

## Middles and Prophecy in the *Odyssey*

Whereas narrative beginnings and endings have attracted a fair amount of attention, middles remain relatively unexplored. Almost forty years ago, J. Hillis Miller wrote, “If Edward Said has discussed beginnings and Frank Kermode the senses of ending, the coherence of the part in between is no less a problem” (Hillis Miller 1978: 375. See Kermode 1966 and Said 1975.) This observation, still valid today, applies with special force to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* whose status as texts has always been uncertain. The participation of Homeric poetry in a living oral tradition that evolved into the textual tradition inherited by the Alexandrian editors; its anchoring in performance and thus in the recreation of the epic past in the here-and-now of performance; the thorny issue of book-division; and the possibility of performing smaller sections of the epic; all these issues make assessments of middles a risky enterprise, the expression of a formalist bias that implies more coherence and narrative structure than is warranted by the messier aspects of the text characteristic of oral poetry (See, e.g., Ford 1991.).

In this paper, I examine the use of middles in the *Odyssey* by looking at the fate of the Phaeacians in the “unique, double version of the ‘recalled prophecy’ motif” in Books 8 and 13. This doublet consists of (1) the prophecy: Alcinous’ report of Nausithous’ prophecy that Poseidon will one day punish the Phaeacians because they have been “painless escorts” (566: πομποὶ ἀπήμονες) of all men by smiting a Phaeacian ship on its way home from a *pompê* and engulfing their city with a huge mountain (8.564-571); and (2) the (partial) fruition of the prophecy (13.159-87). (For useful studies of this episode see Peradotto 1974, Friedrich 1989, and Nagy 2002.) I read (1) and (2) as parts of a larger tripartite prophecy-narrative and argue that together and by themselves these parts

call attention to the “middle” as marker of spatial halving or pivot of transition between different thematic sections: the middle divides a narrative into two parts that are approximately equal in length or delimit thematically unified sections of it. Together (1) and (2) frame the Apologue, a self-contained section ending at the middle of the *Odyssey* (Book 12). (1) occurs fifteen lines before the end of Odysseus’ adventures in Scheria and thus divides two thematic sections of the epic, the hero’s Phaeacian adventures and his homecoming, as narrated in the Apologue. (2) comes very near a halving of the epic suggested by Oliver Taplin, the division between the non-Ithacan adventures (up to 13.92) and the Ithacan ones (Taplin 1992:19). Yet inasmuch as the *Odyssey* promises more journeys for its hero, a promise expressed by Tiresias in Book 11 (and partly reflected in the Cyclic *Telegony*), it does not end in Book 24 but goes beyond it. The placement of (2) a little *after* the middle of the received epic, as well as its concerning a prophecy, a type of narrative to which Tiresias’ promise to Odysseus also belongs, may be taken to reflect this indeterminate post-*Odyssey* and to halve the lengthier *Odyssey* anticipated in Book 11.

Prophecy-narratives lend themselves to a study of narrative middles because they presuppose a “middle” of their own, a transitional space *between* (1) *and* (2) where the action necessary for (2) occurs. They also presuppose, implicitly or explicitly, a space *before* (1), the origin or cause(s) of a prophecy, which renders (1) the middle between this prior space and (2). And, of course, on the level of the *sujet*, prophecy-narratives can dispense with middles all together by omitting (1), the prophecy, and mentioning only (2), its fruition, in which case, (1) is reconstructed post-(2). Prophecy-narratives show that middles may shift between being middles, beginnings, or endings, depending on the

section(s) of the narrative one chooses to perform or read. They are thus good material for a study of middles as used in a poem that partakes, however uneasily, both in orality and in textuality.

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