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The Three Circuits of the Suitors: A Ring Composition in *Odyssey* 17-22

Steve Reece

Many that are first will be last, and last first.
(Mark 10:31)

Introduction

On three occasions in the *Odyssey*, Homer draws attention to the arrangement of the suitors as they sit in the hall of Odysseus' palace: first, when the disguised Odysseus passes from suitor to suitor begging for food; again, when each suitor in turn attempts to string Odysseus' bow; and, finally, when the suitors are slaughtered in succession at the hands of Odysseus and his small band of followers. On all three occasions—the description of which spans a long stretch of narrative (Books 17-22)—Homer seems to have precisely the same arrangement of suitors in mind. But whereas the sequence in which the suitors are mentioned is the same in the first two circuits, it is exactly reversed in the third.

The few meticulous scholars who have noticed this pattern have marshaled it as evidence for their hypothetical reconstructions of the layout of Odysseus' palace. But Homer's description of the layout of the palace is ambiguous, and the notorious failure of these scholars, both ancient and modern, to come to a consensus suggests that topographical verisimilitude was not Homer's primary concern here. Rather, I believe this pattern is an exceptionally well-crafted example of a type of patterning, pervasive in orally composed narrative, known to Hellenists as *hysteron-proteron* or *ring composition*. This is not to say that the pattern is merely a mnemonic aid, a means by which the poet may more easily arrange his material and store it in his mind; admittedly, such patterning held a practical function for an orally composing poet, but it also came to have an aesthetic value, providing for the audience a pleasing sense of recognition and ultimately a

satisfying sense of completion.

I shall suggest further that the pattern here focuses attention on the major theme of the latter half of the *Odyssey*: the theme of vengeance. The first two circuits are inextricably linked to the third inasmuch as they pose tests for the suitors—the first a test of their behavior toward strangers, the second of their worthiness (or lack thereof) to court Penelope—the failure of which leads directly to their slaughter in the third circuit. Antinous, the leader of the suitors, is approached last by the beggar, and he alone of the suitors abuses the beggar and refuses to give him food. Later, in the trial of the bow, he is again last in line; hence, he presumably poses the greatest threat to string it. It seems appropriate, then, that Antinous is the first of the suitors to die at the hands of Odysseus, deservedly with an arrow through his voracious throat. Conversely, Leodes, the most morally and physically innocuous of the suitors, is first in line to try the bow, and he clearly poses the least threat to string it. Again, it seems appropriate, then, that Leodes is the last of the suitors to die, and that he suffers a relatively humane death.

The Three Circuits of the Suitors

In Book 17.336-506, Homer describes Odysseus' arrival at the palace, disguised as a beggar. Odysseus takes the normal place of a beggar, sitting at the threshold (339), but Telemachus instructs him to approach all the suitors and ask for food (346=351). Odysseus proceeds from left to right (*endexia*), begging from each man (365). All the other suitors in turn (cf. *hexeiês* 17.450) give him bread and meat, and he is about to return to the threshold, when, last of all the suitors, he confronts Antinous (411-14). From him he receives different treatment: Antinous tells him to stand where he is, in the middle, apart from his table (447), threatens him with slavery (448-49), and even casts a footstool at him (462-65). Having thus ominously completed his circuit of begging, Odysseus returns to the threshold and sits down (466). Although of the suitors only Antinous is specifically named in this scene, the arrangement of the suitors as a group is very clear: they are arranged in a circuit with Antinous positioned at one end.

This begging scene serves as a preview of the next circuit of the suitors—the trial of the bow—four books later (21.141-268). Antinous

urges all his companions to rise and try the bow in turn (*hexeiês*), from left to right (*epidexia*), beginning from the place where wine is poured (141-42). Leodes, son of Oenops, who sits beside the wine krater in the innermost (*muchoitatos*) part of the hall, is the first to stand and try the bow, but it is too great a task for his tender hands (144-51). He yields and suggests that another of his comrades take it (152). Meanwhile, Antinous predicts that soon others of the suitors will string the bow (174), and he orders Melanthius to kindle a fire and bring a piece of fat so that the young men may try the bow and put an end to the contest (175-80). The young men proceed to do this, but with no greater success than Leodes (184-85). Antinous and Eurymachus, the leaders of the suitors, still hold back from trying the bow (186-87), but after a momentary shift in the narrative to the courtyard, where Odysseus reveals himself to his two trusted herdsmen (188-244), Eurymachus is described making trial of the bow, unsuccessfully (245-55). Antinous, presumably the only suitor remaining who has not yet tried the bow, excuses himself, claiming that it is a holy day and proposing that the trial of the bow be resumed on the next day after a sacrifice to Apollo (256-68). In sum, the circuit of the suitors' trial of the bow in this scene follows the same pattern—the same arrangement of the suitors, and in the same sequence—as the circuit of Odysseus' begging four books earlier. But here the individual suitors who compose the circuit are more fully fleshed out: Leodes is positioned at one end of the circuit, Eurymachus and then Antinous at the other.

The third circuit, the slaughter of the suitors, narrated at some length a book later (22.8-329), fleshes out the individual suitors in even greater detail. But the most remarkable characteristic of this last circuit is that, while the suitors' arrangement is the same, the sequence in which they are mentioned is an exact reversal of the previous two circuits. Antinous, last in the circuit of Odysseus' begging, and last in the trial of the bow, is the first to fall at Odysseus' hands (8-21). Eurymachus, the second from the last in the trial of the bow, is the second to die (44-88). Next to die, this time at Telemachus' hands, is Amphinomus, who is apparently positioned next to Eurymachus (89-96).¹ The bulk of the narrative of the death of the remaining suitors is presented by means of a framing device—a short,

¹ The proximity of the two suitors is implied at 18.394-98, where Odysseus, in an attempt to escape the footstool that Eurymachus casts at him, seeks protection at Amphinomus' knees.

generic description of suitors as they fall one by one (116-18; 307-9)—within which are described in more detail the deaths of individual suitors: Demoptolemus, Euryades, Elatus, Peisander, Eurydamas, Amphimedon, Polybus, Ctesippus, Agelaus, and Leocritus.² After the deaths of all the other suitors, only Leodes remains; he who was first in the trial of the bow is last of the suitors to die (310-29).

Topographical Layout

The pattern of these three circuits has not escaped the notice of those whose concern it has been to reconstruct the architectural layout of Odysseus' palace. But if the resulting confusion and disagreement about the layout of the palace among scholars, both ancient and modern, is any indication, Homer was not overly concerned here with topography. One may compare the very different hypothetical reconstructions of the arrangement of the suitors within the hall proposed by Bassett (1919) and Bérard (1954), though both are based on the same textual evidence. The two most perplexing difficulties lie in the meanings of the adverbs *endexia* (17.365) and *epidexia* (21.141) applied to the circulation among the suitors of the beggar and the bow, and of the adjective *muchoitatos* (21.146) applied to the suitor Leodes. From whose perspective does the beggar, or bow, pass “toward the right?” With reference to what is Leodes the “innermost”? These questions were posed as early as the ancient scholia to the *Odyssey* (on 17.365, 21.141-42, 146), and there has been no consensus to date.³

Homer does not appear to have been concerned, then, with the *absolute* position of the suitors within the hall; the description of the first two circuits is ambiguous, and in the third there is no reference to their

² On the symmetry of this scene of slaughter, see Fenik 1974:146-48, 192-207.

³ The scholia understand ἐνδέξια and ἐπιδέξια to mean from the suitors' perspective, as do Bassett (1919:297) and Braunlich (1936); Bérard (1954:14-16) and Stanford (1959:21.141n.) take the opposite view. The absurdity of such overly literal-minded readings of Homer is nowhere more apparent than in Fernández-Galiano's summary, in the newest commentary on the *Odyssey*, of the endless and sometimes acerbic debate over the nature of the contest of the bow and the general layout of Odysseus' palace (Russo et al. 1992:133-47, 210-17).

absolute position. Whether we place Antinous on the left or the right of the entrance, or whether we visualize Leodes at the end of a semicircle or at the end of a straight row, is of little importance. Homer was, however, concerned with the *relative* position of the suitors, for on all three occasions on which Homer mentions their arrangement relative to one another, this arrangement is precisely the same. How do we explain this careful and apparently deliberate patterning, if not in terms of topography?

Ring Structures in Greek Epic

I suggest that Homer's close attention to the arrangement and sequence of the suitors in these three circuits arises from the oral nature of this epic's composition and performance. Patterning of this sort is pervasive in oral poetry. One may include the pattern of these three circuits—the first two following the same sequence, the third an exact reversal of the preceding two—among the many examples in early Greek epic of the well-known devices of hysteron-proteron and ring composition. By hysteron-proteron, I mean a pattern in which the last mentioned element of one sequence becomes the first mentioned in the next (ABBA, ABCCBA, ABCDDCBA, etc.); ring composition is similar but is generally understood to include a central core (AXA, ABXBA, ABCXCBA, etc.).⁴

For example, there are many occasions in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on which a series of questions is answered in exactly the reverse order: Antinous' three questions to Noemon (*Od.* 4.642-56); Hecabe's several questions to Hector (*Il.* 6.254-85); and, in the most elaborate example of this device, Odysseus' seven questions to his mother Anticleia in Hades (*Od.* 11.170-203; quoted from Allen 1917-19):

“ἀλλ’ ἄγε μοι τόδε εἰπὲ καὶ ἀτρεκέως κατάλεξον·
 τίς νύ σε κῆρ ἐδάμασσε τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο
 ἢ δολιχὴ νοῦσος, ἧ ἼΑρτεμις ἰοχέαιρα
 οἷς ἀγανῶς βελέεσσιν ἐποιχομένη κατέπεφνε;

⁴ On ring structures in Greek epic, see Bassett 1920, 1938:119-28; Sheppard 1922; Myres 1932, 1952; van Otterlo 1944a, 1944b, 1948; Notopoulos 1951; Whitman 1958:249-84; van Groningen 1960:51-56; Hainsworth 1966; Gaisser 1969; Lohmann 1970:12-30, 209-12, 1988:25-81; Niles 1979a; Thalmann 1984:6-32; Parks 1988; Edwards 1991:44-48.

εἰπέ δέ μοι πατρός τε καὶ υἱέος, ὃν κατέλειπον,
ἢ ἔτι πάρ κείνοισιν ἐμὸν γέρας, ἢέ τις ἤδη
ἀνδρῶν ἄλλος ἔχει, ἐμὲ δ' οὐκέτι φασὶ νέεσθαι.
εἰπέ δέ μοι μνηστῆς ἀλόχου βουλήν τε νόον τε,
ἢέ μένει παρὰ παιδὶ καὶ ἔμπεδα πάντα φυλάσσει
ἢ ἤδη μιν ἔγρημεν Ἀχαιῶν ὃς τις ἄριστος.”

“Ὡς ἐφάμην, ἢ δ' αὐτίκ ἀμείβετο πότνια μήτηρ·
“καὶ λίην κείνη γε μένει τετληῶτι θυμῷ
σοῖσιν ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν· οἴζυραὶ δέ οἱ αἰεὶ
φθίνουσιν νύκτες τε καὶ ἡμέματα δάκρυ χεούση.
σὸν δ' οὐ πῶ τις ἔχει καλὸν γέρας, ἀλλὰ ἔκηλος
Τηλέμαχος τεμένεα νέμεται καὶ δαίτας ἔϊσας
δαίνυται, ἅς ἐπέοικε δικασπόλον ἀνδρ' ἀλεγύνειν·
πάντες γάρ καλέουσι. πατήρ δέ σός αὐτόθι μίμνει
ἀγρῷ, οὐδὲ πόλινδε κατέρχεται· οὐδέ οἱ εὐναὶ
δέμνια καὶ χλαῖναι καὶ ῥήγεα σιγαλόεντα,
ἀλλ' ὅ γε χεῖμα μὲν εὐδαίῃ δμῶες ἐνὶ οἴκῳ
ἐν κόνι ἄγχι πυρός, κακὰ δὲ χροὶ εἴματα εἶται·
αὐτὰρ ἐπὴν ἔλθῃσι θέρος τεθαλυῖά τ' ὀπώρη,
πάντῃ οἱ κατὰ γουνὸν ἄλωνς οἶνοπέδοιο
φύλλων κεκλιμένων χθαμαλαὶ βεβλήγεται εὐναί·
ἐνθ' ὅ γε κείτ' ἀχέων, μέγα δὲ φρεσὶ πένθος ἀέξει
σὸν νόστον ποθέων· χαλεπὸν δ' ἐπὶ γῆρας ἰκάνει.
οὕτω γάρ καὶ ἐγὼν ὀλόμην καὶ πότμον ἐπέσπον·
οὕτ' ἐμέ γ' ἐν μεγάροισιν εὐσκοπος ἰοχέαιρα
οἷς ἀγανοῖς βελέεσσιν ἐποιχομένη κατέπεφνε,
οὔτε τις οὖν μοι νοῦσος ἐπήλυθεν, ἢ τε μάλιστα
τηκεδόνι στυγερῇ μελέων ἐξείλετο θυμόν·
ἀλλὰ με σός τε πόθος σά τε μήδεα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ,
σὴ τ' ἀγανοφροσύνη μελιηδέα θυμόν ἀπηύρα.”

“But come now, tell me this, and give me an accurate answer.
What doom of death that lays men low has been your undoing?
Was it a long sickness, or did Artemis of the arrows
come upon you with her painless shafts, and destroy you?
And tell me of my father and son whom I left behind. Is
my inheritance still with them, or does some other
man hold them now, and thinks I will come no more? Tell me
about the wife I married, what she wants, what she is thinking,
and whether she stays fast by my son, and guards everything,
or if she has married the best man among the Achaeans.”

So I spoke, and my queenly mother answered me quickly:
 “All too much with enduring heart she does wait for you
 there in your own palace, and always with her the wretched
 nights and the days also waste her away with weeping.
 No one yet holds your fine inheritance, but in freedom
 Telemachus administers your allotted lands, and apportions
 the equal feasts, work that befits a man with authority
 to judge, for all call him in. Your father remains, on the estate
 where he is, and does not go to the city. There is no bed there
 nor is there bed clothing nor blankets nor shining coverlets,
 but in the winter time he sleeps in the house, where the thralls do,
 in the dirt next to the fire, and with foul clothing upon him;
 but when the summer comes and the blossoming time of harvest,
 everywhere he has places to sleep on the ground, on fallen
 leaves in piles along the rising ground of his orchard,
 and there he lies, grieving, and the sorrow grows big within him
 as he longs for your homecoming, and harsh old age is on him.
 And so it was with me also and that was the reason I perished,
 nor in my palace did the lady of arrows, well-aiming,
 come upon me with her painless shafts, and destroy me,
 nor was I visited by sickness, which beyond other
 things takes the life out of the body with hateful weakness,
 but, shining Odysseus, it was my longing for you, your cleverness
 and your gentle ways, that took the sweet spirit of life from me.”

(Lattimore 1967:172-73)

In diagrammatic form, this elaborate hysteron-proteron may be viewed as follows:

- A - What killed you? (171)
- B - A long sickness? (172)
- C - Or Artemis with her arrows? (172-73)
- D - How is my father? (174)
- E - How is my son? (174)
- F - Are my possessions safe? (175-76)
- G - Has my wife been faithful? (177-79)

- G - Your wife has been faithful. (181-83)
- F - Your possessions are safe. (184)
- E - Your son is thriving. (184-87)
- D - Your father is alive but in poor condition. (187-96)
- C - Artemis did not kill me with her arrows. (198-99)
- B - Nor did a sickness kill me. (200-201)

A - But my longing for you killed me. (202-3)

A more common type of ring structure is the envelopment of a digression from the main narrative—a paradigm, a simile, a proverbial expression, or some explanatory detail—by a thematic or verbal frame, or even by multiple frames. So in *Iliad* 6.123-43, the narrative of Diomedes' challenge to Glaucus, the paradigmatic story of Lycurgus is framed by three concentric rings (quoted from Monro and Allen 1920):

“τίς δὲ σύ ἐσσι, φέριστε, καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων;
οὐ μὲν γάρ ποτ' ὄπωπα μάχη ἐνὶ κυδιανείρῃ
τὸ πρὶν· ἀτὰρ μὲν νῦν γε πολὺ προβέβηκας ἀπάντων
σῶ θάρσει, ὃ τ' ἐμὸν δολιχόσκιον ἔγχος ἔμεινας·
δυστήνων δέ τε παῖδες ἐμῷ μένει ἀντιώωσιν.
εἰ δέ τις ἀθανάτων γε κατ' οὐρανοῦ εἰλήλουθας,
οὐκ ἂν ἔγωγε θεοῖσιν ἐπουρανίοισι μαχοίμην.
Οὐδὲ γάρ οὐδὲ Δρύαντος υἱός, κρατερὸς Λυκούργος,
δὴν ἦν, ὅς ῥα θεοῖσιν ἐπουρανίοισιν ἔριζεν·
ὅς ποτε μαινομένοιο Διωνύσοιο τιθήνας
σεύε κατ' ἠγάθεον Νυσηΐον· αἱ δ' ἅμα πᾶσαι
θύσθλα χαμαὶ κατέχευαν, ὑπ' ἀνδροφόνοιο Λυκούργου
θεινόμεναι βουπλήγι· Διώνυσος δὲ φοβηθεὶς
δύσεθ' ἄλῶς κατὰ κῦμα, Θέτις δ' ὑπεδέξατο κόλπῳ
δειδιότα· κρατερὸς γὰρ ἔχε τρόμος ἀνδρὸς ὁμοκλή.
τῷ μὲν ἔπειτ' ὀδύσαντο θεοὶ ῥεῖα ζῶντες,
καί μιν τυφλὸν ἔθηκε Κρόνου πάϊς· οὐδ' ἄρ' ἔτι δὴν
ἦν, ἐπεὶ ἀθανάτοισιν ἀπήχθετο πᾶσι θεοῖσιν·
οὐδ' ὃν ἐγὼ μακάρεσσι θεοῖς ἐθέλοιμι μάχεσθαι.
εἰ δέ τις ἐσσι βροτῶν, οἷ ἄρουρης καρπὸν ἔδουσιν,
ἄσσον ἴθι, ὥς κεν θᾶσσον ὀλέθρου πείραθ' ἵκηαι.”

“Who among mortal men are you, good friend? Since never before have I seen you in the fighting where men win glory, yet now you have come striding far out in front of all others in your great heart, who have dared stand up to my spear far-shadowing. Yet unhappy are those whose sons match warcraft against me. But if you are some one of the immortals come down from the bright sky, know that I will not fight against any god of the heaven, since even the son of Dryas, Lycurgus the powerful, did not live long; he who tried to fight with the gods of the bright sky, who once drove the fosterers of rapturous Dionysus

headlong down the sacred Nyseian hill, and all of them
 shed and scattered their wands on the ground, stricken with an ox-goad
 by murderous Lycurgus, while Dionysus in terror
 dived into the salt surf, and Thetis took him to her bosom,
 frightened, with the strong shivers upon him at the man's blustering.
 But the gods who live at their ease were angered with Lycurgus,
 and the son of Kronos struck him to blindness, nor did he live long
 afterwards, since he was hated by all the immortals.
 Therefore neither would I be willing to fight with the blessed
 gods; but if you are one of those mortals who eat what the soil yields,
 come nearer, so that sooner you may reach your appointed destruction."
 (Lattimore 1951:156-57)

In diagrammatic form, this ring composition may be viewed as follows:

- A - Are you a mortal? (123-27)
- B - I will not fight with gods. (128-29)
- C - For Lycurgus fought with gods and did not live long. (130-31)

- X - Tale of Lycurgus. (132-37)

- C - Lycurgus fought with gods and did not live long. (138-40)
- B - I will not fight with gods. (141)
- A - But if you are mortal, prepare to die. (142-43)

Such patterns—rings arranged around a central core—are pervasive in Homer in both their simple (AXA) and complex (ABXBA, ABCXCBA, etc.) forms; they are clearly important structuring devices of orally composed narrative.⁵

But perhaps more similar to the situation in the three circuits of the

⁵ The simple form (AXA) may be observed at *Iliad* 2.100-109, 299-332, 487-760; 4.473-89; 5.49-58, 59-68, 69-75, 76-84, 533-40, 541-60; 6.12-19, 20-28, 150-211; 9.434-45, 445-84, 485-95, 512-23; 10.254-72; 11.101-21, 122-27, 765-90; 12.378-86; 13.170-82, 363-72; 14.110-27, 313-28, 442-48, 489-500; 15.14-33, 429-35, 445-51; 16.569-80, 593-98, 603-7; 17.293-303; 18.37-49, 478-608; 19.85-138; 20.213-41, 381-88; 23.740-49; 24.524-50; *Odyssey* 4.351-60; 5.118-29, 285-376; 14.321-33, 468-503; 19.1-52. The complex forms (ABXBA, ABCXCBA, etc.) may be observed at *Iliad* 2.23-34; 4.370-400; 5.800-813; 6.407-32; 7.123-60; 9.524-99; 11.655-764; 14.42-51; 15.502-13, 596-603; 17.19-32; 18.22-64, 393-409; 22.378-94; 23.69-92, 306-48, 457-72, 570-85, 624-50; 24.253-64, 599-620; *Odyssey* 7.186-225; 11.492-507; 14.115-47; 15.222-58; 19.386-470; 21.8-42.

suitors under consideration are those occurrences of a ring structure in which a list of names is presented and then the sequence of that list reversed in the subsequent narrative. So in Hesiod's *Theogony* (507-34) the offspring of Iapetus are listed—Atlas, Menoetius, Prometheus, and Epimetheus—followed by a longer narrative of how each ran afoul of Zeus in roughly reverse order.⁶ Even more similar in tone and in setting to the circuits of the suitors is Homer's description of the chariot race at Patroclus' funeral games (*Il.* 23.288-536). Just as in the Odyssean trial of the bow, Leodes, son of Oenops, the first to rise up to make an attempt, is the last to be slaughtered by Odysseus, so in the Iliadic chariot race, Eumelus, son of Admetus, the first to rise up to join the contest, is the last to arrive at the finish line.

Ring Structures in Comparative Oral Traditions

Such patterning is not restricted to Greek epic. Other oral traditions show a similar tendency to structure narratives by means of hysteron-proteron and ring composition. The so-called envelope pattern in Anglo-Saxon has received much attention,⁷ and ring structures of some sort—also called annular systems, framing devices, triptych structures, binary ordering, inclusio, and chiasmus—have been identified in the oral and residually oral traditions of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments), Old French epic, African epic, the traditional Scottish ballad, and South Slavic epic.⁸ Since South Slavic epic poetry, recorded even in the present generation, is demonstrably orally composed and performed, I shall draw from it some analogues to the ancient Greek examples mentioned above.

To the three Homeric examples of hysteron-proteron above may be

⁶ "Roughly reverse" because Prometheus' position is displaced, reserved for last, since his story is selected for longer treatment.

⁷ On ring structures in Anglo-Saxon, see Bartlett 1935, Heatt 1975, Tonsfeldt 1977, Rosier 1977, Niles 1979b, 1983:152-62, Parks 1988, Lord 1991.

⁸ Representative studies on ring structures, from an oralist's perspective, include: for Old Testament, Fishbane 1975; for New Testament, Lohr 1961; for Old French epic, Niles 1973; for African epic, Okpewho 1979:194-201; for the traditional Scottish ballad, Buchan 1972:87-144; for South Slavic epic, Foley 1983:194-99, Lord 1986a:53-64, 1986b:11-12.

compared a clear case of hysteron-proteron (ABCDDCBA) from the South Slavic Christian song *Marko Drinks Wine during Ramazan* (1-11):⁹

Car Suleman jasak učinio:
 da s' ne pije uz ramazan vino,
 da s' ne nose zelene dolame,
 da s' ne pašu sablje okovane,
 da s' ne igra kolom uz kadune.
 Marko igra kolom uz kadune;
 Marko paše sablju okovanu,
 Marko nosi zelenu dolamu,
 Marko pije uz ramazan vino;
 Još nagoni odže i adžije
 Da i oni s njime piju vino.

Tsar Sulejman issued an order;
 That none drink wine during Ramazan,
 That none wear green dolamas,
 That none strap on plated sabers,
 That none dance the kolo with women.
 Marko danced the kolo with women,
 Marko strapped on a plated saber,
 Marko wore a green dolama,
 Marko drank wine during Ramazan;
 Even more, he urged the hodjas and adjijas
 To drink wine with him.

Another example of a ring structure, this time—as in the aforementioned Homeric scene of Diomedes and Glaucus—a true ring composition with central core, may be observed in the South Slavic Christian song *Marko and the Daughter of the Arab King*. The song begins with a series of questions posed to Marko by his mother (1-5):

Pita majka Kraljevića Marka:
 “Ja moj sinko, Kraljeviću Marko,
 što ti gradiš mloge zadužbine?
 Il' si te ko bogu zgriješio,
 il' si ludo blago zadobio?”

⁹ Quotations from the South Slavic narratives collected by Vuk Karadžić are taken from Foley 1983.

Kraljević Marko's mother asked:
 "O my son, Kraljević Marko,
 Why are you building so many memorials?
 Have you sinned grievously against God,
 Or have you come into unexpected riches?"

There follows Marko's long account (80 verses) of how he killed six Arabs, was overpowered, imprisoned for seven years, and rescued by the daughter of the Arab king, whose kindness he repaid by beheading her. This account is then framed at the end of the song by Marko's direct response to his mother's opening questions (84-86):

"Tu sam, mati, bogu zgriješio,
 a veliko blago zadobio,
 te ja gradim mloge zadužbine."

"So, mother, I have sinned against God,
 And come into great riches,
 And thus I am building many memorials."¹⁰

Another example of ring composition, one quite similar in its length, setting, and tone to the three circuits of suitors under consideration, may be observed in the assembly scene that opens Avdo Medjedović's *Wedding Song of Smailagić Meho* (37-1089).¹¹ First the elders and nobles gathered at Kanidža, with Hasan Pasha Tiro at their head, are listed and described at great length. Then Hasan Pasha Tiro, concerned about the despondence of Smailagić Meho, sets the epic in motion by ordering Cifrić Hasanaga, Meho's uncle, to question the youth. Cifrić Hasanaga carries out Hasan Pasha Tiro's orders. In response to his uncle's questions, Meho delivers a long and passionate speech detailing the causes of his despondence: he is tired of being treated as a youth, as a mere servant to his uncle and father, and he wants to participate in the heroic ventures of the warriors. His uncle Cifrić Hasanaga responds at length, conceding that his nephew has come of age. Finally, Hasan Pasha Tiro jumps to his feet and orders that a decree be fashioned stating that the command pass to young Meho. All the elders and nobles gathered at Kanidža sign the decree and bid farewell as the assembly

¹⁰ On this ring's aesthetic function within the song, see further Foley 1983:198-99.

¹¹ Edited and translated in Lord and Bynum 1974.

breaks up.

The narrative of this assembly is based on a pattern that begins by concentrating on the elders and nobles, with Hasan Pasha Tiro at their head, and proceeds in a descending order of hierarchy to Cifrić Hasanaga, and finally to Meho, the youngest member in the assembly, who has as yet played no part. But Meho's speech, the centerpiece of the ring, provides the momentum for the entire epic, resulting as it does in the youth's elevation from a mere servant of his father and uncle to the central hero of the epic. After Meho's speech the ring pattern makes its way back up the hierarchical ladder through Cifrić Hasanaga to Hasan Pasha Tiro at the head of the elders and nobles, but this time each responds positively to the new hero.¹²

In diagrammatic form, this opening assembly scene of Avdo Medjedović's *Wedding Song of Smailagić Meho* (37-1089) may be viewed as follows:

A - Elders and nobles at Kanidža, with Hasan Pasha Tiro at their head	[Descending Hierarchy]
B - Hasan Pasha Tiro	
C - Cifrić Hasanaga	

X - Meho's speech (elevation of Meho from mere servant ["a girl"] to central hero of the epic)

C - Cifrić Hasanaga	
B - Hasan Pasha Tiro	[Ascending Hierarchy]
A - Elders and nobles at Kanidža	

The Mnemonic, Tectonic, Aesthetic, and Thematic Function of Ring Composition

Patterning of this kind, then, seems to be an inherent characteristic of oral narrative, visible in many oral and residually oral traditions. But it is surely too crude to regard such patterning as merely a mnemonic aid, a useful tool for a poet forced by the exigencies of oral performance to concentrate all his attention—and his audience's attention—on a single

¹² On the ring structure of this assembly scene, see Lord 1986a:53-64.

episode at a time. For ring structure is a tectonic as well as mnemonic principle. It is perhaps the most important structuring device of oral narrative, building bridges between the many components of the larger poem, or, to use a different metaphor, weaving the digressory material into the larger fabric of the narrative.

Moreover, what was perhaps in origin a mnemonic and tectonic device has evolved into an aesthetic principle as well, becoming a desirable and expected pattern of oral narrative. It concentrates the audience's attention on an individual episode, rounding off its borders by means of the rings, and thus providing for the audience a satisfying sense of recognition, enclosure, and completion. As a modern audience, steeped in a strictly literary tradition, we easily forget that, whereas a reading audience can see and anticipate divisions of narrative by noting paragraph structure on a printed page, and can likewise anticipate the winding down of a narrative by noting where the text ends, the audience of an oral performance relies on such devices as ring composition to perform these same functions.

I suggest further that this patterning is not only mnemonic, tectonic, and aesthetic; it is also a thematic device. The rings, often multiple rings, form a terrace leading down to a central core, focusing attention on that core, foregrounding it, and highlighting it. Often this core is the central thematic event not only of the single episode but also of a larger section of narrative, and even of an entire epic. It is often the thematic pivot around which a large stretch of narrative revolves.

So the central core of the complex ring structure of the *Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo* is the description of Apollo's birth, the central event of the hymn (Niles 1979a). So the central core of the ring structure of the Jacob Cycle in *Genesis* is the narrative of Joseph's birth, the architectonic and thematic pivot of the Jacob Cycle (Fishbane 1975:32). So the central core of the complex ring structure in the gospel of Matthew is the great discourse on the nature of the Kingdom, the pivot around which revolve the other sayings and deeds of Jesus (Lohr 1961:427-30). So the concentric rings of the *Chanson de Roland* terrace down to the central event of the epic, highlighting the lament for the dead Roland (Niles 1973:7). So, as described above, the core of the long assembly scene at the beginning of the *Wedding Song of Smailagić Meho* is Meho's pivotal speech, which turns the ring back up the ascending hierarchy, marking his shift from an insignificant youth to the central hero of the epic, and thus motivating the entire subsequent tale.

A Ring Composition in *Odyssey* 21-22

What, then, is the central core of the ring structure formed by the three circuits of the suitors in the *Odyssey*? I suggest that the central core lies between the second and third circuits. The first circuit—Odysseus’ begging—is a preview, an anticipatory doublet, of the second—the trial of the bow. Both circuits follow the same sequence up an ascending hierarchy of the suitors, and together they function thematically as a testing of the suitors, the begging circuit revealing their failure to treat strangers properly, the circuit of the bow revealing their unworthiness to court Penelope. The third circuit—the slaughter of the suitors—reverses the sequence, going back down a descending hierarchy of the suitors as each receives his just deserts. The core—the pivot around which the sequence revolves—is the 171-verse section between the second and third circuits, during which Odysseus himself strings the bow, shoots the arrow through the axes, bares himself of his rags, and takes up position at the threshold (21.270-22.7). This is the pivotal scene of the *Odyssey*, the moment of stasis as it were, the culmination of the themes of return and testing that precede and the inception of the theme of vengeance that follows.¹³ This is, of course, not a novel idea; Plato seems to have perceived the central position of this scene in his dialogue *Ion* (535b), where Socrates queries the rhapsode Ion about his performance of Homeric epic, in effect invoking the whole *Odyssey* by summarizing this very scene: how Odysseus leapt upon the threshold, identified himself to the suitors, and poured out the arrows in front of his feet.

In diagrammatic form, this ring of the second and third circuits of the suitors may be viewed as follows:

Trial of the Bow

A - Leodes (21.144-66)	
B - Other Suitors (21.167-87)	[Ascending
C - Eurymachus (21.245-55)	Hierarchy]
D - Antinous (21.256-69)	

X - Odysseus (21.270-22.7: Odysseus strings bow, shoots arrow through axes,

¹³ Another moment of stasis in the *Odyssey*—Eurykleia’s recognition of Odysseus as she prepares to wash his feet—is also framed by a complex ring (19.386-470).

bares himself of rags, and takes up position at threshold; elevation of Odysseus from beggar to central hero of epic)

Slaughter of the Suitors

D - Antinous (22.8-21)	
C - Eurymachus (22.44-88)	[Descending
B - Other Suitors (22.89-309)	Hierarchy]
A - Leodes (22.310-29)	

This ring structure illustrates with stimulating intensity and vivid concreteness the theme of vengeance worked out in the dénouement of the *Odyssey*. He who has the greatest resources but alone of the suitors refuses to give food to the beggar, and he who is most capable of stringing the bow but alone of the suitors does not attempt it, is deservedly the first to be slaughtered. The morally and physically innocuous suitor who holds the position at the other end of the circuit is the last to die. Truly the structural core of this ring is also its thematic core.

The Thematic Relationship between the Circuits of the Suitors

The language of the epic explicates the thematic relationship between the circuits, namely, that the behavior of the suitors in the first two circuits leads to their slaughter in the third. The first, the circuit of Odysseus' begging, is presented within the framework of a testing of the suitors. Athena, the divinity behind most of Odysseus' actions, spurs him on to beg for food from the suitors, in order that he might find out who is just and who is lawless (οἳ τινές εἰσιν ἐναίσιμοι οἳ τ' ἀθέμιστοι 17.363). More ominously, this testing is an avatar of a common theme in Greek myth, that of a theoxeny, in which a divinity in disguise visits mortals in order to make a test of their hospitality. This theme of theoxeny runs through the entire tale of Odysseus' return,¹⁴ but it surfaces most noticeably in this scene of Odysseus' begging; for here the suitors themselves raise the possibility that the beggar may be a god in disguise, come to make a test of them (17.483-

¹⁴ For other avatars of the theme of theoxeny in Greek myth, see Burnett 1970; for Odysseus' return as a theoxeny, see Kearns 1982, Reece 1993:181-87.

87; quoted from Allen 1917-19):

“Ἄντινο’, οὐ μὲν κάλ’ ἔβαλες δύστηνον ἀλήτην,
οὐλόμεν’, εἰ δὴ πού τις ἐπουράνιος θεός ἐστι.
καί τε θεοὶ ξείνοισιν ἐοικότες ἀλλοδαποῖσι,
παντοῖοι τελέθοντες, ἐπιστροφῶσι πόληας,
ἀνθρώπων ὕβριν τε καὶ εὐνομίην ἐφορῶντες.”

“Antinous, you did badly to hit the unhappy vagabond:
a curse on you, if he turns out to be some god from heaven.
For the gods do take on all sorts of transformations, appearing
as strangers from elsewhere, and thus they range at large through the
cities,
watching to see which men keep the laws, and which are violent.”

(Lattimore 1967:265)

The last of the suitors in this circuit, Antinous, most blatantly fails the test. He holds the highest position in the suitors’ hierarchy; he is the best (ὄριστος 17.416) of the Achaeans and should by all rights give more than the others (τῷ σε χρὴ δόμεναι καὶ λώϊον ἢ ἐπερ ἄλλοι σίτου 17.417-18). But his mind does not match his appearance (οὐκ ἄρα σοί γ’ ἐπὶ εἶδει καὶ φρένες ἦσαν 17.454); he tells the beggar to stand away from his table (17.447), and, in a symbolically powerful gesture, he takes a footstool, an implement associated in normal circumstances with proper hospitality and peaceful banqueting, and casts it (βάλε 17.462) at the beggar. This perversion of proper hospitality by Antinous, with its symbolic transformation of peace into war, of banquet into battle, links this circuit inextricably to the third, the suitors’ slaughter. For Odysseus immediately curses Antinous, calling upon the gods and furies to avenge him with his death (17.475-76); and Penelope’s subsequent curse even more explicitly anticipates the circuit of slaughter (17.494):

“αἶθ’ οὕτως αὐτόν σε βάλοι κλυτότοξος Ἀπόλλων.”

“Oh that bow-famed Apollo would strike [βάλοι] Antinous.”

Indeed Apollo does: just as Antinous had cast (βάλε 17.462) at Odysseus with the footstool, so does Odysseus cast (βάλε 22.15) at Antinous with an arrow that pierces his throat, even as he sits unsuspecting at the feast.

Antinous dies an appropriate death, grotesquely defiling the feast—a feast that he has already perverted—with his own blood (22.15-21).

The second circuit of the suitors, the trial of the bow, is even more inextricably linked to the third. As the narrator predicts, Antinous, who hopes to string the bow and shoot an arrow through the axes, is destined to be the first to taste an arrow from the hands of Odysseus (21.96-100). Leodes, the soothsayer, upon his failure to string the bow, predicts that it will deprive many men of their lives (21.153-56). And Odysseus, upon successfully stringing the bow, springs to the threshold and announces the end of the contest (22.5); now the arrows will find another mark that no man has ever hit (22.6-7). Odysseus' fatal announcement is the transition between the second and third circuits of the suitors. It is the architectonic and thematic pivot of this complex ring structure. It is the epic's central moment of stasis.

As already noted, the sequence of the third circuit, the slaughter of the suitors, is an exact reversal of the previous two. The moral implications resound. Leodes ("Tender"), son of Oenops ("Wine-Face"), who was the first to try the bow, is the most morally innocuous and physically impotent of the suitors, a harmless wine-bibber, one who has stationed himself in an advantageous position beside the wine krater, an ineffective participant in the trial of the bow, whose hands are weak and soft. His claim to amnesty is based on his role as a soothsayer, who did not participate in the crimes of the other suitors (21.144-51; 22.310-19). Hence, Leodes is deservedly the last of the suitors to die, and his death is mercifully swift (22.326-29). Eurymachus ("Broad-Fighter") and Antinous ("Counter-Minded"), who were the last of the suitors in line to try the bow, hold the position at the other end of the ascending hierarchy. They are the most noble and powerful of the suitors but also the most evil and dangerous, Antinous blatantly unjust and shameless, Eurymachus surreptitiously wicked. They are deservedly the first of the suitors to be slaughtered; and their deaths, appropriately the only two bow-slayings described, are presented in lurid detail. Thus, from a moral and thematic perspective as well as from a

structural one, the first has been last, and the last first.¹⁵

Saint Olaf College

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