SOME SOCIAL CONVENTIONS AND DEVIATIONS IN HOMERIC SOCIETY

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The interaction between Homeric studies and social sciences is hardly new or fruitless. G. Glotz's examination, for example, of Homeric law and society at the beginning of this century was influenced by E. Durkheim's comparative study of 'simple' and 'complex' societies. More recently, J.M. Redfield applied Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis with its distinction between 'nature' and 'culture' to the society of the Iliad. What seemed to cement the alliance between Homeric studies and the sciences of sociology and anthropology in these and other books was the belief in the historicity of the world described by the poet. When Schliemann's approach to Homer proved too enthusiastic to be true and Bronze Age archaeology became more Homer's foe than friend, a sociological analysis of the poems enabled scholars to argue for the historical existence of the Homeric world without forcing them to admit the authenticity of events or characters described by the poet. Thus it was possible to regard Patroklos, the person, as a literary invention without questioning the historicity of the social roles which he played in the epos such as of a friend, a warrior, or an exile.

The reading of the poems as a sociological document has yielded impressive results and much insight has been gained into the culture depicted by the poet. The behaviour of the Homeric heroes became more intelligible when it was understood that it was dictated by following and reacting to certain socially binding rules. But the continuing search for the principles which guided the life of the Homeric characters is not without some risks. Preconception, generalizations, and other methodological maladies may confine social challenges and responses to inflexible formulaic patterns of behaviour which leave individuals little freedom of action. When social norm reigns supreme the Homeric heroes cannot but be portrayed as its obedient followers. I propose in this paper to examine three cases in which social conventions seemed to be particularly conspicuous in regulating social interaction and to measure the power of these conventions over the members of the Homeric community.

a. SUPPLICATION

The institution of supplication was regulated by rules of behaviour which defined the conduct and the obligations of the persons involved in this kind of interaction. The circumstances of supplication were special indeed. The supplicated had complete power over the suppliant since he could influence the suppliant's chance of survival by granting him his life, a shelter, or any other kind of help. Now Homer depicted a society in which encounters were often characterized by challenges and competitiveness. But in a meeting between the suppliant and the supplicated, the act of supplication portrayed the former as helpless and hence a
harmless person. The supplicant's weapons were his vulnerability and helplessness which he used to obtain his goal. His claim was strengthened by social conventions. The suppliants were protected from harm by a religious sanction; Zeus watched over them and the norms required one to be responsive to the suppliants (e.g. ll. 24.157–8; Od. 5.445–50; 13.213–4). Still, not every supplication in the epics ended successfully and recently J. Gould sought to demonstrate that any rejection of a supplication was due solely to an incomplete performance of ritual. A faultless ritual consisted of physical contact between the suppliant and the supplicated and a verbal supplication. It is claimed that if there were no physical contact, or if the physical contact were interrupted, the supplication could be rejected.5

This interpretation seems to put undue stress on the rules of the game rather than on the players' volition. Accordingly, when Menelaos pushed the suppliant Adrastos away, he did not wish to interrupt the physical contact between them and thus make the ritual void.6 Rather, the thrusting away of Adrastos eliminated the physical difficulty of killing a man who embraces one's knees, which enabled Agamemnon to kill the suppliant. Achilles, under similar circumstances, was unable to kill Lykaon because the Trojan was running towards him to clasp his knees (ll. 21.65ff). Lykaon finally let go of Achilles' knees and was put to death by the hero. Gould thinks that it was ritualistically significant.7 But Lykaon should have known that eliminating the physical contact would cost him his life. The fact is that there was a limit to the time during which a person could hold on to the knees of an unwilling object of supplication.

Similarly, there were times during which verbal supplication alone, devoid of physical touch, could get results. The refugee Theoklymenos did not establish any physical contact with Telemachos when he approached him as suppliant and yet his supplication was successful (Od. 15.255ff). It was not the incomplete ritual but the supplicated's disposition or the circumstances which surrounded the supplication that influenced the result of the act. Odysseus was afraid to clasp Nausikaa's knees lest it anger her (Od. 6.147). Nausikaa advised Odysseus to come to Arete as a suppliant. She would help him, he was told, if she liked him (Od. 6.313–5). The success of the supplication, then, was ultimately dependent upon the will of the supplicated. Theoklymenos happened to come to Telemachos when the latter's spirits were down. He had failed to gather substantial information about his father and he knew that he was returning to a home infested with suitors. The appearance of a man with an impressive pedigree asking for his help must have raised his self-esteem and he responded favourably to the seer's request. Here, as in other cases of supplication in the epic, character and circumstances contributed more than anything else to the success of the act.

b. Hospitality

Hospitality, like the institution of supplication, was a potential source of immediate relief. Homeric society had clear expectations of how a guest and a
host were to behave. The host was supposed to feed his guest, to care for his bath and lodging, and, more important, to give him gifts (cf. Od. 1.123ff; 3.69–70; 9.266–71, etc.). Like the supplicant, the guest was protected by Zeus (Il. 13.624–5; Od. 6.207–8; esp. 14.402–6) and the belief that a stranger might be a god in disguise added strength to the precept not to harm the guest (Od. 7.199–202; 16.181–5; 17.483–8). The guest, on the other hand, was expected to return gifts and hospitality when he was visited by the host. He was not to take part in any activity characterized by competition with or challenging of his host and, generally, he had to abide by the rules of etiquette which defined his conduct as a visitor (Od. 15.54–5; 8.208–11; 15.69–74).

This general picture of a well regulated and somewhat benevolent social institution can be deceiving. Homer usually portrays people who follow ardently or deviate radically from the norms of their society. We remember two extremes of the Homeric host: Nestor, Menelaos, and Alkinoos (after a while), on the one hand, and Polyphemos en Herakles, on the other. Guests were not normally eaten by their hosts, but it is equally hard to imagine that the typical xenos was entertained as royally as Telemachos and Odysseus were by their respective hosts. The basic rule of hospitality seemed to be that the guest and the host should not impose themselves on each other. Indeed, Telemachos instructed Eumaios to send his guest (Odysseus) away regardless of the latter's own wishes (Od. 17.10–15).

Furthermore, next to descriptions of generous and magnificent hospitality, the epics contain several indications of a degree of selectiveness in accepting a guest into one's home. Thus Eumaios declared that a xenos is sought after only when he is an expert of some sort. Indeed, he asserts that a stranger would lie just to gain hospitality (Od. 14.124–8). The implication of this common wisdom is illuminating. Since every stranger started his life in a new community as a guest or a vagabond, the xenos, especially the statusless one, had to prove his usefulness to the host in order to enjoy his hospitality. What use could a stranger-guest be to his host? The relationship of host-guest was basically a reciprocal one. Gifts were received and sometimes even demanded in the justified expectation that their giver would have his due when he in turn visited his guest. But a guest who lost, or was cut off permanently from, his economic base of support could not reciprocate with a gift in the foreseeable future. 'Eumaios' rule of hospitality', then, emphasizes properly the practical aspect of hospitality, which must have acted as a check on liberal treatment of Homeric xenoi.

Guests were discriminated against not only according to their, or their host's, status in the community. The epic suggests that even a rich host could be selective in his hospitality. When Telemachos and Peisistratos arrived at Menelaos' palace, Eteoneus asked Menelaos whether the guest should be received or sent away to some other host (Od. 4.20–36). Menelaos' reproach of his therapōn hardly conceals the fact that the host, when he so wished, could deny his guest his supposedly due welcome. Like the supplicated and the supplicant, the host and his guest acted on a level in which one member had a clear advantage over the
other. It was up to the host to decide whether to deny a visitor his hospitality or to prove himself as an altruistic or practical host.\textsuperscript{14}

c. MURDER AND EXILE\textsuperscript{15}

A common cause of exile in the Homeric society was murder committed by the fugitive. Out of the thirteen individuals in the epics who may be considered as exiles, eight had killed someone and had to flee their country to escape revenge.\textsuperscript{16} Punishment of the murderer was the kin's responsibility and it was usually sought by violent means. Taking revenge was a source of emotional compensation for the loss of the relative, while a lack of response to the murder was considered shameful and disgracing.\textsuperscript{17} Thus even an unintentional killing by Patroklos was followed by revenge, whose power could have driven out even rulers (e.g., Epeigeus) from their eminent position.

But Homeric society provided another way of resolving the conflict between the killer and his victim's relatives. The *poiné* was a compensation for a slaying which apparently allowed the killer to stay at home.\textsuperscript{18} The nature of the blood-price in the Homeric world is still under debate. Ambiguous text and sparse references form the basis for controversy over the material value of the *poiné*, its binding power, and the regularity of its use. The key passage is the trial scene on Achilles' shield in which the issue may be whether a payment has been made for a killing or, on the other hand, whether a payment should be made at all (Ili. 18.497–508).\textsuperscript{19} The second, recently more prevalent, interpretation of the scene requires that we assume the existence of an effective mechanism of compromise simultaneously with the tradition of bloody revenge.\textsuperscript{20}

Why did anyone have to go into exile at all if they could buy peace at home? A few answers suggest themselves. Generally, it seems that the option of *poiné* as well as that of taking revenge was ultimately dependent on the will of the family. It should not be imagined that homicide automatically triggered a lasting search for revenge. Aias, son of Oileus, for instance, did not seek for Medon's blood during the Trojan war even though Medon had killed his uncle. On the other hand, the number of exiles who preferred to flee after the crime may indicate that for many relatives revenge took precedence over Wergeld. The need for emotional compensation was sometimes stronger than greed or the wish to correct the economic loss caused by the murder. Conversely, a killer might have chosen to run away knowing that his means would not provide adequate compensation.\textsuperscript{21}

As far as can be told from the poems, no murderer-exile ever returned to his home. 'La vengeance du sang,' writes G. Glotz, 'à donné le plus souvent pour résultat le banissement volontaire et perpétuel du coupable.'\textsuperscript{22} But there is an exception to this rule in the epics. Patroklos was taken by his father from his home after he had killed the son of Amphidamas unintentionally in the course of a dice game. Achilleus, while lamenting the death of a friend, tells how he promised Patroklos' father to bring his son back from Troy to Opopis with his
share of the spoil (Il. 18.324–7). How can we explain Achilles’ promise—an apparent contradiction of other biographies of Homeric exile?

One possible solution can be found by treating the contradiction as a result of literary considerations. Homer might have chosen the phenomenon of exile as a background against which to portray Achilles’ character. A lack of concern for ‘legal niceties’ was well suited to Achilles’ conduct. The conquering hero, who could fight rivers and kill men with his battle cry alone, would bring his friend home regardless of social conventions. It may also be supposed that the poet cared little for biographical details. In order to portray Achilles’ sorrow, rage, and despair, memories were introduced which purported to illustrate an ironic and cruel fate. Achilles was made to recall a promise which could no longer be fulfilled. In fact, the poet forgot that Patroklos as an exile was barred from returning home.

But blaming the poet for factual inconsistencies seems to be too easy a solution. And did the poet contradict himself? In fact, we must choose between two possible meanings for the poet’s silence. Homer does not mention exiles who returned home. This could equally mean that exile in the Homeric world was for life or that exiles who returned home were outside of the poet’s interest. Moreover, some fugitives might have lacked the motivation to go back to their birthplace, vide the brilliant careers in exile of Phoinix or Bellerophontes.

But even if exile in the Homeric world was for life, it does not follow that every one of the Homeric fugitives was doomed to abide by this rule. W. Leaf, wishing to reconcile Achilles’ promise with other cases of Homeric ‘aeiphygia’, thought that Patroklos’ unintentional crime could be atoned for by temporary exile and poine. But since nowhere in the poems a distinction is made between intentional and unintentional killing in relation to exile, we can safely assume that the nature of the crime has little effect on the duration of the exile. What perhaps had more bearing on the term of exile was the killer’s might and position vis-à-vis that of his victim’s family. A hero like Patroklos would find little resistance to his return, regardless of whether he came back with Achilles. The man who almost captured Troy, who killed nine of the enemy with each charge he made, who looked like a destructive daimōn on the battlefield, could surely overcome any resistance to his return to Opeis.

Coming home from exile, then, was perhaps not universally forbidden. Achilles’ promise to Menoitiōs shows that like supplication, hospitality, and taking revenge, returning home was an option whose realization was dependent on the individual’s will rather than on inflexible social rules.

The Homeric conventions were that kin would avenge the death of one of their members, that every suppliant and guest would meet with favour, and that exile was for life. Luckily, the poet preserves a few exceptions to these rules whose significance was emphasized here. It is the exception that can rescue the ancient society from being viewed through generalizations alone. The attempt to use the
methods and theories of the social sciences in analyzing Homeric society can be helpful; not so the professionals' tendencies to view society through stiff rituals, unbreakable norms, and strict patterns of social interaction. As much as the Homeric community valued conventions and ceremonies (whose importance should not be denied), it also allowed its members to choose among alternative responses whenever they met a certain challenge. Some responses were more common than others, hence their designations as conventions. I have tried to show here that the power of these conventions was not absolute and that Homeric society offered ways to bypass the rules it imposed on its members. Both rules of behaviour and the exceptions to them are a testimony to the vitality and complexity of the Homeric reality. They show that in a culture which is generally viewed as stifling of individuals, the individual enjoyed a considerable freedom of action.

NOTES


2. Perhaps it should be stated that I am a follower of the school which argues for historicity of the Homeric world and whose major proponent is M.I. Finley, The World of Odysseus, 2nd rev. ed. Penguin Books 1979 (hereafter cited as Finley).


4. Compare Finley 118–121; Adkins, op. cit. 10–13. For aidôs and self-humiliation in the supplication: Gould, op. cit. 87–9, 94–5, 98; Redfield (n. 1 above) p. 118.

5. Gould, JHS 1973, esp. 77–82; see 81: supplication is 'a game of life and death.' For a list of rejected supplications: id. 80 n. 39.


7. JHS 1973, 81.


10. Od. 15.69–74; 16.84. See H.L. Levy, 'The Odyssean Suitors and the Host-Guest Relationship', TAPhA 94 (1963) esp. 150.

11. Od. 17.381–5. For the controversial meaning of demiourgos see K. Murakawa, 'Demiourgos', Historia 6 (1957) 385–415, who produces, nevertheless, little evidence for a Mykenaian origin of this expert. See also Finley 55f.

12. Rose, TAPhA 1969, 388–9; J. Seibert, Die politischen Fliichtlinge und Verbannten in der griechischen Geschichte (Impulse der Forschung 30) Darmstadt 1979, 278f. A case in point is the treatment of Theoklymenos in Ithaka. The seer is passed from person to person until he is

A literary interpretation of this passage can be found in A. Thornton, *People and Threnodes in Homer's Odyssey*, London 1970, 40–41. There is nothing to support the assumption of I.W. Hohendahl-Zoetelief, *Manners in the Homeric epic* (Mnemosyne Suppl. 1980) 45 that admitting the strangers would have disturbed the festivities celebrated in Menelaos' house. Compare Od. 3.5–13; 34ff.


An exile is defined here as a person who had to leave his native land in order to improve his conditions or simply to survive. Homer's language provides little help in formulating a definition: see E. Balogh, *Political Refugees in Ancient Greece from the Period of the Tyrants to Alexander the Great*, Johannesburg 1943, 1, 87 n. 1.

The following can be described as Homeric exiles: Phyleus son of Phyleus (II. 2.627–9); Tlepolemos son of Herakles (II. 2.661–670); Bellerophon son of Glaucos (II. 6.155–202); Phoenix son of Amyntor (II. 9.438–496); Medon son of Oileus (II. 13.694–7; 15.333–6; cf. 2.728); Lykophron son of Mastor (II. 15.430–9); Epeigeus son of Agakles (II. 16.569–581); Patroklos son of Menoitios (II. 23.85–90); a Kretan (Odysseus in disguise) (Od. 13.256–280); an Aitolian (Od. 14.379–85); Melampus (Od. 15.225–41; cf. 11.285–97); Polyphemides son of Mantios (Od. 15.252–5); Theoklymenos (Od. 15.223–5; 255–85; 508–546; 17.52–165; 20.350–371). Tlepolemos, Medon, Lykophron, Epeigeus, the 'Kretan', the Aitolian, and Theoklymenos had killed someone.


The Homeric *paine* is discussed by H.J. Treston, *Poiné: A Study in Ancient Greek Blood-Vengeance*, London 1923, Book I. *paxim*, who convincingly rejects the view that slavery was a punishment for homicide. See also the following note.

This is not the occasion to enter the debate on the nature of the case and the procedure of the trial scene. For recent discussions and bibliography, see Köstler (n. 17 above) 65–77; H. Hommel, 'Die Gerichtszene auf dem Schild des Achilleus', in *Politiea und Rz Publica*, ed. P. Steinmetz, Wiesbaden 1969, 11–38; Ø. Anderson, 'Some Thoughts on the Shield of Achilles', *Symbolae Orosseos* 5 (1976) esp. 11–18.


Achilleus' promise is given in Book 18 of the *Iliad*. The facts of Patroklos' exile are told only in Book 23. If there is a significance to the order of the books (cf. C.H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, New York 1965, 283), the poet might be excused for the contradiction. He could have decided to make Patroklos an exile only after Book 18.

For their biographies, see n. 16 above. Compare Treston, *Poiné*, 25.


If 16.698ff. Cf. 16.264ff; 377ff; 17.269ff; 475–8.

Note, for example, tracks of the functionalist school in the analysis of supplication by Gould. *JHS* 1973, esp. 101. Bolchazy, *The Ancient World* 1978, 63 explains different types of hospitality as a result of different cultural influences on the poet (see also Gauthier, *Ancient Society* 1973, 3–7). The possibility that the same society is capable of expressing different attitudes towards the stranger is excluded.
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