

The Homeric Odyssey, by Denys Page. Oxford, 1955 (The Mary Flexner Lectures delivered at Bryn Mawr College Pennsylvania)

p. 3 The Odyssey, then, is composed of folk-tales, having little or nothing in common with each other except the fact that they are folk-tales and that they are here concentrated on the same person, Odysseus.

. . . The story of Odysseus and the Cyclops, illustrates a general rule of considerable importance in the Homeric Question. It shows very clearly the practice of combining various versions of the same folk-tale into one version and of combining various folk-tales into one folk-tale. It may be impossible - in this example it certainly is impossible - to disentangle the threads once they are woven, except theoretically. The practice in question naturally results in inconsistencies and other imperfections; but as a general rule we may (and sometimes must) interpret such phenomena in terms of a multiplicity not of authors but of stories.

p. 16 The story of Odysseus and Polyphemus exemplifies, at least as well as any other part of the poem, the general principle that minor inconsistencies and imperfections in the narrative may be readily explained in terms not of different authors but of different stories. Elements from several folk-tales are combined but not quite perfectly blended; and within one folk-tale the version adopted is not always fully to be understood except in the light of other versions not adopted. There are numerous other examples, ~~some~~ some of them more prominent. In the course of the Odyssey we often come suddenly upon something which seems to imply a different story, occasionally even a different conception of the character of some person, or of the purpose of some incident. Many of the well-known inconsistencies in the narrative of the poem are, in my opinion, more easily explained in terms of one author and several stories than in terms of several authors and one story.

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This may be thought obvious enough; but many of the most influential writers about the Odyssey hold a different opinion. If one passage contradicts another, or is inconsistent with it, we are told to infer that the one version was composed by one poet, the other by another, the two being combined into their present form by a third poet or editor, at whose unlucky head hard words are flung.²⁹

Footnote 29 What may happen to the Ninth Book of the Odyssey under this treatment may be seen in an article by Mulder in Hermes 38 (1903) 414ff: it is no longer necessary to refute this in detail, thanks to F. Focke, Die Odyssee (1943) 164-76.

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It is becoming fashionable in some quarters to assert that the Unitarian theory of the Homeric Epic has gained ground during the present generation. Of the Odyssey at least that assertion is false, if Unitarian means what it should - one who, having examined both sides of the question carefully and without prejudice, decides in favour of at least a substantial measure of unity of authorship. The prevalent theory today is the contrary of this: the investigations of Bethe in 1922, of Schwartz in 1924, of Von der Muhl in 1940, of Focke in 1943, and of Merkelbach in 1951, however different in the detail of their conclusions, all agree about certain fundamental facts which cannot be reconciled with the theory that the Odyssey was planned and composed, as a whole, more or less in its present form, by one poet. Their structures are built on a common foundation laid by Adelph Kirchhoff in 1879; the best statement of the case is still to be found in his edition of the Odyssey (Berlin 1879, esp. pp. 238-74, Excurs I, on the Telemachy); this is the bedrock on which posterity has built. . . .