

## THE WITCH'S BED BUT NOT HER BREAKFAST: AN ODYSSEAN PARADOX

In his Carl Newell Jackson lectures Sir Denys Page has called attention to a peculiar sequence of incidents in the Circe-episode of the *Odyssey*:

In the transactions between Odysseus and Circe there are one or two curious points to be noticed. Odysseus threatens Circe with his sword; she invites him to her bed; he asks, "How can you ask me to love you when you have changed my friends into pigs? If I am to do as you say, you must first promise that you will not turn me into something degraded and nonhuman when I am undressed." Next morning he will not eat his breakfast. Circe reproaches him; she has promised not to harm him, and there he sits sulking over untouched porridge. His answer is, in the circumstances, an odd one: how could any right-minded man eat or drink while his friends are still grunting in the sty? It is fair comment to retort, "Were they not grunting in the sty when you went to bed with Circe last night? Is this the moral code of your right-minded man, that while his friends are in the sty he may share the witch's bed but not her breakfast?"<sup>1)</sup>

Sir Denys would resolve the paradox by comparison with a similar story told in the seventh chapter of the *Mahavamsa*, a verse-chronicle of Buddhist Ceylon dating from the sixth-century A.D. Here the freeing of the companions precedes the *amour* with the witch. Sir Denys argues that both derive from an old Indo-European original and that the *Mahavamsa* presents the incidents in the original sequence<sup>2)</sup>. The result is that the sequence of the *Odyssey* is regarded as illogical, and no reason, except perhaps the caprice of the poet, could be offered for the displacement. The present study will argue that, regarded from the point-of-view of the plot-pattern and preconceptions of the folktale, the sequence of incidents in the *Odyssey* can not only

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1) Sir Denys Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), p. 56.

2) *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

be justified, but claimed as original vis-à-vis the version of the *Mahavamsa*.

The plot of the Circe-episode falls into a well-attested folktale pattern. The classic analysis of the functional units of folktale plots by Vladimir Propp provides a parallel for each incident<sup>3</sup>). For our purposes it will suffice to use the simpler scheme based on Propp's categories which P.V. Vehvilainen recently applied to the study of the Swedish folktale<sup>4</sup>). Vehvilainen found that the majority of the tales he studied consisted of the following functional narrative elements, which collectively he terms a 'move':

- A. The initial situation with lack (A<sub>1</sub>), misfortune (A<sub>2</sub>) or act of villainy (A<sub>3</sub>).
- B. The beginning of the quest.
- C. The encounter with donors and receipt of magical agents.
- D. The difficult tasks or tests.
- E. The punishment of the villain (in case of type A<sub>3</sub>).
- F. The elimination of the initial misfortune and attainment of the final reward.

Vehvilainen adds that complex tales create their additional incidents out of the same structural elements that occur in the single-move tale. The Circe-episode fits type A<sub>1</sub> (thus unit E is eliminated). Odysseus and his party have landed on the island Aeaëa. Seeing smoke in the distance, he sends half his men under Eurylochus to explore. The initial situation, disclosed by the speech of Eurylochus on his return (*Od.* 10.251 ff.), involves the lack of half of Odysseus' crew, who have entered Circe's house and have not been seen since. To the functional element of the lack of the men is added a non-functional retarding element: Eurylochus' refusal to return to Circe's with Odysseus. Odysseus, then, must begin his quest alone, but as he approaches Circe's house, Hermes meets him in the form of a young man (*Od.* 10.278). Hermes is Odysseus' benefactor in two ways: not only does he give him the magical drug *moly*, but he also gives Odysseus advice on

<sup>3</sup>) Cf. Vladimir Propp, *The Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. Laurence Scott, *International Journal of American Linguistics* 24, 4 (1958), 24-59. The following are the correspondences of Vehvilainen's categories (V.) to Propp's (P.): V. A = P. I, VIII, VIIIa, IX; V. B = P. X-XI; V. C = P. XII-XIV; V. D = P. XVI; V. E = P. XXX; V. F = P. XIX.

<sup>4</sup>) Paul Veikko Vehvilainen, *The Swedish Folktale: a Structural Analysis*, diss. (University of Washington, Seattle, 1964), pp. 73 ff.

his behavior *after* he has withstood the effects of Circe's potion: Circe will invite him to her bed; he is to agree only after he has made her swear not to harm him once he is naked and defenseless, and he is to do so *in order to secure the release of his companions and his passage home* (*Od.* 10.298). Hermes' speech, then, shows how the following scenes are to be interpreted: the first test that Odysseus must undergo is the test of the power of the drug *moly* to neutralize Circe's spell; then comes the second test, the test of Hermes' instructions and Odysseus' ability to carry them out when Circe invites him to her bed. The reward, the release of the companions, can only be obtained when Odysseus has passed this second test.

In the world of folktale to pass the night with a sorceress is not regarded as a pleasure but as a danger. Page adduces several tales of the type in which a beautiful sorceress takes a young man as lover and then turns him into an animal when she has grown tired of him<sup>5</sup>). Thus, in the logic of folktale it is not contradictory for Odysseus to go to bed with Circe and then object to eating breakfast before his men are released. The version of the *Mahavamsa*, in conceiving the *amour* not as part of the test but as part of the reward, is closer to the modern view, but for that very reason should be regarded as a secondary, rationalizing variant.

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5) Page (above, note 1), pp. 59 ff.