

HERMES THE HELPER FIGURE: *ODYSSEY* 10.275-308

I am by no means the first scholar to detect in the god who aids the hero within this delightful episode traces of that primeval folk-tale figure the ‘helper’. The similarities between the two were obviously present, for instance, to Rhys Carpenter, who in his enchanting though often eccentric book *Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics*¹ makes the facts (almost) clear: “Odysseus picks up sword and bow and goes to the rescue. Close by the clearing in the forest a young man meets him – not a little, bearded, old man or a dwarf, as fairy lore would have told it, but the god Hermes, the dead man’s guide in mortal shape”. And Hermes’ uncharacteristic independence of action here has alerted some scholars² to the likelihood that something unusual is going on.

Others have detected the folk-tale helper here, then³. But thanks to recent research on related topics, I am in the fortunate position of being able to illustrate in far greater detail than has hitherto been possible the features that confirm Carpenter’s intuition.

Let us first clarify our minds as to the precise meaning that the term ‘helper figure’ bears in the specific and particular context of a folk-tale hero’s adventure. I attach to it the rather specialised signification deriving from Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*⁴, whereby, at an early stage of a quest designed to liquidate some initial lack – in Odysseus’ case the loss of his ἐτάριοι – the hero meets a figure who helps him. This help may take the

¹ Berkeley–Los Angeles 1946, p. 19f. The folk-tale helper figure, as we shall see, is very often, but not invariably, presented as an old man. Cf. R. Schenda’s article s.v. ‘Alte Leute’ in *Enzyklopädie der Märchens* (1.378): “nach anderen didaktischen Vorbildern treten alte Leute häufig als Helfende und Raterteilende auf”. K. Horn in the *Enzyklopädie*’s entry s.v. ‘Helfer’ 2.2.2, begins the section ‘Alte Leute’ by saying “Urbild des jenseitigen Märchenhelfers ist der Ratgeber, Schenker und Wegweiser auf dem Abenteuer – und Suchweg des mythischen Helden” (6.777) and exemplifies the statement by referring to our episode.

² So H. Hayman in his commentary on *Od.* 10.275-7 observes the singularity that “here alone [apart from the special case of the Second Nekyia at the start of *Od.* 24] ... does Hermes act independently of the bidding of Zeus, and as it were self-moved”.

³ Heubeck’s commentary on *Od.* 10.133-374 (Oxford 1989, p. 51) gives a rather confused account of the facts. On the one hand he notes that “the benign supernatural helper is replaced by the youthful god Hermes”, but later he says that the Circe “episode owes little to traditional folk-tale”, and that in particular “the encounter with Hermes [is] purely epic”. This is misleading. As I hope to show, the encounter in fact owes a great deal to folk-tale, though the poet disguises this reality, especially by undercutting the point of *moly*, originally a ‘magical agent’ (see below n. 11). On the ‘purely epic’ nature of the encounter see below, p. 29.

⁴ For details as to first publication and translation into English see “CQ” 38, 1988, p. 278 n. 8.

form of providing information as to the route that must be followed, or supplying other advice; or handing over some magic tool or object. Propp's own summary of this particular episode actually suits the Odyssean passage better than others it has been used to illuminate: "the hero is tested, interrogated... etc., which prepares the way for his receiving... a magical agent"⁵. This generalisation neatly encapsulates two key features of Odysseus' encounter with Hermes: *interrogation* and the *magical agent*. It is time to consider each in turn.

(1) *Interrogation*. Hermes' very first words to Odysseus (10.281) are πῆ δὴ αὖτ', ὦ δούστηνε,⁶ ... ἔρχεαι; Carl Jung, writing independently of Propp⁷, and being rather more specific, once observed that "often the old man in fairy tales asks questions like who? why? whence? and whither? for the purpose of inducing self-reflection and mobilising the moral forces". The generalisation can be extended beyond the old man who is the most common embodiment of the helper figure in this context. For instance, when Aeneas, in the first book of Vergil's epic, encounters his mother Venus, a helper figure disguised (v. 315f.) as a huntress⁸, just as Hermes in our passage is disguised as a young man (v. 278 νεηνίη ἀνδρὶ ἐοικώς), she poses him the following questions (vv. 369ff.): *sed vos qui tandem? quibus aut venistis ab oris? / quove tenetis iter?* In *Georgic* 4.445f. Proteus, who, as Old Man of the Sea, more closely matches the terms of Jung's generalisation, asks the questing hero Aristaeus *quis te, iuvenum confidentissime, nostras / iussit adire domos? quidve hinc petis?* The model for this scene is, of course, Menelaus' ambush of Proteus in *Od.* 4, and the corresponding questions in this source are (v. 462f.) τίς νύ τοι, Ἀτρεΐος υἱέ, θεῶν συμφράσσατο βουλάς, / ὅφρα μ' ἔλοις ἀέκοντα λοχησάμενος; τέο σε χρή; I have accumulated other such questions elsewhere⁹.

⁵ *Morphology* p. 30f.

⁶ Few commentators have bothered themselves with the tone of Hermes' ὦ δούστηνε at v. 281. The main exception, Hayman (see n. 2 above), deems it "one of compassionate but somewhat contemptuous expostulation", contrasting with the greater sympathy expressed by Hermes as his speech develops. Perhaps this tone remotely reflects the initial hostility towards the hero which 'ambivalent helpers' frequently give voice to, especially when the hero has ambushed or waylaid them (cf. n. 15). Compare on the one hand Proteus *iuvenum confidentissime* at *Georg.* 4.445 and on the other ὦ τάλας ἐφάμερε (cf. "Rh. Mus." 133, 1990, 406) in Pind. fr. 157 Sn., from Silenus' address to Midas, that is from an aggrieved helper figure towards his captor (cf. my article on this story in "Mnemos." 57, 2004, 682ff.).

⁷ In his essay *On the phenomenology of the spirit in Fairytales*. For full references as to original publication and translation see "Prometheus" 29, 2003, p. 63 n. 34.

⁸ For a detailed treatment of this episode and its susceptibility to Proppian analysis see my remarks in "Rh. Mus.", forthcoming.

⁹ See, for instance, my article cited in n. 6 above.

(2) *Magical agent.* In Propp's list of magical agents¹⁰, the third category is "objects possessing a magical property, such as cudgels, swords... etc." and this is the version which most closely fits the moly plant which Hermes bestows on Odysseus at vv. 302ff. Since it is notorious¹¹ that a vagueness totally out of keeping with the values of folk-tale characterises the actual function of this plant, we may observe how one of the functions itemised by Propp is that "the agent is eaten or drunk"¹².

So far we have seen how two aspects of Odysseus' encounter with Hermes encourage the deduction that the god is a vestige, as it were, of the helper figure in folk-tale. There remains a third feature of the episode, one which has no equivalent in Propp's *Morphology*, but which nevertheless clinches the case:

(3) *The encounter in the wood.* That Odysseus meets up with Hermes here is more than once made clear. The hero himself says he was making his way *ἱερὰς ἀνὰ βήσσας* (275) when he saw the god. Hermes then asks where Odysseus is going *δι' ἄκριας* (281); and at the end of the episode Hermes returns to Olympus *νῆσον ἀν' ὑλήεσσας* (308). Such a location is very typical of the hero's encounter with his helper, which regularly occurs to a background of wild or deserted terrain¹³. A forest is the place where Aeneas falls in with his mother at *Aen.* 1.305ff. mentioned above, and, lest this be explained merely in terms of her disguise as huntress, I have elsewhere¹⁴ discussed a number of passages where a hero comes across his helper in a wood¹⁵. A final instance, of a rather refined nature, may be cited:

¹⁰ *Morphology* p. 43f.

¹¹ See, for instance, Carpenter (as cited above, n. 1) p. 20 "Odysseus seems totally to forget this charm when he meets the witch, and Homer (who displays the classic Greek's characteristic failure to comprehend *faërie*) never bothers to mention it again. May we not guess that the magic flower once had a more prominent and more effective place in the story...?", Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge Mass. 1973) pp. 66ff. In a summary of Odysseus' adventures otherwise almost entirely derived from the *Odyssey*, Apollod. *epit.* 7.16 has the hero put the moly in Circe's potions to counteract their effect (*βαλὼν εἰς τὰ φάρμακα τὸ μῶλυ μόνος πίων οὐ φαρμάσσεται*).

¹² *Morphology* p. 45.

¹³ See the article cited above (n. 8).

¹⁴ See the same article. Note that Propp, p. 42, generalising from the Russian folktales which are his source, observes in connection with helpers whose initial hostility needs to be overcome, that "combat in a forest hut between the hero and various forest dwellers is encountered very often". Cf. Meuli (as cited in n. 15) p. 102 = p. 664. For possible religious associations of Hermes/Mercury with woods see A. Athanassakis, "Eranos" 87, 1989, 43f., and 49.

¹⁵ The encounter with the helper figure within a wood is therefore perfectly idiomatic in its own right; but there is a further complication in the present instance. The Odyssean encounter occurs just before the hero reaches Circe's palace (v. 275f.) and *that palace itself*

at the beginning of his *Divine Comedy*, the poet Dante meets up with his guide and helper figure, Vergil, in *una selva oscura* (*Inf.* 1.2)¹⁶.

Two relatively minor features of the encounter may bring up the rear, because, however trivial seeming, they reinforce what has been said above about idiomatic folk-tale features in this meeting within the wood.

(i) In his opening interrogation at v. 281, Hermes asks Odysseus where he is going *alone* (πῇ δὴ... ἔρχεαι οἶος;) and solitary encounters with the helper are frequent (as with Dante and Vergil at the opening of *La Divina Commedia*, or Christ's temptation by Satan in the *New Testament*). They are not inevitable: Aeneas is in the company of Achates when he comes upon Venus and Macbeth has Banquo with him when they sight the three sisters. But on the whole, the hero is in solitary state¹⁷.

(ii) Next, a point that is implicit rather than explicit in the Odyssean episode: the *sudden and abrupt* nature of Hermes' appearance (noted, for instance, by Ameis-Henze *ad loc.* who talk of "die plötzliche Erscheinung des Junglings"). This too is very much at home in the context. Venus' appearance to Aeneas is similarly abrupt at *Aen.* 1.314 and in connection with this passage I have elsewhere given other examples of the abruptness with which a helper figure can appear¹⁸. I might have added an instance from the Norse poem *Hamdismál*, where, at stanzas 12 and following, two elder brothers encounter their younger sibling Erpr, who also doubles as would-be helper figure. Of him Ursula Dronke in her edition of the work¹⁹ has rightly said that "Erpr's sudden appearance as the brothers are planning their departure resembles the sudden appearance of the creatures of folk-tale who know the

stands within the wood. Folk-tales often locate a witch's dwelling place at the heart of a forest, as was observed by, for instance, K. Meuli, *Odyssee und Argonautika* (Berlin 1926) pp. 102ff. and 112 = *Ges. Schr.* 2. 664ff. and 672 or Rhys Carpenter (as cited in n. 1, p. 144: "the Hänsel and Gretel variant of the House in the Woods with the singing witch") and Page (as cited in n. 11) pp. 57ff. assembles a number of folktales which resemble in other ways the story of Circe and Odysseus and involve a sorceress who is located in a forest. For a further instance of a story involving the same feature (on which see H.-P. Schönbeck's article s.v. 'Circe' in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, 3.57), as well as metamorphoses and an old crone as helper figure, cf., as cited by K. Reinhardt, *Tradition und Geist* (Göttingen 1960) p. 80 = *Homer: German Scholarship in Translation* p. 229 n. 5, the tale of Jorinda and Joringel (no. 69 in the Brothers Grimm collection) on which see now H.-J. Uther's article s.v. in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (7.632ff.). For a witch dwelling in the midst of a forest and serving as ambivalent helper note also Baba Jaga from Russian and East Slav folk-tale: see the article s.v. by N.V. Novikov in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (1.1121ff.).

¹⁶ See my remarks in "RFIC" forthcoming.

¹⁷ See my observations in "Prometheus" 30, 2004, 184.

¹⁸ See "Rh. Mus." forthcoming.

¹⁹ *The Poetic Edda*: vol. I, *Heroic Poems* (Oxford 1969) p. 197.

secret of success”²⁰. Hermes certainly knows “the secret of success” and conveys it to Odysseus in the passage we have been discussing.

Finally, we should note the language in which Hermes’ departure from the encounter is couched (v. 307f.): Ἑρμείας μὲν ἔπειτ’ ἀπέβη πρὸς μακρὸν Ὀλύμπου / νῆσον ἀν’ ὕληεσσιν. The phrasing is reminiscent of passages to which one scholar has applied the formula ἄφαντος ἐγένετο²¹ and of which he has said such “scenes of encounter... are complete in themselves and end on a note of finality which separates them from their context”, comparing, for instance, *Od.* 7.78 where Athena leaves Odysseus and goes to Marathon, Athens and the house of Erechtheus. As I have shown elsewhere²², the figures whose departure brings to an end such episodes can independently be proved to derive from folk-tale helpers.

We may end with a question: why is it Hermes in particular who is chosen to occupy the role of helper figure in this episode? There are a number of possible answers. For instance, this is a role occupied by the god in the story of Perseus’ quest for Medusa’s head and other tales beside²³. Or again, Hermes’ role as a guide²⁴ may be a relevant consideration. But I would like to suggest that his associated role as *psychopompus*,²⁵ even though unHomeric²⁶, had a part to play. Folktale helpers are often associated with the Otherworld or Underworld (one thinks of the ‘Jenseitsfigur’ that is Rumpelstiltskin)²⁷ and given Circe’s similar links, the hypothesis I am here suggesting would provide a neat parallel to what happens at *Od.* 4.363ff., where a preliminary helper figure associated with the sea sends a hero on to a further helper figure similarly associated²⁸.

Saint John’s College, Oxford

MALCOLM DAVIES

Appendix. If, as Karl Meuli established and I have elsewhere elaborated²⁹, Circe herself originally served the function in the story of Odysseus of a helper figure who guides the hero on his quest, it may seem odd to be arguing that Hermes helps that hero to his helper. But in

²⁰ On the folk-tale features of this composition and its relevance to Propp’s *Morphology* see further my remarks in “Prometheus” 28, 2002, 12.

²¹ Archibald Cameron in *Miscellanea di Studi Alessandrini* (Rostagni Festschrift, Turin 1963) p. 305.

²² See the article cited in n. 18 above.

²³ See H. Petersmann, “WS” 15, 1981, p. 49f. n. 15.

²⁴ See H. Hester, “Rh. Mus.” 119, 1976, 210.

²⁵ See Hester as cited in the previous note.

²⁶ See G. Petzl, *Antike Diskussionen über die beiden Nekyiai* (Beitr. kl. Phil. 29, 1969).

²⁷ See the article cited in n. 20 above, pp. 1ff.

²⁸ For Circe’s links with the Underworld and Otherworld see my remarks in “WS” 115, 2002, 24f., for the Old Man of the Sea’s similar connections see “CQ” 38, 1988, 284.

²⁹ Meuli (as cited n. 15) pp. 102 = pp. 664ff. Cf. my remarks in “WS” 115, 2002, 24.

fact the proliferation of such figures is perfectly in keeping with folk-tale values and it is an earlier episode of the *Odyssey* which provides the best parallel.

I refer to Menelaus' encounter with Proteus at *Od.* 4.454ff. as recounted by the hero himself. Proteus as Old Man of the Sea is a beautifully idiomatic helper figure³⁰ who aids the hero as regards his quest. But this episode has a prelude at vv. 363ff., in which Menelaus encounters Proteus' daughter, and this prelude is remarkably similar to Odysseus' meeting with Hermes. In the first place, Eidothea comes upon Menelaus in solitary state (v. 367 μ' οἶω ἔρροντι... νόσφιν ἐταίρων) as does Hermes in Odysseus' case (10.281). Then her frank and abrupt³¹ opening question νήπιός εἰς...; (371) might be thought to approximate to the tone "of compassionate but somewhat contemptuous expostulation" which one scholar³² has detected in Hermes' ὦ δύστηνε (281) – in both cases the deity proceeds to a more sympathetic stance. The closest analogy, however, occurs when the respective helper, in a perfectly idiomatic manner, foretells³³ the reaction of the second helper: for Eidothea's πάντα δέ τοι ἐρέω ὀλοφῶϊα τοῖο γέροντος (410) is almost identical to Hermes' πάντα δέ τοι ἐρέω ὀλοφῶϊα δήνεα Κίρκης (10.289).

Note finally that Eidothea, at vv. 444ff., sets ambrosia beneath the nostrils of Menelaus and his companions to counteract the stench of the seal skins in which they are concealed while they wait to ambush Proteus. Is this a vestige of the 'magical agent' which the helper figure gives the hero, the equivalent, that is, of Hermes' *moly*?

I have suggested elsewhere³⁴ that the plurality of helpers in *Odyssey* 4 may ultimately derive from the folk-tale pattern ('old, older, oldest') whereby one helper sends a questing hero on for information to another³⁵.

M. D.

³⁰ See my observations in "CQ" 48, 1988, 278.

³¹ For abruptness as characterising the appearance of the helper figure (as with Hermes in *Od.* 10.280) see n. 18 above.

³² Hayman as cited above, n. 2.

³³ For such prophecy as one of the capacities of the folk-tale helper see Propp's *Morphology* pp. 120 and 128.

³⁴ "Prometheus" 29, 2003, p. 58f. and n. 11.

³⁵ Eidothea's intervention comes when the fortunes of Menelaus and his men are at their lowest ebb (*Od.* 4.363ff.) so it is interesting to note the remarks of Carl Jung in his essay *The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales* (for references see the article cited in the previous note p. 63 n. 34). He observes (pp. 401ff ≈ pp. 217ff) that the helper figure (whom he generalises (see n. 1 above) as "the Old Man") "always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea can extract him. But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish this himself, the knowledge needed... comes in the form of a personified thought", i.e. the helper, who thus represents the "purposeful reflection and concentration of moral and physical forces that comes about spontaneously in the psychic space outside consciousness when conscious thought is not yet – or is no longer – possible. The concentration and tension of psychic forces have something about them that always looks like magic: they develop an unexpected power of endurance which is often superior to the conscious effort of will". These extrapolations from folk-tale are, of course, extremely suggestive for the folk-tale-derived passages of the *Odyssey* which we have been investigating.