Although slavery ‘was a nearly universal phenomenon’, slaveholding was not a mass institution. Terms used for slaves, such as *urdu* in Assyrian, are used of persons as property, or even of a free person who has a superior. Given the absolute domination characteristic of slavery, why was there not a widespread movement toward freedom until the classical period? Why was slave status not only tolerable, but at times even desired? Certainly Eumaeus seems to have been fairly content before the departure of his master or the advent of the suitors. Patterson suggests that, for the most part, enslavement was a means by which an individual was enmeshed within a social network: ‘To belong, to be bonded, was to be protected, by one’s patron and one’s gods. To be personally free was to be deprived of this vital support.’ To be free was to be orphaned, as Egyptian *nmh* conveys, and only the lowest members of society, such as prostitutes, were free from a patron. Although we might not consider as slaves such members of society as a child handed over to a temple for permanent care, such a person is certainly subject to the absolute domination – or the mercy – of someone more powerful. There is a clear example from 545 BCE, in Uruk, of a woman handing her two sons over to be slaves (*širku*) of the temple, during a famine. The practice that we name ‘slavery’ in English has a breadth that transcends the European and American chattel slavery that it has come almost exclusively to designate.

Patterson’s description of a Tupinamba practice gives a template for what he calls the ritual of domination and social death, and in the reading I offer here, the framework can be applied to Homer’s *Odyssey*. The ritual includes role-playing, or a sort of game in which the slave becomes a mock member of the society of his or her domination. The temporary preservation of life and the good treatment of the captive is in the interest of the captor because the slave, in these cases, has a religious status and a social role to play. The slave reifies the master’s social (and religious) status. The preservation of life, however, is only a game because labour and property (reasons for life’s preservation) are not the telos of slavery:

> Among the cannibalistic Tupinamba of South America we find slavery in its most primitive form. Most captives were eventually eaten, but in the many years between capture and execution the captives lived as the slaves of their captor and were usually well treated. Before they entered their captor’s village the captives were stripped, dressed as Tupinamba, and decorated with feather ornaments ... They were given the weapons and other belongings of the deceased [member of the community] to be used for a time, after which they were handed over to the rightful heirs.

The social death of the captive is here marked on the body and through ritual. Powerless, the captive is stripped and then ‘dressed as Tupinamba’. The corpororeal mark (of clothing) is part of an act, wherein the captive becomes a living member of the collective, but not as him- or herself;
rather, the captive is ‘given the weapons’ and belongings of a dead person within the community. In other words, although powerless and all but dead, the captive is kept alive for a purpose, which could be labour but is in this case sacrifice. The powerless slave takes on a kind of power. As an armed member of the community, he could enact war against outsiders, or he could feasibly turn those arms against the society that holds him captive. The power, however, is fleeting. The captive’s temporary status and (impending) defeat only serve to reinforce the master’s domination. The ritual reifies social roles of captor and slave, insider and outsider. Any hope of freedom is dashed, as the captive is turned over to his death and dismemberment.

Patterson offers this ritual as a model in traditional societies. Before proffering Odysseus’ potential abduction in Scherie as a parallel, a few other examples should evidence the model’s operability in ancient Greece. In the first instance, Diodorus Siculus reports that on Agathocles’ defeat of Carthage in 310 BCE, the Greeks found ‘more than twenty thousand pairs of handcuffs’ (20.13), in which the Carthaginians had hoped to carry off the Greeks as slaves. Although the mass enslavement that the amount of manacles suggests is not a feature of Tupinamba slavery or of the Homeric sort, other features of Diodorus’ story are indicative of the primal institution. In the process of explaining why the Carthaginians, on the occasion of losing to Agathocles, sacrificed two hundred of their own children (14.5), Diodorus gives a glimpse of slavery in Carthage. We learn that Carthaginians at some point used to sacrifice their own noble children to Cronos (Baal). Whether because of shortage or some moral compulsion, sacrifice of Carthaginian children falls out of practice, and the Carthaginians began to abduct children from elsewhere. These children were nurtured among Carthaginians, brought up as if Carthaginians (similar to slaves among the Tupinamba).

Slavery as ritual domination and social death is discernible in another example from ancient Greece: the legend of Theseus’ enforced journey from Athens to Crete. Theseus was to be one of fourteen Athenian youth ritually sacrificed in Crete. That seven boys and seven girls were to be fed to the Minotaur, an aberration with a human body and bull’s head, removes the story from the realm of history or social practice to the sphere of myth and fantasy. Nevertheless, the myth of the sacrifice of young people to the Minotaur and Theseus’ subsequent slaying of the beast bears some remnant of reality. Plato’s Phaedo traces a ritual of the fourth century BCE to the Cretan levy of Athenian youth. In the beginning of Phaedo, Echecrates wonders why some time passed between Socrates’ condemnation and his actual death. Phaedo says that, on the day before Socrates’ trial, a ship set sail from Athens to Delos. Legend had it that the ship was the same one on which Theseus and the others sailed to Crete. The legendary Athenians were of course saved, and Echecrates reports that the ship sails to Delos every year to thank Apollo: ‘It is the custom
among them during this period to cleanse the city and for no one to be killed publicly, before the vessel arrives in Delos and back again’ (Plato, *Phaedo* 58b).

In Bacchylides’ *Ode* 17, Minos, the king of Crete, is present on a ship to convey the youth from Athens. When Minos begins to act upon his lust for one of the maidens, Theseus intervenes to dissuade him from sexual violence. Although the Bacchylides fragment does not reveal why the youth are going to Crete, it conveys a great deal regarding the power dynamic and social hierarchies at play between Theseus and Minos. As a king, power and might are at Minos’ disposal, yet Theseus urges the lord – hērōs – to ‘restrain his overweening might’ (17.23). Later, Theseus warns Minos that, even before he displays the ‘might of his hand’ (17.45), a divine force (daimeôn) will decide the outcome. Certainly biē, ‘force’, or domination, is the propriety of a hērōs. Theseus, however, suggests that Minos might be going too far, if he rapes the young girl. The master’s sexual whim is not the purpose of her captivity. Theseus, who himself is later also referred to by the honorific title hērōs, asks Minos to ‘check his grievous hubris’ (17.40-1). Minos prays to Zeus, who as we know from Hesiod is the giver of dikē to kings, and Minos receives a favourable sign. At the same time, Theseus shows his bravery by jumping overboard, and he is also favoured, saved in a miraculous fashion.

The ode reveals something both of what was viewed as a normative social order, and of its disruption. Both Theseus and Minos belong to an aristocratic class. They are both a ‘hērōs’, and the gods show favour to each lord. Minos proves what we have already heard Eumaeus say: it is in accordance with dikē for a king to exercise power, which is why a kind king is beloved. At the same time, the gods’ favour of Theseus (Apollo saves him when he jumps overboard) shows that only circumstance disrupts his position in the world (his relationship to the power, as hērōs). While Minos is welcome to use biē, as a king, the same gods that protect him also protect Theseus.

Thus slavery is not ontological but circumstantial. The slaves in Carthage and Theseus lay bare the nature of domination in the ancient world. Anyone, even a hērōs, could be dominated. Because of the play of power, the dominated individual might not even fully experience his or her social death until the final moment. That is, the captive, in many cases, is treated well for a time; the shame that he or she experiences as a result of being mocked (whether implicitly or explicitly) might be the slave’s only indication that something worse is looming, as would have been the case for the Tupinamba, the slaves in Carthage, and Theseus.21

As I have argued throughout the first half of this paper, slavery was not a widespread institution in the Mediterranean society from which the Homeric poems emerged, but a social practice with a certain degree of instability. Although this is not the place for an exhaustive look at slavery in the Homeric texts, it is worth noting the role of slaves in the home. In
the case of Menelaus and Helen in Odyssey 4, the hero is fresh from a triumph in war. When Telemachus arrives at Menelaus’ court, a double wedding is taking place, the weddings of Menelaus’ daughter, Hermione, and his son, Megapenthes ‘from a slave woman’ (4.12). The poet seems compelled to justify Menelaus’ extra-marital offspring: ‘The gods were no longer showing issue to Helen after the time when she first bore her lovely child, Hermione’ (4.12-14). And there are other slave women (dmóiai) apart from Megapentes’ mother; servants (amhipoloi, 4.133) attend Helen. The inconsistency of the terminology applied to slaves – doulé, dmóia, amhipolos – reveals a range of functions for slaves in an aristocratic household in Homeric society. 25 Slaves serve Menelaus and Helen in various capacities, from sexual service to help around the house.

The view from Odysseus’ home amplifies what we hear in Sparta. After Odysseus slays the suitors, he receives a report from Eurycleia (22.420-3):

You have fifty slave women (gunaikes dmóiai) in your halls, whom we taught to do work, to comb the wool, and to endure slavery (doulosuné). Of these women as many as twelve stepped into shamelessness, and they honour neither me nor Penelope.

Odysseus’ slaves are part of the household labour force, and Eurycleia suggests that slavery is a long-term lot to be endured. In addition to this, slaves are to uphold the honour of a household, as Eumaeus indicated. Yet it is also worth noting that ‘fifty slaves’ may be a number suggested primarily by the presence of an oral formula. Alcinous and Arete also have fifty slaves (7.103-7).

In these rare glimpses, slavery is moving toward becoming a stable institution (for labour), with its attendant features of the slave as part of a labour pool and as property, and also towards becoming an abstraction, ‘slavery’, designated by the noun doulosuné used by Eurycleia above. 26 Even so, the hanging of the twelve disloyal slave women recalls the master’s complete domination of the slave, showing that his requirement for labour was secondary to his requirement for honour. It is important to note that Eurycleia does not say that the women fail to serve their function as part of a labour force (though see Hunnings, this volume). Rather, they (all of the women) have brought shame to the household, violating their rightful status and position in relation to their owner Odysseus by disrespecting those he had left behind to represent his rights as slave master.

What we see more broadly in Homeric society are intimations of the more primitive, widespread role of slavery, similar to what we have already been discussing. The Homeric hero is free in so far as he is not under any compulsion (anangkê) and we know that anangkê can come from a defeat in war or some other misfortune. Upon his arrival at Ithaca, in the first in a series of lies in which Odysseus presents himself in relation to slavery, he offers Athena a very plausible autobiography. The story
reveals the nature of freedom and anankê in the Homeric context. Odysseus claims to have gone so far as to kill a Cretan man named Orsilochus, Idomeneus’ son, because Idomeneus wanted Odysseus to serve him (itherapeuion, 13.262-6). Although it is a lie, Odysseus’s story conveys the values of Homeric man. Odysseus’ false persona kills someone to avoid becoming a dependent, and Odysseus, who is at the time surrounded by Phaeacian loot, warns his audience (Athena) about the threat of violence that results from interfering with a man of biê and the material symbols of that might.

Power – self-domination and the possession of property and people – as opposed to external anankê is also the contrast at play when Odysseus is captive to Calypso. Athena raises the issue at the beginning of book 5:

Father Zeus and other blessed gods who are eternal, let not any sceptered king be kind hearted and gentle, nor knowing themis in his mind! Let him be always difficult and cruel, since no one of the people over whom he rules remembers godlike Odysseus, although he was a gentle father. But now he is on an island and he suffers hardships in the halls of Calypso the nymph, who restrains him by anankê. He is not able to go to his homeland (5. 7-15).

Here Athena conceives of homecoming in terms of power as opposed to anankê. Her approach to Zeus signals a right-relationship between the ruler and the ruled, the king and his people, and gods and men in Homeric society. This is a relationship to which Eumaeus points, as we have seen. If the kindness of a ruler – or father – such as Odysseus no longer yields a right relationship within the Homeric order, then kings ought not to be kind. Odysseus’s kindness, which should bring him favour in the eyes of the gods, has, Athena claims, resulted in servitude; he is held against his will. He has no power (ou dunatai, 5.15) – is not free – to serve his role in society. Although Calypso does not threaten Odysseus with death, his relationship to her is not one where he possesses power or authority.

These passages only begin to hint at the possibility of Odysseus as slave. Although in the Calypso passage we do not see Odysseus as completely subject to the goddess’ domination, the episode is indicative of the limits of Odysseus’ freedom. It has not been unusual for modern readers (such as Toni Morrison) to raise the question of Odysseus’ polygamy, his use of Calypso, so to speak. Yet under the prism of slavery, we see that to assume Odysseus is free to act as he wants with Calypso would be as inappropriate as reading the American slave woman’s coitus with her master as voluntary. The text implies that Odysseus, for a time, gained something from his relationship with Calypso (5.153), but he proceeds under compulsion (anangkêi) unwilling to fulfil the goddess’ wishes. The details of Hermes’ trip to release Odysseus are indicative of the restoration of the correct social order, which is a reflection of a divine one: Zeus the father has sent Hermes, under compulsion (ouk ethelonta, 5.99) and it is
Zeus, reports Hermes, who now bids Calypso ‘to send him off as quickly as possible’ (5.112). Calypso yields to a higher authority; it is not Odysseus’ fate, as a surrogate on earth of Zeus, on whom devolves Zeus’ authority, as a kind king, to be under such restraint.

If the Calypso passage intimates the possibility of Odysseus as slave in Homer’s *Odyssey*, then Odysseus among the Phaeacians illustrates the situation compellingly. The episode, in fact, in many ways resembles the three examples of primitive slavery that we have seen: the Tupinamba, the foreign children in Carthage, and the Athenians among the Cretans. Details that have not been read in the context of ritual domination look different in light of slavery. For example, Athena offers Nausicaa’s preparation for her future wedding as the reason for her to wash clothes by the river, while Nausicaa points to Alcinous’ five sons, ‘two married, three robust and unmarried’ (6.63). Although Nausicaa picks up on Athena’s theme of marriage, it could also be said that her brothers, as unmarried and strong, are also of the age to wage war and defend their city. This reality is clear from the presentation of the main occupation of the men at Alcinous’ court as athletics and dance, both of which we know can ‘stand in’ for warfare in archaic literature during times of peace. The ‘beautiful clothing’ (6.111) of these draft-aged men, moreover, will serve as garb for a naked Odysseus (6.228). Certainly Odysseus solicits the clothing, a need at which he hints throughout his interaction with Nausicaa (6.144, 6.179), but wearing Phaeacian clothes masks Odysseus as a (socially dead) member of that community. He is similar, in this respect, to the Tupinamba captives.

Readings of the passage, including that of Thalmann, have elaborated on the play on marriage that runs throughout; Nausicaa is of marriageable age, and Odysseus is an attractive stranger. Nausicaa, however, suggests another possibility when her playmates express fear regarding her flirtations with a stranger:

Stay still, my maidens. To where are you fleeing because you’ve seen a man? Surely you don’t at all think that he is one of our enemies? There is not any mortal man slippery [enough], nor would there be, who would come to the land of the Phaeacians bearing hostility. The gods love us. We live far away in the surging sea, at the extremes, nor does any other man among mortals mix with us (6.199-203).

Odysseus’ very presence negates Nausicaa’s statement. Nausicaa claims that no one ever visits this land, but Odysseus *is* present, even if on account of extreme circumstances, and if present, there is every reason why he could be a hostile enemy. The presence of slaves in Alcinous’ household corroborates the inference that the community has either brought back captives from war, or the Phaeacians are in contact with traders, from whom they would have been able to buy slaves. Thus the focus on marriage obfuscates the real danger involved for Odysseus.
2. Odysseus as Slave

So far we have two features of the story that parallel slavery among the Tupinamba, the Carthaginians, and the Cretans who enslaved Athenians: the potential role play of captives (here Odysseus) in foreign clothing; and, in the case of the Tupinamba and the Cretans, the suggestion of warfare and defeat as Odysseus’ point-of-entry into Phaeacian society. The emphasis on Odysseus as xenos in Alcinous’ house obscures the danger he faces. Nausicaa’s formula is one that Eumaeus echoes later: ‘We ought to take care of this man because all strangers and beggars are from Zeus, and even a small gift is welcome’ (6.207-9). The role of xenos, however, belies the hostile subtext that prompts the need for Odysseus to enter the court under the cloak of darkness with which Athena protects him, for him to address Arete first rather than her apparently less hospitable husband, and for Alcinous to be chided into offering hospitality by a respected elder. Odysseus’ safe reception has by no means been guaranteed, and Alcinous’ slowness to welcome him ‘contrasts sharply with an earlier passage – Telemachus’ visit to Menelaus’ house in Sparta’. All apparent indicators point to Odysseus as xenos, but this status is unstable.

The athletics competition in book 8 contains strong intimations of potential trouble. Athletics amount to surrogate warfare, and the captors want a formidable opponent they can claim to have dominated, as they would have done in war. Domination might not be Alcinous’ intention, but what of the other kings? Alcinous is one of thirteen kings who have come to scrutinise the guest. Like Odysseus, Alcinous is anxious to keep the situation from getting out of control. Though he is in his own home, Alcinous’ dominance over the other kings is not absolute, and thus his xenos is not entirely secure. Alcinous probably needs the help of others to secure Odysseus’ passage home. Thus the Phaeacians are called to his halls to ‘make a trial’ of Odysseus (8.23). As the interaction unfolds, we find that there are indeed many wills at play.

Alcinous’ suggestion of games is aimed at distracting his guest from the song of Demodocus, which had reduced Odysseus to tears. Here again, Odysseus is not presented as powerful, but is indeed emotionally and psychologically overpowered by the narrative of Troy. Alcinous’ suggestion of the games is perhaps another poor diplomatic move. One contestant, Laodamas, teases Odysseus relatively mildly: ‘He has been broken by many hardships. I don’t think there’s anything worse to confuse a man than the sea, even if he may be especially strong’ (8.137-9). But Odysseus cannot ignore Eurylaus’ harsher status-based taunt (8.159-64):

Stranger, I don’t think that you look like a man that is skilled in all the athletics events that abound among men, but like one who shuttles to and from on his benched ship, such as abound among men, a captain of merchant seamen, one who takes care of freight and is in charge of conveying his cargo and his greed-gotten gains. You do not look like an athlete.
Odysseus responds angrily to Eurylaus' recklessness (he says he is atathalos (8.166), a dangerous characteristic that in turn, when displayed by Odysseus, will cause the deaths of his own men), saying: 'I will make a trial of the games, because your word hurts my heart, and you have provoked me to speak' (8.185). He then hurls the discus almost inconceivably far. As the Tupinamba example shows, the fact that Odysseus is a formidable opponent is exactly what makes him a worthy captive.

What separates the narrative of Homer's Odyssey 8 from our other examples of enslavement narratives around the eighth century BCE is simply that we anticipate and receive a different outcome. The structure, however, follows that of our examples of enslavement: the entry of an outsider, the mock cooption of the outsider into the community, and the trial of this potential opponent, which leads to his domination. Odysseus' mastery of key interactions – which we might compare with Theseus' seduction of Ariadne in that story – is a crucial factor in his avoidance of captivity. We have already discussed Odysseus' interaction with Nausicaa, and his supplication of Arete, rather than Alcinous, secures him a safe reception at the palace. As the narrative progresses, Alcinous and Demodocus become critical to Odysseus' release. We have also noted that Alcinous' recognition of Odysseus emotional distress – his tears in response to Demodocus' song – prompts the king's attempt (albeit unsuccessful) to help him. Given the taunts that follow, we might well argue that these Phaeacians are bad hosts, but they are merely acting from an impulse to dominate a potential foe.

Odysseus, cheered by a timely visit from Athena, becomes less angry but reflects that a man in his position is in danger of doing comprehensive damage to his position (panta kolouei, 8.211) by issuing challenges to men who are his hosts. Fortunately, Alcinous recognises this cue to himself as Odysseus' sponsor, and he puts an end to the competition before his guest embarrasses himself. The guest's failure could lead to more than shame, as was the case of Minos' son, Androgeos, He was killed by his host Aegeus, resulting in the ritual enslavement of Athenian youth to compensate for the death. In the case of Odysseus' ambivalent position as captive/guest in Phaeacia, Alcinous shifts the focus from domination back to xenia, but his words point to the possibility of another outcome.

The return of Demodocus marks an important shift in the narrative. Although there are no direct words between Odysseus and Demodocus, the bard's choice of topics for his next song is telling: an incident in which a powerful god, Ares, is dominated and embarrassed. The topic of Demodocus' tale is, at first blush, odd. Hilary Mackie has argued that in the Odyssey, as opposed to the Iliad, songs of bards tend toward recent events. In the Odyssey, Phemius and Demodocus both sing about events at Troy, as if demonstrating their ability to stay up-to-date with heroic exploits. Even speakers like Menelaus and Odysseus tell tales about their recent journey homewards. Mackie suggests that 'perhaps the Phaiakians are –
by Odyssean standards – even a little behind the times'. Yet one way of explaining Demodocus’ choice of theme is to acknowledge that the motives of mockery of the captive, ritual honour, and domination are present both in the muthos and in Odysseus’ circumstance. Within our framework, Demodocus’ story is clever in drawing attention, through an unexpected muthos, to the situation at hand: the capture and domination of an otherwise powerful warrior. Odysseus’ chief rival, Euryalus, has already been compared to Ares (8.115), as Braswell reminds us. Demodocus’ tale is the story of Ares’ affair with Aphrodite, and how Hephaestus, with the help of Helios, traps the adulterers. What are the tactics and values that Odysseus might take from Hephaestus in order to conquer his Ares? To borrow Braswell’s language, how does Odysseus’s intellectual superiority, similar to Hephaestus’, defeat Euryalus’ might?

The language of domination and dependency that distinguishes slavery from guest-friendship is clearly echoed in the muthos. Hephaestus devises traps full of trickery (8. 281). The dominant party ‘forges bonds that are unbreakable and unable to be loosened, in order that they might remain there firmly’ (8.274-5). Hephaestus puts chains ‘all around the bedposts in a circle’ (8.277-8). Demodocus’ emphasis is not on the act of adultery per se but rather on the binding; xenia has certainly gone wrong. When Ares and Aphrodite lay in bed, ‘the crafty bonds of cunning Hephaestus fell, and in no way were they able to stir their limbs nor to raise them up. And then in fact they knew that they could no longer escape’ (296-9). Within the muthos, the outcome is clear: the ostensibly weaker party, Hephaestus, wins by cunning.

The story suggests that, for Odysseus, neither freedom nor captivity is already determined. Although Demodocus presents the celebration of the cunning of Hephaestus to Odysseus, the trap and the mockery that Ares faces in the story in fact offers a closer parallel to Odysseus’ present situation. Like Ares, Odysseus is trapped. As Brown argues, the laughter of the gods, which parallels the behaviour of Odysseus’ hosts, brings shame to the object of scorn. Gods, holders of might, gather to see Ares trapped, while the goddesses hold back out of shame. Yet although Odysseus is threatened, in this event it turns out that Euryalus is Ares. Odysseus’ foe will suffer defeat at the hands of a weaker but more cunning opponent.

Recognising his vulnerability and the trap in which he finds himself, Odysseus takes immediate action. Wasting no more time, he bathes and says his goodbyes, as if he has already gained passage home. Odysseus then asks Demodocus to sing about Troy. Harrison rightly calls attention to Odysseus’ unusual actions here: ‘In a display of quite unparalleled rudeness the hero proceeds to assume control of the proceedings, first presenting Demodocus with a choice piece of pork from the table of his host (474f.), and then himself nominating the theme to be treated by the bard in his next song (492f.).’ Harrison surely has a point in arguing that
Odysseus has set Demodocus up in order to mislead him purposely. Odysseus, not Demodocus, will tell the most captivating story and win his freedom.

The possibility of Odysseus as slave – the ever-present possibility that he will be enslaved – returns us to the folkloric core of Homeric narrative, the reality from which the poet draws when portraying his character in action in a specific environment. Something, some mastery of social options, however, separates the individual, heroic, folkloric character from his or her context. Part of Odysseus’ heroism, in a modern sense of the word, that which separates him from any other hero in his own poem (and that which also distinguishes Theseus in Bacchylides) is a dignity independent of social class, as Thalmann showed in The Swineherd and the Bow: determination, resolve never to fail, or never to be entirely dominated. This is one sense in which Odysseus is polymetis, resourceful; he always finds a way.

Odysseus’ Cretan stories, told later in the narrative during his interactions with Eumaeus, reify the hints of the real possibility throughout the text – the possibility I have sought to demonstrate here – of Odysseus as slave. These stories, along with the details of Eumaeus’ life, reveal a specific Homeric Weltanschauung: the world is cruel, full of obstacles to individual freedom, and in such a world human values – in terms of kind treatment, hospitality, trust – do matter. And yet such a system of dependency can also create a social optics whereby relations of dependency, slavery, and power appear natural. The constructed order of things takes on the reality of an ontology, which is reinforced culturally through iconography and ideology. Odysseus as slave undoes this ontology.

A North American parallel should serve in conclusion. In his narrative, Frederick Douglass introduces us to the institution of slavery (and the rules of domination) through a ‘terrible spectacle’ of behaviours, interactions, and rituals of violence. The ‘terrible spectacle’ renders slavery a near-permanent – real, immutable, inborn – status for the dominated. Douglass tells us, or shows us, how his master humiliated his Aunt Hester, stripping her ‘her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked’. Douglass would observe the ‘warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him)’, which ‘came dripping to the floor’.39 Douglass’s focus is always optical: ‘I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over.’40 The spectacle shows Douglass, who is a boy at the time, what his value is in nineteenth-century American society. Seeing violence against his aunt not only teaches Douglass his social role as slave, but his master thus also reifies his own value as dominant.

The spectacle of domination, which opposes individual character, is so convincing in North America that it takes an equally enchanting vision to undo it. If observing domination and degradation iterates and reiterates roles in American society during slavery, then imagine the spectacle of the

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Negro, the non-human, thing-being slave, mounting an argument for his freedom, publically. In 1845, William Lloyd Garrison wrote the following about watching Douglass at an anti-slavery convention four years earlier, in 1841:

I shall never forget his first speech at the convention – the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind – the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise – the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks. I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than ever. There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact – in intellect richly endowed – in natural eloquence a prodigy – in soul manifestly ‘created but a little lower than the angels’ – yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave, – trembling for his safety, hardly daring to believe that on the American soil, a single white person could be found who would befriend him at all hazards, for the love of God and humanity!41

The grounds on which the Negro was enslaved were its inhumanity, its soullessness, its proximity to beasts of burden. Violence and enforced ignorance transformed social circumstances into ontological truth. If this is the case, if slavery was akin to an optical illusion, then the reality of a Frederick Douglass – an educated, eloquent, extraordinary Negro – pledges to undo the magic trick or to restructure ontology. Douglass is to Garrison a religious apparition, an epiphany that produces a miraculous transformation of society.

It would not be extreme to say that the Abolitionist serves for Douglass a similar role as does Alcinous for Odysseus. Each agent becomes the vehicle that helps to transport the slave to freedom. Odysseus’ heroism, then, is similar to what we see in Douglass. We find that the origins of freedom lie in inner force and intellect that counter domination and social death. The sleight of hand that Odysseus performs is no different from the way in which Douglass crafts freedom for himself. Odysseus as slave, therefore, shows us how to be free.42

Notes

1. For a discussion of the hierarchical structure of Homeric society and Eumaeus’ role in it, see Thalmann (1992), especially 84-100. See also Donlan (1980) and Rose (1992) 92-140. In general, it is worth noting that throughout this essay, ‘Homeric society’ and ‘Homeric culture’ refer not to an actual historic culture, but rather to the layers of culture from perhaps as early as Mycenaean times to the eighth or seventh century BCE which are fused and represented in the Homeric texts. This approach is similar to that of Thalmann (1998) and Redfield (1994).

2. In Odysseus’ Cretan story to Eumaeus, Odysseus claims that, in Egypt, some of his men are killed, and others are taken alive, and forced to work (14.272). Tellingly, in this passage, the problem of working (ergazesthai) has to do more with
dishonour than industry. The ‘false’ Odysseus, as a son of a Cretan lord by a concubine, is conscious of his status alongside his noble brothers. He makes it clear that he prefers sailing to field labour (ergon, 14.222), but the issue again is honour.

3. See e.g. Cartledge (1993), Garnsey (1996), and even to some extent Thalmann (1998).


6. Although this is not the place for a full discussion, Page duBois’s notion of the slave as object/thing is somewhat more subtle than that of Garnsey (1996); duBois (2003) 6 sees ‘that being human is not an absolute condition but rather a gradual one, on a sliding scale on which some humans approach the status of things, of objects’.


8. Redfield (1993) proffers this as an actual option, but elaborated the theme even further in a presentation for the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute at Grambling State University, 2007. I am indebted to Redfield for the general approach that I offer here.


11. Slaves are gained as a result of ‘military strength, or the capacity to capture slaves as booty from other, weakened communities (and any defeated enemy population might in principle be enslaved’) (Garnsey [1996] 3). Throughout the Mediterranean world, one might also come into slavery at the hands of pirates or merchants.

12. An aspect of slavery for which Patterson might not fully account, because of his binary opposition of ‘slavery’ and ‘freedom’, is resistance. Resistance extends the space, so to speak, between alive and dead. For Patterson, ‘freedom’ might well be the primary purpose of resistance, but during enslavement, modes of resistance including storytelling and rituals do combat the master’s intention of having the slave as an extension of himself, a symbol of his domination. Robert Farris Thompson’s Flash of the Spirit (1984) is one example of an attempt to account for such resistance.


15. duBois (2003) sees this, as does Nadel (1988) in his analysis of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) and the representation of Southern culture in that novel.


17. A weakness of the idea of social death is that it does not allow for the retention or ‘memory’ of social practices, the remnants of the society from which the slave is taken (see also Hall’s chapter below, pp. 204-6). In places like Brazil in the modern world, these fragments, pieced together along with practices adapted from the new culture, lead to new cultural formations. See Thompson (1984) and Merrell (2005).

18. Patterson (1991) xv; see also 33, where he takes on, though not entirely convincingly (since this instance would be the exception to his rule), the question of Israelite presences in Egypt as an instance of mass slavery.


21. Games, and even to some extent game theory, are useful ways of talking about these types of social interactions, where power and domination take on a ritualistic dimension, each party knowing and ‘playing’ – or not playing – his or her expected role. See, for example, Herzfeld (1985) and Dugatkin (1996).

23. Artistic representations of the event to which Phaedo refers existed as early as 650 BCE, according to Gantz (1993) 262, and both Bacchylides (17) and Sappho (fr. 206) refer to the 'seven boys and seven girls' (see Servius on Aeneid 6.21). For a general discussion of the Theseus myth, see Walker (1995).

24. Although war is the primary mode of captivity, we see in the case of the Carthaginians that slaves could also be bought from traders or pirates. See, for example, Redfield (2001) 179.

25. For a systematic look at the language of slavery in Homer’s Odyssey, see Thalmann (1998). Thanks to Barbara Graziosi for providing the scholia here.


28. As in, for example, Jacobs (1887 [1861]) and Douglass (2001 [1845]).


30. Another permutation of the theme of clothing comes in Odysseus’ story, told to Eumaeus, that he was shipwrecked among the Thesprotians on his trip from Egypt. (He is of course telling falsehoods, but the central issues of narrative expectation and convention remain.) He is given aristocratic garb: ‘They dressed me in the cloak and tunic’ (14.320). When the Thesprotians, independent of the king Pheidon, sell him into slavery (his doulion émar, 14.340), the aristocratic clothes are the first to go: ‘They took the cloak and tunic from me, and they threw another ugly rag on me and tunic, this one ratty, which you yourself can see with your own eyes’ (14.341-3).

31. Thalmann (1991) 153-70; see also, for example, Gross (1976).

32. Thalmann, in his reading of Bellerophon’s death sentence because of Anteia in Iliad 6, reminds us of the link between marriage and death in Homeric narrative. Bellerophon’s successful evasion of death secures him the king’s daughter, but failure would have meant continued servitude, or death (Thalmann: 144-6, 157). G. Rose (1969) and Gross (1976) emphasise that the encounter with the Phaeacians is not friendly but one fraught with perils for Odysseus.


34. If Mackie (1997) is correct that characters in the Odyssey master their grief by telling their own story, then Odysseus’s narrative dominance does not occur until book 9.


37. In sum, ‘mockery can serve as a mechanism of popular justice’ (Brown [1989] 291), as is the case of the mockery of the adulterer here.


40. Douglass (2001 [1845]) 16-17, my italics.


42. Thanks to Barbara Graziosi for calling my attention, too late to incorporate the information into the main narrative of this chapter, to Iliad 4.385-400, where Agamemnon, chastising Diomedes, tells the story of the latter’s father Tydeus, who escaped possible enslavement and similar challenges.

References

