

### §32. Polis and Parlor

Then everything fades, the light and music of the party, and Madame Lemaire says to her friends, “Come early next Tuesday, I have Taomagno and Reszke.” She needn’t worry. We shall come early.

– *Proust, The Salon of Madame Madeleine Lemaire*

Urban life has its own culture – in part, a culture of wealth and leisure; a culture of the parlor. The parlor, as like as not, will be that of a rich woman who hosts meetings devoted to the arts. The modern Tuesday Musical Club is one version; equally valid is a series of several meetings during one week: presentations addressing a particular interest.

Of the two poems, the *Odyssey* is the more formally perfect. Look how it is arranged so as to be effectively presented in six series of four meetings each:

1-4. Preparatory: Telemachus	13-16. Back Safe on Ithaka
5-8. An Interlude: Phaiakia	17-20. Making Plans in the Palace
9-12. Digression: Adventures	21-24. Showdown and Conclusion

Note the brilliance of this. The first series in each group of three introduces a situation, the next delays the action, and third brings something energetic. Borrowed from folklore if necessary; our poet is a reflective sort, and violence, beyond the bedtime story, is not her thing. She would rather evoke than excite.<sup>1</sup>

Individual afternoon sessions will last not more than an hour. This seems to be something of a performance universal. A roomful of students cannot listen longer than an hour, and the modern literary afternoon also respects that limit. For consider: what if someone has brought her daughter?<sup>2</sup>

Our poet is a master of delay, of spinning out, of disguises and evasions, to keep the story going as long as the form requires. Sometimes she runs thin, and when these devices fail her (at Phaiakia, or in the meeting of a no longer disguised Penelope and Odysseus), she falls below the 40 minute standard. Here are the line counts for the six series mentioned above, arranged as above:

1-4. 444, 434, 497, 847	13-16. 440, 533, 557, 481
5-8. 493, 331, 347, 586	17-20. 606, 428, 604, 394
9-12. 566, 574, 640, 453	21-24. 434, 501, 372, 548

As we identify interpolations, her practice will become clearer, and it will be seen that she is consistently respectful of the realities of performance.

<sup>1</sup>The four-meeting series is the formal innovation which we mentioned back on p39. It is tempting to credit its invention to the *Odyssey* poet herself, but more likely, it was already present in the tradition (see p62), and she simply composed for it.

<sup>2</sup>The limiting factor is the whispered “Ma, I gotta go.” Such considerations are of no concern to those whose idea of Homer begins and ends with Chantaine’s *Grammaire Homérique*. But they are violated at her peril by any literary hostess.

And as our poet took up her task, what did she start out with? First of all, expertise in the craft of singing, including the making of verses to be sung.

Second, the repertoire of the Homeridae as it existed at that time. But since the major additions to the Iliad were done in response to the Odyssey, or to currents of thought which find their clearest expression in the Odyssey, this will not have been the Iliad we know. *The Iliad she knew* did not yet have the later added chapters 10 and 23-24. It did not yet have the long interpolation in 2, with its Odysseus who brags himself “the father of Telemachus,” or its shorter parallel in 4. It did not yet have the peace propaganda so nicely worked out, as if on Penelope’s own tapestry loom, toward the end of 18. In short, it was lacking just those elements it would later learn from the Odyssey. Accordingly, its 24-book form was still simple, and consisted mostly of performance units of more or less 50 minutes, a form which Homer himself seems to have inherited from the early Trojan War tradition.

Third, she had an audience. A largely feminine audience, which, though eager for the culture of the day, found in the culture of an earlier day more stabbing and slashing, more blood jetting and armor clanging, than it needed. She found an audience primed for literary culture, but ready for something different in the way of literary culture. More nuanced, and more sophisticated, and if one dare suggest it, more feminine in its sensibility.

All this she gave them.

And with a distinctive witty touch that lets her hearers (and us, if we can get the frequency right) share her sometimes barbed amusement at the overdoings of Achilles and his crowd, at the prolixity of the everlasting Nestor – and at the limitations of Homer himself, who in reducing the previous saga of Troy to the compass of the days of Achilles, dumped such good things as the Trojan Horse. Which she now puts back in, as though to say, Look here, my estimable friend, at how much you lost, in doing what you did.

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Apart from the beefing up of Telemachus (and others, including Penelope), there are few interpolations or other disfigurements in the Odyssey. The worst, those affecting Telemachus, we consider in the next chapter. The others we will deal with when they occur, as we follow the story, or its highlights, in the order our poet gave them, the better to appreciate her skill in arranging them.

Her cause, the cause of what a more urban world called justice, the rule of law and not the cult of vengeance, we have met; it was her first announcement to her audience of a new world of thought, with Zeus himself as spokesman. We have only to follow it to the end, its conclusion in Od 24.

And this, with a few concessions to the limits of a short book, we will do.