

Where does the proem of the *Odyssey* end?*

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One of the most striking things about the opening of the *Odyssey* is the invariable paragraph-break after v. 10: ‘Start the story where you will, goddess, daughter of Zeus, and share it now with us.’¹ The following paper has as its aim to present a case for deleting this paragraph break, a typographical custom which gives the misleading impression that the proem ends after v. 10 and that everything thereafter is the opening of the main narrative, or at least a transition to the main narrative. To demonstrate my case I shall present two parallel passages: the proem of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, and a ‘second proem’ in *Odyssey* book 5.

By the term ‘proem’ I mean the *framing device* that cues the main narrative, and which is a generic feature of pre-classical epic narrative. In this paper the word ‘proem’ may be understood equally well as referring to a semi-autonomous sub-genre, with its own conventions and formal characteristics, whose function is to frame the larger macro-genre of epic. Either way, it is its function of framing that is important here. I make this clear only because a number of technical usages of ‘proem’ are presently in circulation, especially the usage that confines its meaning to hymnic preludes such as the *Homeric hymns*.

Although it may seem at first sight trivial or pedantic to argue over where, exactly, the proem ends and the main narrative begins, important consequences follow from this decision. The framing of a performance act, in this case the performance of epic narrative, is unequivocally important in the interpretation of the narrative so framed; it is, so to speak, a performative that frames the performance, and which

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¹ Following the recent translation of Martin Hammond, *Homer. The Odyssey* (London, 2000).

cues both the audience and the performing poet to what is coming. A clear understanding of how this framing works is manifestly important both to the study of storytelling — narratology — and to the interpretation of the *Odyssey*.

Why is there a break at v. 10?

Typography is insidious. When confronted by a paragraph break it is difficult not to see a break in sense. Although the earliest manuscripts of the *Odyssey* would not have possessed any such breaks, or any punctuation, the paragraph break is there in modern editions of the Greek text, in Allen's Oxford edition and [van Thiel]'s Teubner;² it is also present in all but one of the English translations that I have inspected.³ In some it is even more striking: the translation of Rieu sets vv. 1-10 apart as an indented paragraph in italics, stressing the separateness of these verses even more. The important thing to realize is that to insert a break is an *editorial choice*: no one, and no syntactical or formal rule, has compelled any editor or translator to put it there. The paragraph break exists because of the assumption that there is a break; conversely, the typography leads interpretation, cueing readers to see vv. 1-10 as a separate unit. In effect, we as readers are laden with the weight of centuries of paragraph breaks.

To be sure, there are other factors which have motivated most critics to take 1-10 as a unit. Other than the paragraph break, the main *formal* reason for seeing a break between 1-10 and 11-21 is the fact that the Muse is invoked both in v. 1 and in v. 10: this looks like ring-composition in the first ten verses, which in turn suggests that these

² Van Thiel[']s online text] omits it: but [that] edition has no paragraph breaks at all, nor any other modern typographical conventions, such as breaks between books or punctuation.

³ The translations of Chapman (originally published in 1616), Cowper (1791), Butcher and Lang (1879), Butler (1900), Murray (1919), Rieu (1946), Lattimore (1965), Fagles (1996), Lombardo (2000), and Hammond (2000). The sole exception is Fitzgerald (1961), who puts a break *before* v. 10. Some translators (Fitzgerald, Lombardo) use several paragraph breaks throughout the first 21 verses; Hammond puts breaks both before and after v. 10.

verses are to be perceived as a unit, discrete and separate from what follows.⁴ Evidence below will demonstrate that this is not the case.

Other traditional motivations for preserving the break tend not to stem from formal considerations but from an interpreter's agenda. So, for instance, Page complains that in the proem 'there is not a word to indicate the action of the whole of the second half of the *Odyssey*'; but he immediately goes on to observe, 'not until the *prooemium* is finished do we hear anything about the subject of the second half [in vv. 16-19]'.⁵ Page's argument is circular. He creates infelicities in the proem to support his *a priori* assumption that it is inauthentic: the proem *must* be inauthentic, therefore it *must* foreshadow only a small slice of the epic, therefore it *must* end at v. 10. Page allows his agenda to take precedence over the evidence.

Clay and Pedrick also require a break after the first ten verses, but again the arguments are circular.⁶ Clay requires vv. 1-10 to reflect a biased narrator, but not the subsequent narrative; Pedrick argues that vv. 1-10 are spoken by the poet *in propria persona*, while everything from v. 11 onwards is the response of the Muse. Clay condemns critics such as Rüter and Bassett, who 'fail' to perceive the sharp break at v. 10. This is in spite of the fact that Rüter focuses precisely on the question of whether there is a *break* or a *transition* before the main narrative.⁷

Yet another way that the relationship between proem and main narrative is traditionally articulated is by positing successive

⁴ Eg Peter V. Jones, *Homer's Odyssey: A Commentary Based on the English Translation of Richmond Lattimore* (Bristol, 1988), 3; Stephanie West, in A. Heubeck (ed.) *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey I* (Oxford, 1988), 68; I.J.F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge, 2001), 5. Jones is at the same time one of the few that prefer to take the proem as including 11-21 (Jones, 1).

⁵ Denys Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford, 1955), 168 n.2.

⁶ Jenny Strauss Clay, 'The beginning of the *Odyssey*' *AJP* 97.4 (1976), 313-26 at p.314 n.3, = *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1983), 41 n.70; Victoria Pedrick, 'The Muse corrects: The opening of the *Odyssey*' *YCS* 29 (1992), 39-62.

⁷ K. Rüter, *Odysseeinterpretationen: Untersuchungen zum ersten Buch und zur Phaiakis* (Göttingen, 1969; = *Hypomnemata* XIX), 28-52.

phases of ‘introductory-ness’. Terms like ‘prologue’, ‘exordium’, ‘introit’, or ‘opening’ are used so loosely that they refer sometimes to vv. 1-10, whereas at other times they include vv. 11-21, or the assembly of gods as well, or Athene’s visitation to Telemachos, or even the whole of the *Telemachy*. Thus, for example, Perrin refers to vv. 1-10 as ‘prooemium’, 11-21 as ‘prologue’, and 22 as the start of the main narrative;⁸ for Wheeler, the ‘introit’ refers to the invocation of the Muse;⁹ for Stephanie West, vv. 1-10 are the ‘proem’, 11-21 a ‘sketch’ of the scenario at the start of the epic, and by 22, ‘The stage being now set, the action opens.’¹⁰ Bassett gives up on the usual terminology and refers to the whole of 1-21 as an ‘induction’: ‘using the word not as a technical term, like “proem” or “prologue”, but merely as a short-hand expression to describe all that precedes the narrative of the action.’¹¹ Schadewaldt includes the council of the gods when he uses the term ‘Prolog’.¹²

In fact vv. 1-10 are no ring-composition, and v. 10 is neither the end of the proem nor a break between proem and narrative. The proem of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, and a parallel passage within the *Odyssey*, at 5.105-15, provide counter-examples.

Exhibit A: The proem of the *Catalogue of Women*

We are fortunate enough to possess most of the proem to the Hesiodic *Catalogue*: fragments of vv. 1-22 are extant in P.Oxy. 2354,

⁸ B. Perrin, *Homer’s Odyssey Books I-IV* I (Boston, 1889), 1-5. Although Perrin’s commentary is mostly an epitome of K.F. Ameis and C. Hentze, *Homers Odyssee für den Schulgebrauch erklärt*⁸ I (Leipzig, 1884), the latter do not use these terms: they are Perrin’s own.

⁹ G. Wheeler, ‘Sing, Muse ...: The introit from Homer to Apollonius’ *CQ* 52.1 (2002), 33-49.

¹⁰ West, *Commentary* (as in n.4), 67-74.

¹¹ S.E. Bassett, ‘The inductions of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*’ *CW* 27.14 (1934), 105-10 and 27.15 (1934), 13-18 at p.105. He takes as ‘inductions’ *Odyssey* 1.1-21, *Iliad* 1.1-12a, and Virgil *Aeneid* 1.1-33.

¹² W. Schadewaldt, ‘Der Prolog der *Odyssee*’ *HSCP* (1958), 15-32. At times he also uses *prooimion* in this way (p.17).

supplemented in places by ancient citations. I give here a translation, to avoid lengthy explanations of the supplements to the text:¹³

Sing now of the race of women, sweet-voiced
 Olympian Muses, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus;
 those women who were then the noblest [...]
 and loosed their own girdles [...]
 had sex with gods [...] 5
 for at that time feasts and assemblies were held communally
 among both the immortal gods and mortal humans.
 Nor did [mortals] have the same life-span as [now ...]
 men and women [...]
 foreseeing old age in [their] minds [...] 10
 who [lived] all too long [...]
 demigods, whom forthwith [...]
 the immortals [...] youth [...].
 Tell of the [...] of these women, Muses¹⁴ [...]
 as many as [broad-browed Olympian Zeus] lay with, 15
 engendering the foremost race of noble kings,
 [...] Poseidon [...]
 [...] and Ares [...]
 [...]
 [...] 20
 [...] Hermes [...]
 [...] the might of Herakles [...]¹⁵

¹³ Most supplements are taken from R. Merkelbach and M.L. West, ‘Fragmenta Selecta’ in F. Solmsen (ed.) *Hesiodi Theogonia, Opera et Dies, Scutum*³ (Oxford, 1990), 113-14; others are required for sense, though the exact Greek wording is missing in places.

¹⁴ In the parallel construction at *Odyssey* 1.10, Merry thought τῶν was the direct object of εἰπέ, but erroneously; similarly a direct object is required here on which τάων depends, so: ‘Tell us, Muses, of the (deeds? glories? children?) of these women.’ See W.W. Merry, *Homer: Odyssey, Books I-XII I* (Oxford, 1928), 19.

¹⁵ The translation is my own.

The key verse here is 14 (τάων ἔσπετε Μ[οῦσαι]), which renews the invocation to the Muses in vv. 1-2. Here, however, it is quite clear that *the proem does not end* at v. 14: vv. 15-22 continue the themes of 3-13 (gods interacting with mortals, women having sex with gods), and combine them with a list of gods that engendered sons by mortal women. Indeed the conclusion to the proem is not extant: even by 22 the text has not yet embarked on the genealogies that make up the main narrative of the *Catalogue*. Yet v. 14, both in its location and its character as a renewed invocation to the Muse, is precisely analogous to v. 10 in the *Odyssey* proem.

Here, moreover, it is clear that the renewed invocation is no ring composition. V. 14, far from providing closure to the first 13 verses, is a new invocation, with a new relative clause dependent on it (v. 15 ὅσο[α]ς ..., ‘as many as ...’) as is typical of the opening lines of proems.

As with all invocations to Muses, its function is introductory rather than backward-looking; and *Odyssey* 1.10 should not be seen as an exception. It is impossible, then, to take *Odyssey* 1.1-10 as a case of ring-composition.

Exhibit B: a ‘second proem’ of the *Odyssey*

For a second parallel to the *Odyssey* proem, consider a passage from later in the same epic, which has startling parallels with the proem:

... the man who was the most wretched of the other
men, those who fought around the city of Priam
for nine years, but in the tenth, after sacking the citadel, they went
homeward — but in their homecoming they offended Athene,
who roused up against them an evil wind and tall waves.

At this time all the others of his good companions had perished,
 but him a wind brought, and a wave drove him here [ie to Kalypso].
 Now he [Zeus] commands you [Kalypso] to send him away as quickly as possible,
 for it is not his fate to perish here, far from his dear ones,
 but still it is destined for him to see his family and arrive
 at his high-roofed home and to his native land.¹⁶

This passage, *Odyssey* 5.105-15, is part of Hermes' address to Kalypso.¹⁷ There are many verbal parallels between this passage and 1.1-21, listed below.

This extremely close parallel has not been noticed hitherto. It may seem to invite a very hard Analyst interpretation: that the passage preserves traces of an earlier proem, from some hypothetical moment before the *Telemachy* was (allegedly) added on to the beginning of the *Odyssey*. I am not proposing this, however: I put the passage forward only as a parallel, to highlight thematic features of the proem through the similarities.

In other words, this passage has intimate thematic links to 1.1-21. Like the proem, the book 5 passage has been criticized on the grounds that it is partial and tells the larger story of Odysseus' travels very incompletely;¹⁸ in particular the poet is blamed for seemingly telescoping two storms, the one sent by Athene immediately after the

¹⁶ The translation is my own.

¹⁷ Clay, 'The beginning of the *Odyssey*' (as in n.6), 322 n.23, provides a helpful summary of notes and scholia on 5.105-11 surveying the history of these verses, portions of which many critics have wanted to athetize for a variety of reasons. The most common reason is that 110-11 are repeated at 133-4, but see below on the thematic significance of this repetition.

¹⁸ De Jong, *Narratological Commentary* (as in n.4), 132: 'Hermes' summary of Odysseus' *nostos* is highly elliptical'. Conversely, Jones asks us to 'note that it takes 15 lines for Hermes to get to the point': Jones, *Commentary* (as in n.4), 50.

Achaians left Troy, and the one Poseidon sends after Odysseus leaves Thrinakia.¹⁹

The chief point to notice in this passage is, of course, that it is conspicuously devoid of any interruption between 5.105-9 and 110-15 that would correspond to the break customarily seen after 1.10. To accentuate the similarity between the two passages I have placed a paragraph break here as well, in the position corresponding to 1.11. But no editor or translator has ever thought of inserting a typographical break after 5.109.

Although Hermes claims to be reporting Zeus' commands in 105, in fact Zeus never said any such thing: the only verbal parallel between Zeus' command to Hermes and Hermes' report here is between 5.41-2 and 114-15. The passage is no repetition; its structure is not an accident. Rather, the parallels between this and the real proem of the *Odyssey* must be explained in terms of patterns, typical themes, which are actively at work in the composition of this original passage.²⁰

To be sure there are some important differences, but consider the similarities, tabulated below:

- 5.105 ἄνδρα, parallel with 1.1. As in the real proem, note the careful avoidance of using Odysseus' name throughout this passage.
- 5.106 οἷ: parallel to the relative clause in 1.1. (At 5.106 the relative pronoun is in the same place as the one introducing the relative clause in *Iliad* 1.2.)
- 5.106 ἄστνυ: cf the focus on the sack of Troy in 1.2, and 1.3 ἄστεα.
- 5.107 πόλιν πέρσαντες: parallel to 1.2 πτολίεθρον ἔπερσε.
- 5.108 ἐν νόστῳ: cf the striving for νόστος in 1.5.
- 5.110 ἔνθ' ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες = 1.11a.
- 5.110 ἐσθλοὶ ἑταῖροι: cf the preoccupation with the companions in 1.5-9.

¹⁹ F. Blass, *Die Interpolationen in der Odyssee* (Halle, 1904), 84; Merry, *Odyssey* (as in n.14), 67; F. Focke, *Die Odyssee*, = *Tübinger Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft* 37 (Stuttgart, 1943), 79.

²⁰ Other passages in the *Odyssey* also contain verbal echoes of the proem: eg 16.63-4 (introduced by φησί, as is 5.105), 16.188-9, 19.168b-70.

- 5.111 τὸν δ' ἄρα: the contrast is parallel to 1.13 τὸν δ' οἶον.
- 5.112 νῦν: cf the temporal clause in 1.17ff. ἀλλ' ὅτε ...
- 5.112 σ': The sequence of ideas is thematic: the formula ἔνθ' ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες followed immediately by, here, a command to Kalypso to release Odysseus from her abode, or elsewhere, an account of Kalypso holding him there. This sequence is parallel to 1.11-15, and is also repeated in 5.133-6, 7.251-8.
- 5.113-14 οὐ γάρ οἱ τῆδ' αἴσα ... ἀλλ' ἔτι οἱ μοῖρ' ἐστί: parallel to 1.17 οἱ ἐπεκλώσαντο etc.²¹ (16.63-4 also combines elements from both halves of the proem: πολλὰ βροτῶν ἐπὶ ἄστεα ... πλαζόμενος ... οἱ ἐπέκλωσεν.²²)
- 5.113 φίλων, and 114b-15 φίλους τ' ιδέειν καὶ ἰκέσθαι / οἶκον ἐς ὑπόροφον καὶ ἐὴν ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν: parallel to 1.17-19 οἰκόνδε νέεσθαι ... μετὰ οἴσι φίλοισι ... ἦν γαῖαν ἰκέσθαι.

The verbal parallels with 1.1-21 are numerous and, with an important exception noted below, follow the sequence of the proem.

There are, of course, differences as well. Certain ideas are absent here which recent critics see as interpretively important in the book 1 proem: the repeated idea πολλὰ ... πολλῶν ... πολλά, which is important to Pucci's elaboration of the word πολύτροπον (which is, accordingly, also omitted here); also the idea of 'toils', ἀέθλοι, πόνοι, etc, which are important to Nagler's reading of the proem.²³

Should these omissions deter us from reading this passage as parallel to the proem in book 1? Certainly not: there is no obligation on the narrator to provide parallels to every thematically significant element in the proem. Furthermore, there are two respects in which the passage in book 5 differs *actively* from the proem:

²¹ De Jong, *Narratological Commentary* (as in n.4), 132, also sees a parallel between 5.113-15 and 1.16-18 (but not between this passage and the proem generally) in the repeated idea of fate.

²² See Bruce Loudon, *The Odyssey: Structure, Narration and Meaning* (Baltimore, 1999), 74-5 for discussion.

²³ Pietro Pucci, 'The proem of the *Odyssey*' *Arethusa* 15 (1982), 39-62; Michael N. Nagler, 'Odysseus: The proem and the problem' *CA* 9.2 (1990), 335-56.

(1) The god named as interrupting the Greek heroes' *nostos* here is Athene, rather than Hyperion the Sun, who in 1.9 takes away the companions' 'day of homecoming'. Divine intervention is a repeated theme, however, and Clay comments at length on the importance of the 'wrath of Athena' both in this passage and in the real proem.²⁴ This difference is thematic, then, and hardly likely to be random.

(2) In book 5 contrasts are drawn between Odysseus and the other fighters at Troy, *then* between Odysseus and his companions. This is a reversal of the sequence in book 1: the contrasts are first with the companions (5-9), *then* with the other Achaians (11-5). The sequence is inverted; but the narrator has preserved both contrasts. This suggests that the poet is actively engaged in revision of elements in the proem. Consequently this too cannot reasonably be taken as a random act.

Concluding remarks

The parallel in the *Catalogue of Women* shows that there is nothing that requires v. 10 to be the end of the proem, and that it is odd indeed to take *Odyssey* 1.1-10 as a case of ring-composition: renewing the invocation of the Muse suggests continuation rather than closure. There is no good reason to abandon the idea that an invocation to the Muse is introductory, framing, rather than backward-looking.

The parallel in book 5 strongly suggests a discreteness about that passage, a sense in which that passage *sticks together* as a whole. In addition, there is no discernible break at the midway point through the passage corresponding to the one traditionally seen at 1.10. We should feel comfortable about transferring these characteristics to 1.1-21. The book 5 passage clearly does not feel any compulsion to be parallel only to the first ten verses of the *Odyssey*, but to the first 21 verses.

So in summary, there is no excuse for the typographical and interpretative traditions that make the proem end after ten verses. It may be that the paragraph break after v. 10 is so ingrained in the history of the reading of Homer that future editors (and translators) may never remove it: it may be that we are slaves to our own traditions. If the hope that the

²⁴ Clay, 'The beginning of the *Odyssey*' (as in n.6), *The Wrath of Athena* (as in n.6). See Loudon, *The Odyssey* (as in n.22), 69-103 on the *threefold* narrative of divine wraths: Helios, Athene, and Poseidon.

typography of future editions of the *Odyssey* might change seems too grandiose to become reality, even so a close generic relationship has been revealed between the *Odyssey* proem, the *Catalogue of Women* proem, and *Odyssey* 5.105-15. This will be of particular interest to those who have an interest in the framing of poetic utterance.

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Note

This paper originally appeared in John Davidson and Arthur Pomeroy (eds.), *Theatres of Action: Papers for Chris Dearden, Prudentia* suppl. (Auckland: Polygraphia, 2003), 1-11. The pagination is identical to the printed version.

Addendum (written May 2011)

This paper is flawed by a failure to take into account alternate reconstructions of *Cat.* fr. 1.14, in particular Stiewe's reading, which has now been printed in Most's new Loeb edition:

τάων ἔσπετέ μ[οι γενεήν τε καὶ ἀγλαὰ τέκνα

The line still unambiguously addresses the Muses, but the parallel is slightly weakened. In addition, the print version should have shown the sublinear dots under τάων.

There are also a few incidental errors. In the printed version page 2 mis-cited some editions of the Homeric text; the present PDF version has alterations, in square brackets, to avoid misleading the reader.