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**Reviewed Work: *Die Odyssee. Epos Zwischen Marchen und Roman* by Uvo Holscher**

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**Disciplines**

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**Comments**

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UVO HÖLSCHER. *Die Odyssee. Epos zwischen Märchen und Roman*. Munich, C. H. Beck, 1988. Pp. 360. DM 68.

In an extended reading of the *Odyssey* aimed at a general literary audience as well as at classical scholars, Uvo Hölscher sums up the results of a lifetime of engagement with the Homeric epics. Readers familiar with Hölscher's earlier writings, such as *Untersuchungen zur Form der Odyssee* (Berlin 1939), "Das Schweigen der Arete," *Hermes* 88 (1960) 257–66, and "Penelope vor den Freiern," in *Lebende Antike: Symposion für Rudolf Sühnel* (Berlin 1967), will find the insights expressed there expanded and incorporated into a broader appreciation of the poem as a whole. In common with other German scholars of the neo-analytic school, notably Wolfgang Schadewalt and Karl Reinhardt, Hölscher has been especially concerned with measuring the achievement of the Homeric epics in relation to their possible sources. In particular, he focusses on the folktale, or *Märchen*, as a source for the *Odyssey*, locating the *Odyssey*'s distinctive nature in its transformation of the folktale into something qualitatively different and characteristically epic. For him, the folktale is a subliterary form defined not only by its subject matter but by its unadorned and linear narrative technique. In his terminology, folktales are "einfache Geschichten," "simple stories," in which the teller's only concern is with the forward momentum of the plot and in which events follow one another in a strictly chronological sequence.

According to this view, the simple story underlying the *Odyssey* would

have begun at the beginning, with the hero's departure from home, rather than at a point close to his return, and would not have veered at once into a digressive account of the exploits of his son. That original starting point is not entirely suppressed in the *Odyssey* but surfaces in Penelope's recollection at 18.257ff. of Odysseus' parting instruction that she should wait for him until Telemachus grows a beard. This instruction, which provides the deadline for the hero's return demanded by the folktale, also generates in the *Odyssey* the extended and prominently-placed narrative of the Telemachy, which is for Hölscher a key episode that brings to the poem a range of features absent from the folktale. The Telemachy allows a full exploration of the crisis on Ithaca that makes Odysseus' return so urgent, introduces a play of perspectives through which Telemachus' and Odysseus' stories comment on one another, and inspires the stories of the *Nostoi* of other heroes that are included in it. The figure of Telemachus exerts a transforming influence on other parts of the plot as well: the inclusion of the *Telemachy* determines the starting point of Odysseus' *apologia*; the story of the suitors' attack on Telemachus' life is a new invention of the *Odyssey* poet; in one of Hölscher's more striking arguments, the setting of the contest of the bow during a festival to Apollo is determined by Apollo's association with initiation rituals such as Telemachus is effectively undergoing.

Odysseus, on the other hand, is a figure with a well-established heritage in folktale, where his wily character would be fully at home. He has been incorporated into the expedition against Troy through his role in another folktale that underlies that story, a folktale in which he plays the role of helper to the husband who recovers his stolen wife. In the process, the magic animal on which the folktale character relies has been converted into the epic stratagem of the wooden horse; his various folktale adventures have been reduplicated and arrayed in such a way as to bring out a new theme of wandering; his journey to the underworld has been given a heroic cast through a series of encounters with the major heroes of the Trojan legend.

These, and the other similar transformations hypothesized by Hölscher, answer to a series of distinctively epic interests: in the significance of place, in the experience of the passage of time, in the shape of an entire life. Reformulations of folktale plots also allow for what Hölscher calls "epic situations," complex scenes turning on the psychological experiences of several characters. Penelope's appearance before the suitors in Book 18 is a prime example of such a scene. What was a wily trick in an original folktale has turned into a noble display of regal superiority, whose significance is enriched by the unsuspected presence of Odysseus. Similarly, the postponement of Odysseus' recognition by Penelope, an event which in the original folktale would have followed immediately on the slaughter of the suitors, separates the emotional reunion of husband and wife from the political act of Odysseus' recovery of the house, and creates a complicated three-sided dynamic in which Odysseus and Penelope communicate through their exchanges with Telemachus.

This exposition of the transformations out of which the *Odyssey* presumably arose supports an essentially literary vision of the poem. In Hölscher's view, the *Odyssey's* complicated narrative structure assures that it was composed with the aid of writing, and the poem's oral antecedents do not set it apart from later works, but rather make its creation comparable to the developments through which both lyric and tragedy went from being communicated largely through oral performance to functioning primarily as literary texts. Through this process of "Literarisierung," the poem transcends its social context and becomes pure art; hallmarks of this transcendence are poetic self-reflexiveness and intertextuality.

Thus Hölscher treats the *Odyssey's* relationship to the *Iliad* as one of straightforward literary influence: Telemachus' dismissal of Penelope at *Od.* 1.356ff. on the grounds that *muthos* is the business of men is a deliberate echo of Hector's dismissal of Andromache at *Il.* 6.490ff. on the grounds that war is the business of men; the application to Penelope of the term *periphrōn*, which does not square with her folktale background, derives from an evocation of Diomedes' wife mourning her lost husband at *Il.* 5.412ff.; the opening sequences of the *Odyssey's* plot are copied from Book 24 of the *Iliad*. As it reworks elements drawn from the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* incorporates them into a very different poem, one that uses unprecedented effects of suspense and surprise, that draws the listener into the story as a participant in scenes of epic recitation, that invokes new ideals such as that of the good king responsible for the welfare of his subjects, and that imparts the interest in atmosphere and setting that is absent from the *Iliad* as well as from folktale. These differences are seen as being so substantial that the poems are certainly by different authors. Indeed, as Hölscher presents it, the *Odyssey's* greatest affinity is not with the *Iliad* but with the ancient novel. The novel's resemblance to the *Odyssey* stems not so much from direct influence as from a similarity of origin, since the novel was also generated out of the literary adaptation of folktale motifs. As a consequence, the *Odyssey* itself came to be received in late antiquity as a novel.

Like all accounts of the origins of the Homeric epics, Hölscher's is inevitably a projection conditioned by the author's perception of the poems themselves. Here that limitation seems most troublesome in the oversimplified depiction of the "einfache Geschichten" lying behind the *Odyssey*. No actual folktale is really as devoid of atmosphere, context, characterization, and perspective as Hölscher suggests, and he seems more to be constructing a series of foils for the *Odyssey* than invoking plausible antecedents. This impulse is evident in the way he tends to reject possible sources of which traces actually survive—for example, arguing against the influence of a previous epic about the Argonauts—in favor of imagined folktales. And, while he does at times invoke as an intermediate stage the saga, the large scale poem in which folktale motifs are attached to a specific location and to particular quasi-historical characters, he more often seems to posit a single leap from simple folktale to complex epic narrative. This

development is always assumed to represent progress as well as change, and every admirable feature of the poem is presumed to be the addition of the *Odyssey* poet. Here one misses the sensitivity to the traditional character of the epics that in recent American criticism grows out of the work of Milman Parry. A greater emphasis on the epic tradition makes it possible to propose a more gradual evolution for the qualities manifested in the *Odyssey* and also to recognize as intrinsic to epic some of the elements that Hölscher sees as traces of imperfectly transcended folktale. Thus, for example, Gregory Nagy's demonstration in *The Best of the Achaeans* that a conflict between *mētis* and *biē* is embedded in the epic tradition allows for a more satisfying appreciation of the wiliness of Odysseus and Penelope, making that trait a central element in the epic's meditation on the possible routes to human success rather than a leftover remnant of another genre.

On the other hand, as a working hypothesis, Hölscher's construct also has certain advantages. His identification of the ways in which a more straightforwardly linear structure has been redeployed to form the *Odyssey*'s intricate plot is quite convincing, and the resulting contrast between our poem and its supposed antecedents works well as a guide to the poem's particular interests and emphases. Whether or not one agrees with all of Hölscher's assumptions, his approach succeeds in isolating and highlighting those features that the *Odyssey* does indeed share with later literary fiction. Readers of this book can expect to come away from it with a newly sharpened sense of some of the *Odyssey*'s most sophisticated aspects: its awareness of its own poetic character, its attunement to the symbolic significance of setting and place, and its appreciation of the complexities of human motivation and feeling.

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