

## The Odyssey vs. The Telegonia

Gary S. Tong 1965

There are two major and mutually contradictory traditions accounting for the death of Odysseus. One of these is found in Homer, i.e., that Odysseus would meet a mild death, far away from the sea, and in old age, surrounded by a prosperous people.<sup>1</sup> The phrase ἐξ ἁλός<sup>2</sup> (meaning either "out of the sea" or "away from the sea") is of course ambiguous, but in the context of Teiresias' reassuring prophesy this phrase most likely means "away from the sea". The second tradition is that Odysseus was killed by Telegonus, his own son, by Circe, in an encounter where neither father nor son knew who the other was. This version is known from the now lost epic poem, *The Telegonia*, attributed to Eugam(m)on of Cyrene (6th century B.C.)<sup>3</sup>

There is, in addition, yet another account of Odysseus's death, viz., that after continued wanderings, he was changed into a horse by Athena.<sup>4</sup>

Now, whereas we have neither later allusions to the death of Odysseus as predicted by Homer, nor any stories telling the full story of this version do, on the other hand, have numerous later references to the death of Odysseus by the hand of his son.<sup>5</sup>

Since there are no references to Telegonus killing his father earlier than the date ascribed to Eugammon, it can be assumed that all later references to the same story are either based on Eugammon, or on some unknown source earlier than his dates.<sup>6</sup> Therefore the question arises as to which of the two traditions is the original one, or else whether there had been two independent, parallel traditions recounting the death of Odysseus. The Homeric version, by virtue of its greater antiquity, seems to claim for itself greater authenticity than that of the *Telegonia* which, belonging to the Epic Cycle, is of later date than the *Odyssey*. Furthermore recalling again the ambiguity in Homer's phrase ἐξ ἁλός, we can suspect that the episode of Telegonus killing his father with a spear tipped by a sting-ray's tail (*Dictys* 6.15, etc.), was really a clever invention hinging on that ambiguity: the spike of the sting-ray literally came "from the sea."

However, to say something about the antiquity of the Telegonus vs.

Odysseus version, there are some clues which may indicate that such version is possible dating from the 8th century B.C., for according to Eusebius, Eugammon had based his *Telegonia* on a work similarly entitled, written by a certain Cinaethon of Lacedaemonia. And according to Eusebius, Cinaethon wrote in the 3rd Olympiad, i.e., late 8th century B.C.? Lacking real proof that Eugammon indeed drew from earlier sources, it is impossible to carry back with certainty the date of his version before the 6th century B.C. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the contents of both the *Odyssey* and the *Telegonia* for further clues.

By now it is a widely accepted view that the *Odyssey* is a mixture of various elements: folklore motifs, etc.<sup>8</sup> The main motifs of the *Odyssey* are: a) contest of suitors for bride; b) return of the long absent husband; c) mother sends son to find long absent father; and perhaps d) the wanderer.<sup>9</sup> In the *Telegonia* one can see two recognizable motifs: a) son seeks unknown father (Thompson H. 1381.2.211); and b) father and son combat (Thompson N 338.3; J 675.1; S 11.3.3; A 515,5; N 349.2; N 731.2).

Both epics, then, share one important motif, that of the son (sent by his mother) to find his father. (More will be said of these later.) As for differences, however, in the *Odyssey* no mention at all is made of Telegonus, and the death of Odysseus at the hands of his son is, if anything, strongly contradicted by Teiresias's words. The important question is whether the father and son combat was ever really part of the story of Odysseus.

First, surely Eugammon was not the first to deal with this motif. The father-son combat is a wide-spread tradition, represented in Persian myth by Rustem and Suhrab, in Irish myth by Cuchulain and Coulaoch, in medieval German literature by Hildebrand and Hadubrand, in Greek myth by Oedipus and Laius. In addition many instances of this motif appear in folklore, (as cited above). Clearly, even if Eugammon was the first to introduce this motif into the story of Odysseus, he was probably basing it on some source prototype. Eugammon is unlikely to have invented this motif independently because the motif itself was probably fairly well-known, judging from comparative mythology, and also the motif, as it appears in various traditions, shows many elements found the *Odyssey*.

Second, an important part of the stories of father-son combat is the search by the son for the unknown father. This search culminates in the meeting, but failure to recognize one another by the father and son. It is hard not to see the Quest of Telemachus in the *Odyssey* as being a clear instance of this motif. True, Telemachus does not find Odysseus - -this fact will be discussed later - -but when they do meet at last, Telemachus at first refuses to believe the Odysseus is really Odysseus. His refusal reminds one of the "non-recognition" between Rustem, Cuchulain, Hildebrand and their respective sons. With the Quest of Telemachus taking up a sizable portion of the *Odyssey*, yet contributing nothing to the basic plot--the trials and homecoming of Odysseus--we can perhaps assert that the *Odyssey* does contain a major element (i.e., search by the son for the father), of the father-son combat theme.

Third, as early as the 5th century B.C., that is, predating Eugammon's *Telegonia*, we find the motif of father-son combat in connection with Odysseus. Parthenius (*Love Stories* 3) gives a summary of now lost play of Sophocles, entitled *Euryalos*, in which Odysseus goes abroad, has a son, Euryalos, by a local princess, who later sends the grown up Euryalos to find Odysseus. In the end Odysseus, in ignorance, kills Euryalos. If such story was indeed current in the 5th century B.C., it is very likely that there had, in fact,

been some tradition involving Odysseus killing his own son, or perhaps Odysseus being killed by his own son.

If the points above suffice to show that the father-son combat motif was not tacked on the Odysseus story by Eugammon, but that this motif was in some way originally connected with Odysseus, it remains to see why the *Odyssey* contradicts such a connection. It has been established that an important element of the *combat* is represented in Homer by the Quest of Telemachus for his father whom he does not know. Yet this quest does not end in bloodshed --as such quest should as part of the father-son combat motif. The reason for this variance can be explained perhaps if we look at the plot and the general tone of the *Odyssey*. Apparently the full story of Odysseus did not consist of the Homeric story of the homecoming only. This fact is indicated by the fact that Teiresias in his prophesy mentions Odysseus's going inland with an oar to found a shrine to Poseidon. Also, Homer himself emphasizes that Odysseus's adventures are far from being over even after his return home; for in Book XXIII. 248- of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus **says to Penelope:** ὃ γύναι, οὐ γάρ πω πάντων ἐπὶ πείρατ' ἀέθλων ἦλθομεν, ἀλλ' ἔτ' ὄπισθεν ἀμέτρητος πόνος ἔσται, πολλὸς καὶ χαλεπός, τὸν ἐμὲ χρὴ πάντα τελέσσαι. (“Dear wife, we have not yet reached the end of our troubles. I still have a long hard labour to perform before I reach my end”.) Homer must be alluding to a story concerning the further adventures of Odysseus. However, the *Odyssey* itself leads up to, and culminates in the homecoming of Odysseus. Therefore the Quest of Telemachus, which was originally probably identical with the search of Telegonus for his father, is built into the context of the homecoming. Whereas the Quest of Telemachus (or if Telegonus) originally ended either in parricide, or the father killing the son, in the *Odyssey* the quest is altered since the plot emphasizes the return of Odysseus, and not the story of his death.<sup>11</sup>

Another possible element of the father-son combat in the *Odyssey* may be the following. Odysseus in the court of Alcinous is challenged to a contest in the games. The challenger is called Euryalos, the same name as that of Odysseus's son whom Odysseus kills according to Parthenius's summary of Sophocles' *Euryalos*. This challenge is highly reminiscent of the challenge to a wrestling match made (among others in Greek myths) by Telegonus and Polygonus, sons of Poseidon, to every stranger.<sup>12</sup> This Telegonus seemingly has nothing to do with Odysseus's son the same name<sup>13</sup>, yet the arrogant challenge by these brothers to strangers is similar not only to the challenge by the Phaeacian Euryalos to Odysseus, the stranger, but to the challenge given by Hadubrand to Hildebrand, and by Suhrah to Rustem. The appearance of the names "Telegonus" and Euryalos" in both "challenge" theme and in the father-son combat, with both names also appearing in connection with Odysseus is perhaps no coincidence. In that case the challenge of Euryalos to Odysseus at the Phaeacian games is a much-altered remnant, in Homer, of the father-son combat myth.

To summarize, it seems that the story of Telegonus killing Odysseus, as told by Eugammon in Hellenistic times, is very likely based on an older

tradition, for the motif both exists in the legends of various nations, and has also appeared in connection with Odysseus in a now lost play of Sophocles. Moreover, if it is true that Eugammon's source was the *Telegonia* of a certain Cinaethon, then the story may be as old as the 8th century B.C.

However, Homer contradicts this tradition. And yet there appear in Homer several elements of the tradition of the *Telegonia*--although these are not easy to identify at first sight. But if these elements have been changed for the sake of the plot, then it is reasonable to suppose that in the *Odyssey* even the account of Odysseus's death had been altered from a tragic one to a happy one, since the idea of "return-home" is a happy one. The ambiguity of the phrase "ἐξ ἁλός" no doubt might not have escaped the attention of the maker of the *Odyssey*--and the phrase was perhaps intentionally created vague, so that the Homeric alteration of the story of Odysseus's death could pass as no alteration at all. But if Homer made these alterations then his version is not the original one, and one may say that it was Eugammon, and not Homer, who continued the older tradition about the death of Odysseus.

Because of the relative scantiness of proof, such a conclusion is hardly irrevocable, though perhaps it may seem likely. However, Odysseus was not only a figure in legend,--but a hero with a cult as well (see Thompson, p. 104). His story, therefore, must have been put together from various elements of folklore and local myths. The fact that in later times the death of Odysseus through Telegonus was by far the better-known account--only Servius mentions Homer's version--and also the fact that in Greek myths the heroes hardly ever die peacefully, would again indicate that the author of the *Odyssey* had altered an older tradition for literary purposes.

#### Notes

1. Homer, *The Odyssey*, Bk. 1. 134.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Pauly-Wissowa, *Realencyclopaedie der classischen A.*, Stuttgart, 1894-.
4. Servius, *On Vergil*, 2.44. Odysseus's connection with horse(s) may point to his association in some way with Poseidon, just as his planting an oar inland and his building of a shrine to Poseidon does. These associations, and also the fact that Penelope is known to have had a local cult in Mantinea, as well as other facts, might show that Odysseus was originally a local hero or divinity linked to Poseidon. (See J.A.K. Thompson, *Studies in the Odyssey*, Oxford, 1914.) As for why Odysseus should be prevented from reaching home by Poseidon if he is really a manifestation of Poseidon, we can remember the fact that Herakles suffers likewise on account of Hera's anger--although his name *Hera-kles* means in fact "Hera's glory."
5. For example, Sextus Empiricus in *Adversum Mathematicos* 1. 267, makes no references to a peaceful death, although in talking about the various versions of Odyeseus's fate he mentions a) changing into a horse; b) being

killed by Telegonus; c) a gull dropping a string-ray's poisonous tail on Odysseus's head.

6. Some of these references are:

Apollodorus, *Epitome*, 7.36

Lycophron, *Alex.* 795

Servius, *On Vergil*, 2.44

Hyginus, *Fabula* 125

Dictys, 6.15

Parthenius, *Love Stories*, 3.

7. Pauly-Wissowa, see under *Telegonus*.

8. See for example Thomson, p. 102-3; W.J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey*, Oxford, 1930, pp. 19-20.

9. Although the theme of the "wanderer" is not listed as a motif--at least by S. Thompson's *Motif-Index*--this theme is not at all unfamiliar to us. Take for an example such characters as the Wandering Jew, the Wandering Gypsy, the Flying Dutchman, Wotan in the Walsung Saga, the Hungarian "Wandering Student" (Garabonciás Diák), the "Beggar's Curse" story (in *World's Greatest Folktales*, ed., J. R. Foster, Harper, N.Y., 1953). In many of these examples the hero is condemned to wandering by a curse incurred through an act of impiety, etc. Particularly close is the parallel between the story of the "Beggar's Curse" and the wandering of Odysseys. In the former which is a medieval French tale, a mistreated beggar curses a peasant to the effect that the peasant should wander for seven years before being able to go home, and when he does reach home, he should find trouble in his house. Indeed, when the peasant finally gets home he finds his wife married to another man, while he himself is not recognized and cast out. Similarly, in the *Odyssey*, the "mistreated" Polyphemus curses Odysseus saying: "κλῦθι, Ποσειδάων...μη Ὀδυσσῆα...οἴκαδ' ἰκέσθαι...ἀλλ' εἴ ἔλθοι...εὖροι πῆματα οἴκῳ". [‘Hear me, Poseidon, let Odysseus never reach his home... may he come...and...let him find great trouble in his house.’] (Translation by Th. Van Thulden), Book IX. 1. 528-535).

10. Among some similarities between Odysseus, Rustem and Cuchulain, is the fact that all three travel much into foreign lands, and have a child by a woman in foreign lands; all three eventually travel some more, leaving the child behind, who upon growing to manhood set out to find their father. Odysseus, in particular, is ascribed many children, begotten while in foreign lands; he has sons by Circe, by a princess in Elis, in Thesprotia (the two latter in the *Telegonia*, see Pauly-Wissowa), in Ereios (Parthenius, *Love Stories* 3), by Calypso (Eustathius 1796. 35). Although most of these "genealogizings" were apparently attempts at connecting a locality with Odysseus, this is not the case--significantly enough--with Telegonus. Perhaps he belongs to the original father-son combat element.

11. Although the father killing the son is not the same as the son killing the father, the point of the motif being the inherent tragedy, a reversal of who kills who should not be a crucial question. The killing of

Odysseus by Telegonus , and not the other way around (as in Sophocles' *Euryalos*), was no doubt a way of telling how Odysseus finally met his end.

12. Apollodorus, *The Library* 2.5.a; Lycophron, *Alexandra* , 123-5.

13. There is yet another Telegonus, with no apparent connection to the two others, in Apollodorus, 2.1.3.: "εις Αἴγυπτον ἐλθοῦσα ἐγαμήθη Τηλεγόνῳ τῷ βασιλεύοντι τότε Αἰγυπτίων" ["(Io) she came to Egypt and was married to Telegonus, who then reigned over the Egyptians."] (Translation by J. G. Frazer)