

## The *Odyssey*'s Economy of Pleasure and the Open-Ended Tale

In the *Poetics* Aristotle argues that a plot should have a beginning, middle and end (1450b) and that this imitation of events conveys pleasure—whether from the lesser comedic plot, the more austere tragic or, in the case of the *Odyssey*, a tale that is “double” (ἡ διπλῆν τε τὴν σύστασιν ἔχουσα), “containing opposite endings for better and worse men” (τελευτῶσα ἐξ ἐναντίας τοῖς βελτίοσι καὶ χείροσιν). Even in the case of the debased audience that prefers the comic narrative (δοκεῖ δὲ εἶναι πρώτη διὰ τὴν τῶν θεάτρων ἀσθένειαν), the fact that the tale has *an end* is determinative in its effectiveness in bringing the audience pleasure.

The Homeric *Odyssey* seems preoccupied both with ending a tale and end the experience of pleasure. Indeed, the *Odyssey* presents something of an economy of pleasure where gods and heroes alike derive pleasure from feasting (e.g. 1.25, 1.422, 4.27), conversation (4.239), athletic competition (4.626 and 17.168) and sex (5.227). The suitors and the Phaiacians alike especially take pleasures in songs—and the stories they enjoy are those of the Trojan War, tales with known and certain ends. Within the context of such pleasure, the epic also presents indulgent grief, perhaps anticipating Aristotle's famous formulation about poetry's felicity in producing pleasure from “pity and fear”. Menelaos, for example, depicts himself as “delighting his mind with grief sometimes” (ἄλλοτε μὲν τε γόῳ φρένα τέρπομαι) and Penelope also describes her days as pleased by grieving and lamenting (ἦματα μὲν γὰρ τέρπομ' ὀδυρομένη γοόωσα, 19.513-14). Yet, not all grief is pleasurable. Odysseus' grief at hearing the songs of the end of the siege of Troy is so un-pleasurable that it prevents the rest of the audience from enjoying the song (8.91-2 and 8.542). Central to this tension between pleasure and pain at a tale's telling are Eumaios' words of invitation to Odysseus when he asks that they “take pleasure in recalling our horrible

grief to one another since a man may also take pleasure in his grief *afterwards* when he has suffered and gone through so many things” (15.398–402). Pleasure comes from a tale that *ends*.

The grief that the epic’s players experience at not knowing Odysseus’ fate, echoes the real life pain of not knowing a loved-one’s fate, not understanding how to live after a momentous event, or the anxiety of an unknown death that awaits everyone. This paper argues that the *Odyssey* uses contrasting presentations of grief and pleasure in response to narratives (1) to magnify the importance of Odysseus’ (incomplete) tale; (2) to advance the epic’s interest in probing the dangers of poetry and narrative, in this case contesting the importance of the tales whose ends are known; and (3) to anticipate its own problematic ‘closure’, the open-endedness of Odysseus’ tale, and the lives that must be lived after the epic’s end. In order to explain the development of the theme of narrative pleasure and pain, the paper will draw on theories of narrative closure from cognitive science and behavioral therapy to propose that this epic—which focuses on a world after the fall of Troy where life goes on—capitalizes upon the audience’s desire to know how a story ends and dramatizes the dangers of the pleasure derived from a closed narrative. This framework in turn helps us to understand better the epic’s own end and the lessons it offers for an audience that necessarily lives beyond the boundary of the tale.