

§44. The Suitors



“Now for a mark far other – a mark ne’er hit by a bowman!
This will I choose me, and see if renown shall be sent by Apollo.”
He spake, and at Antinoös directed the sharp-fanged arrow,
just as he paused at the moment of lifting a beautiful goblet . . .

– *Odyssey* 22:6-9

Did the suitors deserve to die? This has been the subject of much thought. Odysseus presents his own indictment in these terms (35-40):

“Dogs! ye imagined me never returning again to my homestead
back from the land of the Trojans – and so laid waste my possessions,
won by compulsion to lustful embraces the women, my servants,
yea, and with guile came wooing my wife while still I was living,
neither afraid of the gods who inhabit the infinite heaven
nor that the vengeance of man could smite you hereafter.”

Eurymachos responds by blaming it all on Antinoös; he offers restitution on behalf of the others. Odysseus indignantly refuses. What is going on?

Yamagata¹ has examined Odysseus’ charges. Consumption of property? No. Intimacy with slave women? Not quite enough. Their proposal to Penelope? The fault is partly hers. They do not fear the gods of the people, and offend the gods by their abuse of the guest obligation (*xeinoi*)? Also no . . .

The suitors had to die because that was given in the plot, and beyond the poet’s control. It *had* to end that way. At least she too found it uncomfortable; she lost no chance to emphasize the wrongness of the suitors’ behavior:

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And so we have her company in our discomfort. And we are approaching the point where the *Odyssey* will move beyond having Odysseus as its hero, and the poet will at last have her way with her story.

¹Yamagata **Morality** (1994) 28-39. Sh has in view the rewritten 108-suitors story; the indictment fits a little better in the original 12-suitors version.

Property

But notice what sort of issues these are. They consist of damage to property. In the old palace society, property was what a king had, gained by prowess, and protected the same way. In the new polis society, property is protected by law. If someone steals from you, the law (in principal) will catch and punish them. Not because of the injury to you, but because of the injury to the public good. So also with the rest of it; the maids are property, available only to their owner. Intimacy with them is a violation of his property right.

And does society itself exist? If so, in what form?

It exists in the form of the assembly. The comical “assembly” in Id 2 is an interpolation from the time when the new society was known, and was there to be opposed. All conferences in the Iliad are councils of war, the chief figures getting together to consider what it is good to do next. No such council ever takes up questions of morals, or of wrongdoing, whether personal or social. That is not their scope, and it is not their purpose.

So what does Telemachus first do, when he begins to assert his right of succession to his father’s property? He *calls an assembly*, and attempts to persuade it of the rightness or wrongness of the suitors’ behavior. He fails. The point is: *the judgement belongs to them*. As we approach the end of the poem, the assembly, and with it the public interest, are about to become functional. This is what will happen, in explicit terms, at the very end of Od 24.

The question “deserved to die” has simply no meaning in Iliad terms. Did Melanippos deserve to die, whether once or three times? That is unanswerable. He just got in the way of a process (killing) which was going on at that time.

So are people wrong to ask that question? Are they wrongly importing their own modern notions of justice? Yes, they are; here as with all such questions. But as it happens, their notions of “justice” are shared by the Odyssey poet, which is why we have her on our side.