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The Suitors' Take:
Manners and Power in Ithaka

by DONALD LATEINER

1. Introduction

This essay examines “give and take” behaviors of the suitors, men of
acknowledged stature still inadequately examined by modern critics. The
approach owes a debt to the social or human “sciences” of social psychology,
historical anthropology, and comparative economics. I employ categories of
nonverbal behavior, of social order and face-to-face interaction, and models of
distributive reciprocity including gift-exchange. These tools for analyzing
practices and habits that structure communities less and more complex than our
own clarify heroic power and prestige and their absence.1

These pages explore institutions of ubiquitous influence, characters of some
depth, and situations of sufficient complexity and significance. This exploration
of elite ideology, of “what goes without saying,” these quotidian values with
which all comply complaint-free, shows how those in power “extort the essential
while seeming to demand the insignificant.” It also addresses lesser phenomena,
gestures and apparently off-handed comments in a carefully plotted text. This is
a narrative “one of whose central themes... is the contrast between those who
notice tokens and put together meanings and those who do not.”2

Despite revisionism swirling about Odyssean characters, including Penelope
and Telemakhos, the evaluation and standing of the bevy of less articulated
suitors have remained relatively stable. For most audiences, they are obvious
villains: lustful, increasingly murderous, and bullying of their social inferiors.
No one has fully dissected their carefully plotted but clumsily executed attempts
to take full charge.3

The burden of this paper is to provide suitable social context for the suitors’
comedy of manners. We examine in particular their kakoxeinia, faulty and

1. The paper’s social analysis builds on a growing consensus “that the institutions and modes of thought [and
social interaction] in the poems were ultimately derived from the world in which Homer and his audience lived”
(Morris [1986] 82; pace Kirk, Finley, et al.). The borrowing from contemporary historical life, more than the date
of any particular institution or cultural artifact, is important for this paper. Lacking archaeological, contemporary
artistic, and historical evidence, our generalizations about heroic human behavior depend on a literary version of
a once oral tradition. Other issues provide non-Homeric comparative data from Greece and elsewhere and thus
allow more historical interpretation. Morris (1986) 81-83 exposes the methodological issues. References without
author or title belong to the Odyssey.

2. Bourdieu (1977) 95; Austin (1975) 128-29 casts gauntlets before minimalist and analyst critics while chiding
the myopic suitors.

in the culturally-embedded Trojan war myth and Polyphemus in this poem provide “anticipatory doublets,” pre-
echoes of the theme of hospitality violated.
inverted management of rules of heroic reciprocity, and their dyssemia, faulty and "out of sync" nonverbal behaviors. Consideration of maladroit face-to-face encounters and awkward gestures permits a sociopsychological critique of egregious "manners" from inside the Homeric value system. "To the manner born," they nevertheless stumble frequently, an eerie congeries of social bunglers. They exemplify every flaw in the heroic system. Manners, in the Odyssey and perhaps everywhere, often amount to morals. Courtesy and deficiencies in etiquette then and now produce communicative reactions of pleasure or indignation. 4 Zeus in the Odyssey is usually invoked in the guise of xenios and hiketesios which amounts to dikaios. 5

As for nonverbal behavior, in modern American face-to-face interactions it has been estimated that 55% of emotional meaning is conveyed through a steady stream of facial expressions, postures, and gestures, 38% through tone of voice and other paralinguistic phenomena, and only 7% through explicit words. 6 Furthermore, nonverbal behavior, a facet of all immediate encounters, is continuous and not avoidable; you cannot not communicate with your face and body. The suitors exhibit dyssemia: faulty active and passive nonverbal behavior—both inappropriate use of time, space, postures, and gesture to communicate, and incorrect reading of others' cues and comments. Their abuse of (intended) conventional symbols, such as Antinoos' "comforting" touching of Telemakhos, other blatantly phoney tones and gestures, and their "leakage" of (unintended) emotive symptoms, such as lip-biting and laughter, 7 convey heroic gaucheness as well as unworthiness for the marital and political roles to which they each aspire. These semiotic behaviors also communicate instability and unheroic manners, interactions parallel to the fairy-landers, sub-civilized, hard Kyklopes and the dancing and effete, super-civilized Phaiakians with their warm baths, soft beds, and large wardrobes. 8

Nonverbal behaviors universally organize, regulate, and punctuate social encounters between equals and unequals, families and strangers. Telemakhos arrives a stranger at the palaces at Pylos and Sparta, and there, as part of his reception, encounters proper peer greetings. The royal family rises to greet a visitor of apparent equality, identifiable, one imagines, by his gait, clothes, and bearing. Hosts lay out all their best: baths, clothes, food, wine, etc. When Odysseus enters the Phaiakian palace, contrariwise, his sudden and humble approach, borrowed clothes, and lowering of position (at Arete's knees and in the

4 Hohendahl-Zoetelief (1980) surveys inner and outer "right attitudes," conventions of abuse, gratitude, apology, and instruction, more in the Iliad than in the Odyssey. The author usefully points out aberrations from heroic norms, but problems of definition and method vitiate the study. Simpson (1992) describes Homeric hospitality as index of morals.
5 7.162-65; 9.269-71; 13.213; 14.56-58, 158, 284; 16.422; 17.484. The first two epithets provide the concrete embodiment or example of the third quality or principle: "observant of custom and social rule, civilized" (LSJ9 s.v.).
6 Nowicki and Duke (1992) 7, based on the work of Albert Mehrabian, discuss American patterns of communication. No reason or evidence suggests that ancient Greeks were less expressive than contemporary Americans.
7 We register conscious and ungovernable aspects of others' bodily expression ("leakage") to read motives and check covertly the reality of others' attempts to present themselves in the most favorable light (social "face").
ashes of the fireplace) nonverbally betoken—by the avoidance of the usual series and sequence of guesting-motifs (significant absence)—his admitted lack of any status in that social order and his calculated unwillingness to demand any.9

2. Basileis Behavior: Greeting, Eating, Gifts, & Territory

Rank and Hierarchy, ubiquitous in the animal kingdom, organize all known societies. To flourish in any group, individuals must convey suitable self-image, negotiate self-interest, manipulate flexible rules, short-circuit competing parties, ingratiatate themselves with higher-ups effectively in order to request favors, signal superiority to obtuse subordinates, and align status with presumed equals. Asymmetrical encounters and exchanges endorse and confirm unequal status. Odysseus as traveler, suppliant, and hobo generally can only take, not give, but generic Homeric princes like Diomedes promise full reciprocity, should current interactants ever arrive as guests (II. 6.224-25). Self-lowering in encounters, granting respect, prestige, and power to interactants, positions the initiator to receive a favor or gift.10 Parties can choose to express equal or lower status, regardless of other indices of status-ranking. Thus prince Telemachos at the steading refuses to stand (or sit) on ceremony with drover or beggar (16.42-53).

Territoriality, animal establishment and maintenance of keeping competitors out or in, generally occurs “out of awareness” by means of unobtrusive “body language,” facial expression, and paralinguistic phenomena (such as pace, tone, and voice volume). Penelope’s suitors are much preoccupied with maintaining group affiliation and cohesion (games, feasts, cult) hoping to gain possession of the palace and establish domination and submission in their own ad hoc social order. They expend much energy policing “outsiders.” Telemachos, Penelope, and (implicitly and nonverbally) the beggar Odysseus question their space, their place, and their self-determined exclusive rights to consume the family’s stores and occupy the widow’s bed. The suitors’ repeated need to make their privileges explicit and to impede nonverbally all other comers, even the pathetic beggar, italicizes the precarious nature of their dubious claims and downright illegitimate occupation.

In Homeric epic frequent ceremonies of encounter indicate social equality and inequality. Verbal and nonverbal behavior includes initiating, turn-taking, terminating encounters, favor-requesting, and prestation. “Residual rules” govern all encounters, crisis arises from their violation. Making acquaintance on the Iliadic battlefield, for instance, requires ceremonial challenge, vaunts and taunts, exchange of genealogical trees and economic boasts, etc.11 In Odyssean travel


encounters, host’s and visitor’s etiquette of arrival and reception is clear, if varied by relative status. Goddess second-class Kalypso’s resentful but polite reception of Olympian Hermes, for humorous instance, presents intelligence, self-control, and impeccable courtesy—that is, “greeting up” to a superior and caving in to all his demands (5.55-148). Odysseus’ beggar disguise later on Ithaka allows him, by submissively “greeting up,” to gain essential food and shelter from several hosts. Suitors bend and try to break every rule to check him, but find themselves stymied. The self-selected subgroup of basileis who have come as suitors in the Odyssey shows ignorance, or worse, indifference to the entire ceremonious system of heroic exchange. They reject the norms of suitorhood, the μνηστηρέων δίκη of giving gifts, arranging feasts (18.275, 1.132-34, 225-29, 365), and maintaining peer values as practiced at Pylos, Sparta, and Phaiakia. They also assail and revile the lower ranges of society. Alkinoos has prepared us: “Anyone with any brains considers both guest and suppliant as good as a brother” (8.546-47: ξείνος θ’ ἱκέτης τε).

The most mannerly act available to the Western Greek swains, after Penelope made clear her desire to wait for Odysseus, was to leave Ithaka or visit her father Ikarios and sue for her in marriage. In fact, by barging in, they have only rudely manifested their lust as well as their status- and wealth-seeking determination. They desire to eat without measure and dally indefinitely. The wooers of Penelope behave as though they have already usurped Odysseus’ position. On the level of “aware” nonverbal behavior, the suitors follow a set of rules for winning Penelope as wife. They once shower her with gifts—but only her father could offer her hand in marriage. They establish turn-taking procedure among themselves for the bow contest, and propose and accept a timeout in that contest. A modicum of honor and respect survives among these thieves, but no automatic structured access to desired political dominance. The one hundred and eight suitors (16.245-53) have commandeered a physical stage, the courtyard and banquet tables. With the tone and color of paramount lords, the assembled companions bring along their “portable territory.” The theme of hospitality (including epithets, formulaic verses, type-scenes, and pervasive narrative patterns) is inverted by the suitors.

Guest-friendship and the dinner table are the loci of nonverbal social skills. The feast “cues in” community values, comity, and ethical excellence. The vinous banquets of Nestor, Menelaos, and even Eumaios are exemplary. The egregious Menelaos realizes that immoderate hospitality can annoy as much as too little. A guest in haste should not be detained but sent off (15.68-79: ἐθέλοντα δὲ πέμπειν). Despite his royal domestic problems, the Spartan ruler provides expansive but “normative hospitality.” To the contrary, the entertainments provided by Herakles and to Eurytion (21.26-30, 295-301, negative exemplars of host and guest themselves) lead to slaughter and mutilation.

12. 2-50-54. Theoklymenos shows them the way out; Amphinomos intuits that he ought to leave but is supernaturally restrained (20.371-72, 18.153-57). Some readers assume the suitors remain by some squatters’ right but cite no precedent or parallel to this “woo and siege” operation. The anomaly arises from husband’s twenty-year absence.
latter figures present "anticipatory doublets" for the suitors' extended displays of negative hospitality, indecent table behavior, and ignominious end (1.365-71, 17.564-68; 21.26-29 [the same bowl!], 295-304).

Hierarchy shares thematic prominence with xenie, mutual hospitality, actual or promised reciprocity and grateful requital, charis (χάρις, χαρίσσα αἴμοβη, 3.58-59), fair exchange of benefits, sometimes injuries. The superficially festal banquet has become a jackals' feast described with imagery of bestial voracity (2.203: βιβρώσκειν), when Telemakhos gets shunted aside in his own house. The rude suitors respect no one, as everyone notes (e.g., 2.162-69, 14.89-95, 22.414-15, 23.65-66). The banquet tests them (cf. Il. 4.257-59); they fail to welcome, refuse to share, sacrifice inadequately, and raise endless ruckus (1.132-34, 4.768-75).

They have perverted the social graces, manifestations of the moral order, in their extortionate commensality and treatment of society's underdogs: children, women, and outcasts. They scorn and taunt the manor's heir, Telemakhos (perpetual "kidding," snide sniping, and finally attempted murder). They have boxed in the lord's spouse, Penelope (planted spies, activity policing, house invasion, and occupation; 2.109, 198-99, 237, 247; and threats of virtual rape or "bride capture"). They pressure and try to entrap beggar Odysseus (verbal and physical "joshing" or abuse, threats of enslavement and bodily mutilation including castration). They and Akhilleus suggest that even recognized lords get pushed around when basileis see an opportunity (2.246-51, 11.501-03). Their ungentle acts create domestic, social, economic, and political crisis. Their nonverbal relaxations—loitering, wenching, and gaming—validate negatively the ruling family's outrage and eventual vengeance. Their anomic behavior and sole allegiance to their ephemeral group threaten destruction of the existing, dominant but fragile household and political order on Ithaka.

The negative reciprocity of the suitors towards all "outsiders" and their depredations of the chieftain's persons and goods indicate social dysfunction in Ithaka. No assembly has met since Odysseus' departure two decades ago (2.26-28). No vestige of old obligations remains and no suitable recompense and consequent tribal solidarity. Instead of regular confirmation of community realized by a leader's personal generosity and balanced gift-exchange, we find subordinate men seeking "something for nothing" and eroding the chief's wealth.

13. Fenik (1974) Part II examines the place of type-scenes in oral traditional/formulaic artistry. Aioulos also rules a polis-type community with perpetual feast by day, sleep by night. This closed, incestuous world honors the vagrant well—at first; cf. Vidal-Naquet (1986) 22.

14. 11.184-87, answering Odysseus' query about his family holdings, shows how little the dead in the far West know, here mother Antikleia. She oddly and wrongly informs her son that her young (see Stanford ad loc.) grandson manages basileutic special plots (τραύμα), controls the chief's feasts, and administers justice at the behest of all (διοικητὴς τῆς οἰκουμενῆς). This provides her horizon of expectation for the typical eminent lord, not Telemakhos' reality.

15. Although they publicly call for Penelope's return home and remarriage according to patrilocal custom (Penelope's stated plan), an outcome which should leave Telemakhos in control of his patrilineal estate, their interest in the property seems evident from the cabal's plans to dispose of the rightful heir (2.111-14, 1.275-78, 19.137-59, 21.71-77; also 4.700, 16.383-92, 22.52-53; and see 16.385-86). There is no matriliny in Homer; see Finley (1978) 87-91. The suitors' reasoning, however, seems to be that, if Penelope is successfully wooed in Odysseus' palace and bed, a shadow of legitimacy would promote her new husband's claim to the Ithakan property and political supremacy in Ithaka.
The suitors’ refusal to give and failure to invite others in return amount to declaring civil war. The basis of this exchange system is flouted. Dispensing, not hoarding, wealth makes a man rich in the chiefdoms of the Homeric poems. Vast wealth can only be given away. Economics are woven into all other institutions and symbolic systems. Gifts, through liberal and meaty feasts, *xeinia*, marriage-bids or *eedna* (ἐδνα), funerals, protection in time of peril and so on produce honor and ensure loyalty, support, and service (e.g., 19.27-28). Surplus is exchanged for authority, influence, kinship (by marriage), and even quasi-kinship (ξενινη) by the chief. The suitors violate Zeus’ law; so say Eumaios, Telemakhos, Odysseus, Penelope, and even Zeus and the suitors themselves (14.89-95, 16.85-88, 17.483-87, 22.413-16, 23.63-67, 24.480-86).

The semi-anarchy of the island is reflected by a semi-anarchy in the house. Telemakhos’ problematic position, as he says, is not a public, legal issue (2.44-45) but one of personal status, like a Sicilian “Don.” He holds no stable hereditary office in this proto-state, and stands to inherit wealth, not power, at best (16.373, 19.159). Telemakhos cannot, however, currently control the reserves. Food-sharing, owed to family, is granted to guest-friends and mendicants (*xeinoi* and *ptochoi*), but not to all and sundry and not to unhelpful interlopers indefinitely. Without numerous inherited followers, virile kin, and κλέος for warrior leadership, Telemakhos lacks credibility and leverage: personal power. Therefore, since he cannot redistribute surplus wealth, he has no esteem and little residual rank. He cannot prevail at home, much less rule his semi-state. His “political” power, like that of any Homeric basileus, can only flow from martial ability and from economic capacity for controlled generosity, for redistributing surplus goods, the substantial existence of which Eumaios emphasizes (14.96-108). Shifting orbits of support and power, rather than any simple succession to primacy or king’s hereditary, politically legitimated office, confront the eminent youth who competes for place and prestige with numerous rivals.

The suitors’ strategy, as the *Odyssey* opens, is quite effective. Their goal is not merely to enjoy themselves but to eliminate the basis of Telemakhos’ tenuous (at best) political influence, namely his redistributive capacity, and for one of their number to marry the “widow.” Until Penelope chooses a mate, they threaten to devour the master’s surplus. The distribution of that surplus is Telemakhos’ only chance to build prestige from his slight hereditary edge and to gain personal authority in a gift-based society (2.203-05, 14.93-95, 105-08; 18.144).

His journey in search of his father and kleos, an infusion of social identity, thus serves at least three purposes: (1) it removes him from immediate danger; (2) it temporarily freezes his continual loss of “face”; (3) it shows the demos that he can act, he can gather companions, *hetairoi*, furnish a ship, and sail off to acquire xenie (guest-status and -gifts) and/or booty—like his father (19.333). This last

16. Mauss (1967) 3, 11; Donlan (1982b) 157, 160. The purpose of a chieftain’s wealth is to expend it in order to accumulate debts. Thus he acquires esteem, prestige, and power. The giver “owns” a debt.

17. Donlan (1982b) 152-53 dissects the nature of Homeric “politics.” See also Morris (1986) 98-99 for a review of recent literature on the exiguous “element of heredity.” Note the irony when the suitors call Telemakhos “rather poorly allied” (20.376: κακοξειμωτήρος, hapax) because his only friends are the seemingly weak beggar and the seemingly insane prophet.
motive will impel public sentiment to shift from helplessness and/or indifference to renewed respect for the Laertid line and to favor the scion’s somewhat forlorn cause. In the course of the poem, his “youth” radically shifts from a real handicap to an exploitable guise.

The suitors distort prestation by turning normative heroic generosity (generalized reciprocity) into personal profit (negative reciprocity). They pervert heroic reciprocity (between unequals) when they half jokingly but half seriously advise selling the already accepted beggar and the newly arrived mendicant into slavery. Finally, they explicitly invert ceremonial guest-gift so that it becomes insult (20.381, 105; 20.296). By dishonoring heroic conventions they lose their chance for good repute (έχλείτη: cf. 21.331). Shame and ill repute (αίχοχοι λόβη τε: 18.215-25; δανίη: 13.142) are the outcome for unearned freeload­ing, consumption (cf. II. 12.310-21), mistreating or allowing the mistreatment of beggars.

Meanwhile the suitors reward followers from another man’s goods, an approved heroic custom, but uniquely here in Homer not by raids and battle, but by exploiting the ill-guarded household of their host, the Ithakan chief’s estate—a holding twenty times richer than any other (15.530, 17.256, 18.325; 14.98-104; 17.451-52). Economic decline translates for Telemakhos into loss of prestige and capital. Telemakhos cannot now call on Ithakans for services because he has not hosted them, or captained overseas expeditions for booty, or even convened the demos (2.26-32). There is an absence of heroic leadership, that is, of ongoing reciprocated benefits and rewards/honor exchanges (17.83: χαροντι ... χαρων) between the “natural” headman and the demos. There is an absence of acknowledged indebtedness on all sides. The suitors show no appreciation for the one-way flow of food and luxury. The suitors have shut out local Ithakans from the supposedly communal feast. The townspeople cannot get as good as they give; Telemakhos cannot earn their loyalty or exercise control by his stores of food and drink. Even housemaid Melantho has transferred allegiance. She repays Penelope’s parental kindness and generosity with ingratitude, saucy insults, and sexual treachery. The suitors should be “dueling with gifts,” the economic analogue to heroic battle, in Walter Donlan’s formulation. This event we once see when Penelope descends to the megaron and implicitly consents to leave the Laertid estate. The ensuing competitive gift-giving suits eighth-century bride-wooing as well as chieftainship-seeking. But the magical moment is an enchanted anomaly (18.212: ἔρως δ’ ἀρσι θυμόν θελελθεν) amidst the suitors’ quotidian routine:

18. 1.95, 2.257, 3.199-200, 4.611; cf. 16.371-75; Jones (1988) 500, 505.
19. 18.320-36: “like her child,” τατόσα δὲ ώς. She exemplifies untrustworthy female sexuality once more, a theme transcending class that is prominent from the divine conclave in Book 1 to Agamemnon’s diatribes in 11.427-34 and 24.193-202.
20. Cf. the grandiose economic heroism of Northwestern American Indian or ancient Gaulic potlatch: Diodorus 5.26, from Posidonios, on Gaul. Donlan in this volume; Perysinakis (1991) reviews the literature on hedna in Homer—a one-way stream of "gift-bids" from suitors to the father of the bride (298). He finds the poems internally consistent: Penelope will go to the highest bidder (16.76-77). Morris (1986) 105-10 also argues for bride-wealth and against dowry, explaining the problematic 1.277-78 as "attracting rich hedna" (109 with previous Literatur).
enjoying the big chief’s material goods and seeking their own material advantage. Their behavior here, “under the influence,” violates their norm of endless consumption. They ignore the expected norm, to sail to father Ikarios in order to compete in giving wealth, a technique of showing wealth and creating influence (2.50-55). “Giving is also a way of possessing.” Mutually beneficial exchange of goods, and exactly calibrated (but often unbalanced) respect has disappeared or, rather, degenerated into unilateral depredation. The suitors’ wordy discourse employs the fiduciary currency of consensual exchange, but expropriating actions and peremptory gestures extort compliance and suggest violent capture.21 They physically consume and destroy another’s wealth (φθινόθεσιν 1.250 = 16.127, 14.95) when they should be producing and accumulating capital to lavish on others. Their very pretensions should tell them to unhand their host’s surplus. They are “loitering” (πολεψιμένου, 2.55) chiefs with no visible braves to reward.

Penelope alludes to another example of the suitors’ attrition of reciprocity: Odysseus’ paternal protection of Antinoos’ father from a local lynch mob and the current failure to repay that favor (16.424-33). Antinoos’ gratuitous insult of the beggar’s thematic and comedic belly draws Telemakhos’ sarcastic appreciation of pseudo-parental concern for his wealth: “How well, like a father, you care for me!” ἃ μετ’ αὐτήν ἐσχίζω καὶ ἐξαπατάμεσθ᾽ ἤδη. Penelope condemns them for ingratitude, injustice, and sheer interference with housework (4.682-95).22 The Telemakhean capital in question has been consumed without permission by Antinoos for three years (17.397-402). Again, Antinoos shamelessly refers to Odysseus’ once having taken Antinoos himself on his knees in order to feed the helpless child (16.442-44). The passing remark underlines both the hero’s paternal care of his people, demos, and subordinate basileis (cf. 2.234, 5.12; 4.687-91) and this one’s inappropriate response. The passage also shows little sense of firm institutions; similarly Odysseus the basileus exercises little discipline either at home or on campaign (Il. 2 passim; Od. 10.31-48, 428-42, 14.259-70). Basileis acquire and confirm local authority by redistributing booty and locally extracted surplus. The βασιλεύτερος lord gives more, as Odysseus, the outside observer, reminds his “betters” (17.415-23).23

The Western suitors are not anomalous in vying for hero-in-chief status. Diomedes, Akhilleus, and Odysseus try to take command at Troy whenever Agamemnon shows his characteristic foibles and weakness (Il. 1, 2, 9.30-56). Agamemnon, supposedly βασιλεύτατος (Il. 9.69), can barely cope with the

23. Generosity exhibited to equals has less savory aspects when surpluses are extracted from inferiors. “Asymmetrical reciprocity” encounters materialist and critical analyses from Poseidon and Thersites: Il. 21.441-57, 2.225-42; Od. 10.40-45, a proletarian, but not entirely incorrect, suspicion; 13.259-68.
troops or the aristoi competition. Telemakhos a fortiori cannot curb the ambitious basileis in the multilinear, oikos-based Homeric world because he cannot establish any lasting debt by giving them gifts. First, the gifts are not yet his to give (pace 21.348-49; cf. 116-17); second, they coolly seize the redistributive assets before he can master them (Vyller [1981] 118, 127-30, 143).

The suitors repeatedly mobilize themselves to restore ceremonial order. They have enjoyed anomalous excitement and stimulation without cost or reciprocity, but the precarious state of their illegal occupation and irregular consumption of Laertid stores requires continuous “small talk,” expressions of loyalty and mutual respect for their current involvement at Penelope’s. They have to shore up indirectly (metacommunication, often by body language) shared responsibility for interaction rituals and outcome.

The suitors institutionalize their social front of superiority by a de facto hierarchy that functions well enough until assumed rank and preeminence conflict with requests from Telemakhos, presumably the de iure owner, and the stranger who has no standing at all. “The impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps.” This statement about our “routines” in everyday life is all the truer when the front is a questionable or fraudulent one. The guileful suitors, themselves impostors, usurp social status as xeinoi in order to acquire a privileged social, economic, and political eminence as spouse, consumption-master, and local chief.24

As a team with obvious coaches and directors, the wooers have insinuated themselves into the megaron, into control and exploitation of another man’s surplus and indeed all his possessions, and they redefine Ithakan political reality by force and threat. They overawe potential dissenters and disturbers like the recalcitrant Halitherses with violent threats of their collective authority (2.178-93). They impose a “party line” on doubters within their own ranks, especially the fainthearted like Amphinomos and the conscripted like Phemios and Medon (16.351-64, 22.354-60). Their conspiratorial routines promote limited camaraderie—sneering riposte, persiflage, mockery of the heir apparent and his few remaining retainers. Their σκόνμματα and highhanded invasiveness incur the labels of reckless, senseless, and indecent —ἀφρασές and ὑβρισταῖ.25 Among their misdemeanors, they hope to elide succession to the wife and the barley, wine, and gold of the departed warrior.

The basileis use scolding tones and threats, egg on a beggar’s beating, laugh at unheroic pain, and eject an unwelcome messenger of doom (18.78, 84-87, 34-
The suitors solemnly pledge the victorious new parasite’s prospects with a nonverbal toast (18.111-23). Antinoos ineffectually strikes the beggar as his tool Melanthios had. Yet, both are powerless—by taunt or force—to move the new arrival. These class-distinct nonverbal behaviors betoken superiority, but other symbolic movements “leak” their flaccid core. Their knees (an Indo-European site of vulnerability as well as seminal power) go weak in desire for Penelope, parallel to the fear that later loosens the impotent maids’ limbs. Their lip-biting reveals frustration.26 Thus the suitors simultaneously violate heroic moral values and etiquette, social norms or the horizon of heroic personhood and manners, for instance their exclusive athletic, gaming, and feasting protocols (4.625-27 = 17.167-69). They resolutely ignore ground rules of the human condition. They eat and drink without limit, their health is excellent, and they never work so their hands remain “soft and uncalloused.”27 Their gluttony continues except when the Laertid clan (or Athene) questions their everyday arrangements and comportment. Cherished images of self and society are nourished by social roles they impute to each other. A new beggar seems just to present another source of “unquenchable laughter,” like the clowning antics of hobbled Hephaistos on paradisiacal Olympus in Iliad 1. The banqueteers constitute a coherent troupe but only for a truly captive audience.28 Telemakhos lives in social half-existence, a survivor of his own social death.

The suitors have purposely neglected the obligation and privilege to reciprocate to men and gods (4.651, 18.287). They brusquely say that the beggar is Telemakhos’ xeinos and not theirs (20.295, 21.313, 424 [Odysseus?]). Although Telemakhos is generous with his own food, Antinoos does not share even another’s (17.400-04). He offers only a ballistic footstool, “both symbol and instrument of the coercion of underlings by those in power.”29 The suitors’ various truncheons, that is, provide inarticulate but resentful inferiors with both instrumental harm and also nonverbal signs, now of negative reciprocity, reminders of force, battle, capture, and pain rather than of hospitality (17.478-80). The creator of the social crisis confusesthe “two opposed poles of the Homeric universe” by throwing his footstool, a ballistic weapon, at the sacralized suppliant, a beggar, in the place of fellowship. Lawless (ἀνειλθότα ειοσ) Ktesippos adds sacrilege and insult to injury by portentously calling his missile—a food by-product—a geras, “chiefly due,” also a xeinion. Such abusive “liberality” is as derisory as the raw flesh-eating Kyklops’ alleged “favor” to

28. Goffman (1959) 7-9, Dickie (1983) 257; Rick Newton provided the comparison to the Olympians in an electronic communication of 23 October 1992. The suitors consume another man’s estate πέτα, living like the immortal gods (πέτα ζωοτέ: 5.122, 1.160). They arrogate the privileges of another order of being, crossing the line in a fatal way, as the crewmen do when they eat the kine of divine Helios.
Odysseus of making him the last to be eaten.\(^3\)

The monster's explicit *verbal* disregard of Zeus is matched by the suitors' *nonverbal* improprieties in honoring the gods. They drink more often than not without final libation, they reduce libation to an empty ritual, and they fail to sacrifice properly, even to send the *knise* to the gods. They don't fulfill their sacrificial promises or perform them according to custom. Thus they do not share with the gods. Rather, they slaughter another man's cattle (echoing the Ithakan crew's inadequate ritual when they butcher the cattle of Helios).\(^3\) Like the Kyklops, the partying princelets in Ithaka pose the paradigm of bad hospitality—they feed off guests, not as literal cannibals, but by threatening delivery to a human butcher and by making the stranger into the butt of cruel jokes about inhospitality. Dishonor becomes ever more prominent, honor more problematic, as we also find in the course of the *Iliad*'s narrative trajectory.

Eating "is a life and death matter" in Homer. It is the most intimate act of the family and community. The suitors are feasting when first we meet them. Their *ethos* is immediately adumbrated by their actions—playing board games with pebbles, sitting on the hides of another man's slaughtered beasts, preparing to enjoy commandeered wine and meat—and by their inattention and inaction. They do not see and do not welcome Athene as Mentes, as Telemakhos does, establishing contact and protecting her from the unholy, ill-mannered uproar (δρυμαγγύς). Yet another day or month of eating does not civilize the suitors in manners and morals, for "the way one eats is an index of one's morality" in the *Odyssey*. *Xenie*, by the standard forms, transforms a stranger into a guest. First the suitors ignore Mentes, then they try to ignore their host's son, later they abuse Aithon verbally, subsequently with pieces of furniture. Finally "food itself is made a weapon" when Ktesippos throws the poorest edible bovine part at, as he notes, the guest of Telemakhos in the house of Odysseus (20.295-300).\(^3\)

Their (table) manners are their morals, no mere sign. Eating is their *telling* activity.\(^3\)

The banquet has its own formal patterns, literary (type-scene) and social (sacrifice, seating and serving ranks, prestation, generosity conveyed and
The leader normally gives, and the subordinates accept, provisions at table. Participation indicates inclusion as a local retainer or acceptance as a guest with status. All there “stretch forth their hands,” a gesture of desire, expectation, and participation as subordinates or guests developing debt (1.149; 8.71; cf. 17.356, 366). Food and drink in fair shares are offered to equals at the δεῖζ ἐλοι (11.185) for promise of equal future returns at a peer’s house, ἀνεμβόλεμοι κατὰ ὁλκοῦς (1.375). Nonverbal signs of honor, especially at the dining table, include the special portion, the special cup and toast, the special order of drinking, and the special seat next to the host. These rituals signify social bonds and degree of consideration, for Homer by nonverbal behavior actualizes sentiments in a physical and visual way: “la justice et l’injustice vont se dire en pain et en viands.”

The suitors exhibit increasingly hostile glances, vocal tones, body positions (head-cock, muscle tautness, and posture), and movements, that is, “faces,” sounds, gestures and postures. Antinoos, general manager of the production, verbally abuses, brands a threatening missile, scowls fiercely, and attacks with a significantly lowly object; other suitors laugh nastily, imprison, occupy the house, taunt the defenseless, bite lips, laugh and cry simultaneously (17.374, 395, 409, 450, 463; 18.35, 41, 289, 350, 388, 410; 20.346–49). When all symbolic speech fails, when annoyance and anger have escalated, the suitors initiate highhanded action, acts morally unacceptable and comic: they punctuate furious emotional outbursts with ballistic attacks, footstools and ox-hoof. Ktesippos crudely and climactically misrepresents this “guest-gift,” an edible (?) ox-hoof thrown at the hero’s head. Aside from ineffectuality, these unheroic betrayals of their inadequate “cool” or self-control index both haughty, really “uppity” manners and shaky self-esteem. Their practice does not accord with heroic ideology—for consumable goods or winning a bride. They therefore feel the need to reinforce new, unsecured social boundaries.

Their heavy drinking poses another daily threat to minimal standards of sub-heroic decorum. They grumble at the beggar’s allegedly equal portion (18.360–64, 20.293–95). Their ill-“disguised” hostility fails of its desired discouragement: Telemakhos and Odysseus are not cowed by their bullying words and gestures.

moments that show suitors in full charge. Given the frequency of puns on names and events in the Odyssey (including the most famous and instrumental Outis or “Nobody”), one attends to all such undertones. 34 Said (1979) well describes the literary and anthropological sequences for Homeric feasts. She delineates the suitors’ failures and distortions (14) in the proper parts and normal sequences of both oral formulaic narrative and ritualized heroic etiquette.

35. Eumaios recollects a guest once well entertained who promised to do the same (14.381–85). Equal shares are also the Homeric law for equals in inheritance (14.202–13). Unequal shares may obtain in peacetime entertainment to honor special guests (15.115–27). In warfare another kind of equity and “fair shares” emerges between overlord and warrior (4.66; II. 9.318–19).


37. ὑπερφιλάκιον, ὑπερφιλάλοι, are their anti-heroic epithet. Used 26 times in the Odyssey, it characterizes the suitors’ behavior 22 times as “heedless of others” or “rash.” Twice suitors thus ironically describe Telemakhos’ behavior, and once each it describes isolationist Skherians and the Kyklops (4.663, 16.346; 6.274, 9.106).
Their fragile but superficially impressive solidarity displaces and lowers the status of their ostensible hosts. They isolate the underpowered Laertid circle from the rest of the Ithakan community: Laertes far from town, Penelope upstairs in her chamber, Telemakhos forced to flee his house in voluntary exile and later shamefacedly to send his two guests elsewhere for their own safety (15.509-18, 540-46; 16.69-89). The companions leave occupied Laertid property only to drag themselves off to bed after another hard day. They stick to their group line, the expressive status quo, with effective social discipline. The relatively benign suitor, feckless Amphinomos (“Having It Two Ways”), once briefly considers leaving but cannot. The solemn verbal warning is italicized by an object-adapter (the special cup) and by elaborate ritual gestures of solemn libation (18.153-55).

3. Hoisting the Suitors by Their Own Petard

The eruption of the disguised beggar Odysseus, however, into their feasts is explicitly recognized by the wooers as a threat to ad hoc arrangements for power, status, and wealth-sharing (17.481, 18.401-05, 21.323-29). He appears an alien, declassed novelty. An unknown beggar is marginal to any social group, by definition, and often seems a legitimate scapegoat. His actions, however, as drifter and panhandler do not conform to aristocratic ideology, to expectations based on the “Getter,” Arnaios, nicknamed Iros, “Heavenly Hustler.” Their haughty behaviors attempt to train a new ornamental house-pet, to monitor and police the replacement mascot (18.48-49). The social derelict stays close to the ground, squats in the megaron (18.395), protects his new turf, and snarls at churlish interference. The suitors purvey improbably stern words of threat and abuse, packaged lectures to the sturdy poor of Antinoos and Eurymakhos. They specialize, however, in nonverbal paralyzing stares, glares, and lethal frowns, part of what Erving Goffman well called “face-work.”

The itinerant beggar, by outfacing the usual social constraints, spoils their haughty “front.” He begins to control events nonverbally. While not pretending to equality, he presumes an intimacy, diminishes the proper beggar’s distance, and expects, as beggar and invited guest of the scion (17.339-67), his “fair share” of food and space. His submissive self-assertion exposes the presumptions of the noble parasites. Thus Telemakhos ironically thanks Antinoos for trying to protect his food and drink from one beggar but not from scores of suitors. They become increasingly outrageous in nonverbal behavior as the non-suitor advances into “their territory” and goods. The suitors’ shameful posturing is characterized only slowly, sequentially. In Homer’s oral technique, their char-

38. 1.106-07, 2.395-97, 18.428. They alone have time and unheroic will to play board-games, τετρασάκης ... ἕτερον, 1.107; ἴκεσθαι, 17.530; ἰστήρ ... ἴκεσθαι, 21.428-29.
acter is progressively elucidated as details accrete. Bad to begin with, their behavior and rotten ceremonies grow worse by abrupt increments, by the nonverbal acts as clearly as the words.

Odysseus as beggar presents ambiguous conduct that he can disown at the slightest sign of withdrawal or refusal. Equivocating with his positions and postures at the door, around the table, near the feasters, signaling subordination but improvising challenges by word and gesture, by their rules he bluffs, postures, and lies his way into megaron and more elevated dignity. He playfully and seriously feints and moves closer. By submissive self-assertion, he tricks the suitors into faulty anticipations and insults that rebound to their own dishonor. They mistakenly calculate social stratigraphy and ethical registers. Employing Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts, we examine Eurymakhos’ challenge.

“The challenge confers honour.” Eurymakhos, to debase the stranger, first mocks (κερατωμέων) his bald pate, drawing everyone’s attention to a “badge” (uncontrollable physical trait) of advanced age, then offers him hard work on a distant estate in order to remove him from the premises. He will provide pay, food, and clothing (18.346-64). The condescending offer would make the stigmatized stranger into his vassal and client, bondsman and servant. He practically withdraws it by the end of his outburst when he alleges that the stranger would prefer easy begging! The trapping, quasi-liturgical formula of challenge to work in the fields (ironic in itself emanating from the apparently leisured suitor and addressed to the legal owner of those fields) constitutes elaborate insult to the strength of a presumed inferior male in the macho and status-ridden Mediterranean manner.

Odysseus, however, seize the opportunity to retaliate in kind, turns it around, and challenges Eurymakhos to a one-on-one “working contest” (νεκτών ἐρις ἐργοῦοι)—choose your weapon: sickle or plough and oxen. He thereby wittingly arrogates equality for himself by means of a status-lowering retort to taunter (366-75). Odysseus then at once revises his challenge to shield and spear, thus claiming martial as well as agricultural arete and a salient heroic equivalence. He finally accuses Eurymakhos of bullying and cowardice (376-86). He does not thus admit any weakness but advances the social diminution of his opponent by alienating sympathy. Eurymakhos in response both threatens his presumed inferior with formulaic (but no less essential) nonverbal dark looks and affronts him with baseless allegations and inappropriate (or ironically appropriate) mythic paradigms of incautious drunkenness. Finally the big man assaults the vagrant with the lowly footstool. The threefold, unmodulated overreaction undermines his front of superior dignity. The unprivileged wanderer appears more successful in handling matters of manners than the aristos. The dark look does not “work,” the allegations are obviously false, and the footstool misses. Yet more, a chorus of

42. Odysseus’ verbal conflict on effete Skheria with rude Euryalos about manners suited to athletic challenges (cf. Dickie [1983] 257) provides an “anticipatory doublet” for this contest of words.

43. No one expects a “Protestant work ethic,” of course, but a normal aristos has heroic jobs cut out for him: free and bonded workers to supervise in their appointed tasks (cf. 15.321-24), booty and kleos to acquire regularly, and obligations to peers to fulfill. Sarpedon voices Homeric ideology: basileis earn their magnificent keep: II. 12.310-28.
suitors noisily condemn their fellow's obscene infraction of etiquette. In the paratactic and "repetitious" oral mode of Homeric epic, Telemakhos then boldly returns the insult of drunkenness on the suitors (407) in a way that again drives the suitors to nonverbal lip-biting. Their own colleague Amphinomos, the good "bad guy," also censures Eurymakhos' hostile words and violence against the helpless stranger (414-16). The powerless have their own power. In seventy packed lines, Odysseus maneuvers the suitors into ethical faults and social lapses, both by word and act and by commission and omission.

Eurymakhos had issued a challenge suitable to silence or remove subordinates. Odysseus counterchallenged him, however, as equal. A master's job offer was countered by a peer's call for level competition. Eurymakhos responds not only to insults but to covert claims of equality latent in the challenge. The aristocrat has been verbally boxed in. Should he accept the beggar's presumptuous "offer," he treats him as worthy peer; should he refuse it, he must appear cowardly. So he tries to avoid the lethal social dilemma by nasty looks, words (καὶ δέλων), and humiliating physical attack. By reacting so strongly, he dishonors himself. The attack boomerangs on the attacker, and he, not his opponent, loses face because "the disparity between the two antagonists is unequivocal." Odysseus, that is, merely crouches in self-defense to avoid the stool. He momentarily returns to acknowledged inferiority, passivity, to make the suitor look foolish and unbalanced. His humility, "by emphasizing his weakness, highlights the arbitrary and immoderate character of the offense." Eurymakhos has let slip the "contempt gambit" of abstaining from dignifying reply. In any case, disdain here might have been read as "a mask for pusillanimity."44

Odysseus' task as beggar is to foreground defenselessness, but Athene desires the disguised hero to provoke egregious and reckless offense (18.346-50). Always on guard, he repeatedly catches the suitors off guard. Odysseus quickly grasps sympathetic Eumaios' cues, and, like Penelope, locates fissures among the insolent banqueteers. "Every exchange contains a more or less dissimulated challenge." All objects are chess-pieces in games of face and honor. The body, face, and mouth also maintain or damage honor. Odysseus levered limited recognition of a beggar's honor in order to insinuate himself into megaron society. Telemakhos contrasts their own full bellies to his obligation of feeding the beggar (18.408, 20.262-67). Penelope with a woman's submissive self-assertion manipulates their residual sense of normal "fair play" to obtain a beggar's (modified) chance at the bow.

More often than not in real life, "moves" are unexplained and unargued. Social practice, a part of ideology, depends on implicit rules. Charity to the weak, handouts to the hungry, generosity to the guest are axioms that not even the suitors, guests themselves, can openly contradict. The concepts wear the cloak

44. The Odyssey here intertextually (Pucci [1987]) "answers" the Iliad's confrontation between contemptible Thersites and elite Odysseus: weak, bad, and ugly heckler versus good and heroic institutional leader. Humiliation at Troy edifies the masses as well as penalizes the immediate culprit. Expedient self-denial in Ithaka trumps vulgar pride based on power. Stillness can speak louder than aggressive abuse from any mouth. The differences may outweigh the similarities in interchanges, but both "little guys" engage our sympathy and probably the original audiences'; Thalmann (1988) 25.
of universality. When Aithon stops being humble or the wielders of power quietly stop feeding him, the crisis requires explicit statements of ideology.

Zeus Xenios suffuses the narrative's system of rewards, crimes, and punishments. Omnipresent in concatenated scenes of fulfillment or violation (Books 9-12), he yet remains notably absent from the suitors' repertoire of social exchange. Disguised Odysseus must mobilize his material and political interests under the guise of divine authority, social institutions, and ethical impeccability. He conceals "real" high status in order to put himself further in the right by assumed low status. He beats the "kinglets" at their own games (including megaron-mobility, strength, manners-manipulation, and archery), abides by their implicit rules (for the most part), accepts their verbal forms and performs their chores, and even "wins [some of] the group over to his side by ostentatiously honouring the values the group honours." The dominant suitors have the greatest interest in maintaining publicly recognized virtues and marks of honor. The suitors' stage should reflect their front of power and eminence: regulated competition for the bride and spontaneous generosity to those disadvantaged by gender, age, wealth, or other marks of status (Penelope, Telemakhos, Iros, Theoklymenos, and Aithon).

Their comic shuffling meets with deserved destruction. The Odyssey poet, like the Iliad poet, frequently questions any equation of heroic moral and military excellence with divine or high birth. The suitors expose the deficiencies of the old order determined by birth.46

They cannot finally control or alter the rules. They misread omens from Odyssey 2 onwards, they fall for Penelope's ruses, Telemakhos outwits them in his route and time of return, even before Odysseus does. They abuse the beggar, the vagrant, and the fugitive. Even when dead, sadder but no wiser. Amphimedon grotesquely misinterprets Penelope's proper cleverness (24.167-69); he is still misreading women, children, and beggars. Misdirection is a Laertid and Homeric hallmark technique for foiling peer and audience anticipation. The suitors' shoddy perversions of heroic rituals dismantle the Iliad's more heroic paradigm. Traditional concepts of moral nobility through lineage often appear here to be superficial and hollow, shopworn relics of another era, although (or because) Nestor and Helen still swear by them. Personal virtue emerges rather from humble men and women, and from the currently lowest not least, Eurykleia, Eumaios, Philoitios, and disguised Odysseus.47

45. Bourdieu (1977) 10-14, 22, 192 supplies the quotations in the previous six paragraphs.
46. Morris (1986) 123-27 believes, to my surprise, that the poems glorify basileis, "legitimize a desired structure of social dominance," and enshrine the "right" sort of society from an "elite viewpoint." Homer was no Karl Marx, but insecure, backpeddling Agamemnon, Akhilleus, and the preposterous suitors provide a poor mirror for nobility; cf. P. Rose (1988); Thalmann (1988) 26-28. Part of the house itself, servants usually acquiesce silently, a nonverbal sign of accepted submission, as with Phemios, Medon, and even "remarried" Penelope (23.361-65). Their suggestions are routinely rejected and their fidelity needs testing. Some servants dismiss proper behavior: 16.305-20; Olson (1992) 222. Nevertheless, the retainers Argos, Eumaios, Eurykleia, and Philoitios (20.194-96) are better mannered, more noble spirits and more perceptive players than the wooers. We should only cautiously surmise ideology from (assumed) contemporary expectations, since we confess ignorance about the composition of Homer's audiences.
47. The bondsmen Eumaios and Eurykleia are of noble lineage (15.413, 1.429).
"Take and give. I do not begrudge you. In fact, I command it," says presumptive owner Telemakhos to the suitors (17.400). Not mere peevishness and sarcasm (thus ad loc. Stanford and Russo), Telemakhos intentionally goads the suitors to abuse xenie once more, and in a worse way, and before other publics. Athene desires their social missteps (e.g., 18.346-48, 20.284-86). Thus they maltreat the code of behavior that they pretend to uphold. The suitors fail to maintain an "acceptable self," fail to manage "expression games," and fail to repay obligations of indebted basileis.

Overt and covert symbolic acts indicate disassociation and injured innocence in this narrative. The suitors, Athene, and repeatedly the Laertids bring to public attention their opponents’ overstepping of recognized limits. Antinoos (and later others) rehearses Penelope’s successful evasions and deceptions in the agore confrontation in order to curry public sympathy (2.85-128). The shrewd hero draws moral and social strength from flaunting socioeconomic weakness. He converts personal need into public disapprobation for suitorial deeds. The suitors cannot control symbolic meanings of their words and movements of their bodies. Their comedy portrays social ineptitude and a fragile ad hoc social order.

Their very words backfire, just as their nonverbal behaviors do. Thrown bones and kicks eventually recoil to destroy the pampered perpetrators. Irony is present, repeatedly enhanced by the suitors’ misapprehensions of the realities of power. Out of awareness, they bite their lips in exasperation at Telemakhos’ increasing boldness. The string of strange nonverbal events in Book 20 is ominous in every sense: a crack of thunder, a bird omen, involuntary human acts, climaxing in the suitors’ surreal hysterical fit of loud laughter (20.101, 242, 345-49). Homer often favors paralinguistic phenomena to characterize bad manners.

4. Nonverbal Leakage

Unintended self-disclosure, sometimes ungovernable bodily expression ("leakage"), usefully reports to us others’ hidden agendas. We covertly read and check attempts at misleading and self-aggrandizing self-presentation (social “face”). In a warrior’s world of braggadocio and macho posturing, the Laertid clan is remarkable for skill in verbal and nonverbal self-control, in hiding true sentiments and in emitting false revelations of weakness, as family members engineer
others’ expectations of their moves. *Lip- and limb-service* to societal norms presents a “veneer of consensus” that allows them to respond in unexpected ways. These disruptive and divisive maneuvers embarrass the pretentious companions’ *modus vivendi* as they delight the safely separate audience.

One comic element arises from *clashes* of verbal and nonverbal signals. People usually discern the truth of such conflicts by the *nonverbal* channel. Iros talks big but shrinks from actual combat; Eumaios talks poor and humble but entertains with lavish, well nigh princely generosity. Odysseus begs and pleads for bread and gentle reception but never flinches from kicks and blows. The suitors brag about power and prestige but then cower before few opponents. The nonverbal act subverts the words, “speaks louder” than deflatable rhetoric.

Other characters appear less skillful in face-to-face heroic encounters than Odysseus, in part because they leak self-betraying signals unawares, such as lip-biting suitors, smiling Telemakhos, or insufficiently discrete Eurykleia (18.410, 16.476-77, 19.476-81). “Leakage” surfaces while the chiefs struggle unsuccessfully to deceive, that is, to suppress spontaneous affect displays such as tears, laughter, verbal frustration, or anger (2.24 & 81, 20.358; 21.248-50; 20.268). Their nonverbal behavior signals psycho-physically their loss of social control. Situations begin to elude their will. Interlocutors receiving “non-congruent messages,” contradiction among verbal, vocal, and visual channels, depend on nonverbal behavior for more reliable data. Verbal arrogation of status or statements of approval, if conflicting with body language, fail to persuade children and even alert adults.

Telemakhos and Odysseus chronically step “out of line” in order to expose pseudo-gallantry and the political order constructed by the *basileis*. Odysseus’ “faulty interaction” punctures the ideological assumptions that undergird the semi-public proceeding. Instead of renewed submission to authority, one observes passive resistance, strategic transgression of rank, examples of “leakage.” The wooers’ words and gestures defend the established order; Laertids deflect weapons of the dominant class and turn them against their mouthpieces. Telemakhos’ and Odysseus’ challenges remind the suitors of their “dissensus,” that they have contrived a false comradely reality. Everyone has coherent patterns of appropriate, unconscious conduct, but the suitors want to be what they are not. The expressive masks of congeniality that they display in face-to-face interaction with Telemakhos drop, or “go out of play,” when he leaves the (banquet) scene. Homer conveys this disjunction by showing them squabbling with each other over the beggar’s table rights or dividing over how to disestablish Telemakhos.

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52. Even if he subconsciously now or later covertly realizes that the stranger is his former master, as Roisman (1990) 219-21 well argues, Eumaios repeatedly emphasizes Zeus’ laws and expectations: he would provide equivalent entertainment for another (14.56-61, 388-89, 402-06). Roisman, p. 229, however, believes that the “best fat hog” of the second meal would be felonious waste for any guest other than the herder’s master. We agree that Odysseus repeatedly hints at true identity in various encounters, verbally and nonverbally giving himself away to those whom he would like to trust.


54. Goffman (1959) 121 discusses social masks. For example, 4.659-74: when they learn of Telemakhos’ unexpected escape, the suitors sit in a huddle, their contests stop. Antinoos develops blazing eyes and grunts at being balked: δειει τιμάω τίμων — / “Ω πότοι ...” A brief doxography of attitudes...

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Odysseus’ situational improprieties of word and gesture would be deemed psychotic in an equal, but they appear downright suicidal in an unempowered inferior. His attempt to “hustle” co-participation in the focused “action” of the bow ignores hierarchical spacing and exclusionary turn-taking. The leakage intentionally uncovers issues of politesse and hierarchy-acknowledgment. The bold move doubles their humiliation (status and skill), but its audacity nearly leaks out the entire disguise and plan of revenge. Odysseus cuts off his “nose in order to destroy the other’s face.”55 His grudging acceptance by the companions as privileged local beggar has implicitly pledged him to maintain his (low, distant, subjugated, “knows his place”) position in the ceremonial order. His status should have no slightable self. He should desist from any activity whenever requested to do so, but he, then Penelope and Telemakhos, resist and insist on some version of privilege. His turn at the divinatory instrument, the bow, would put the established suitiorial social selves in jeopardy, as is made explicit, for he is baser (χειρόω) and yet might turn out to be better (ῥηθισίω [ἄν] ἔτραυσσε, 21.325-28). The suitors’ illusions of self-determinacy at risk-taking are exposed. What seemed avoidable but chosen and acceptable risk (a game, that is) becomes dangerous and other-imposed, by the ephemeral noble.

Antinoos urgently tries to exclude the vagrant from bow competition among the volatile nobles (21.285-310). Recalling in a minatory manner the intruder’s originally unearned “gift” of a fair portion of food, his real but limited license to conversation, his exclusive position of welcome beggar at the megaron’s table, and the cautionary paradigm of the drunk centaur Eurytion, the chagrined nobleman now threatens Odysseus with negative “gifts,” mutilation and bondage. He tells him to sit down, keep apart, and shut up. He wants the vagrant to “keep his place, stay put.” Despite Antinoos’ strenuous effort to ring down the stage manager’s curtain of (the dominant class’s) propriety, in the bow contest Odysseus makes the competition happen. He takes possession of the bow with Telemakhos’ crucial support. He takes the prizes by superior guile. The wanderer’s very composure and presence of mind doubly dis-graces them: under pressure in the theater of competitive public performance, they bluster, threaten, pale, huddle, and scatter. As Iros’ trembling betrays his fear, so suitors’ labile complexions growing pale, wild glances, and mindless stampeding reveal perturbation. They unheroically “leak,” they express “overflow of affect.” 56 Their fear is palpable. He both outpoises and outshoots them.


towards Thersites in Iliad 2 illustrates the pitfalls of an attribution even there of “univocal intention of the bard”; P. Rose (1988): 6-11. Thersites presents an indictment of Agamemnon “Most Kingly” parallel to Akhilleus’ vociferations. He expresses the grudges and discontents inarticulately shared by the mass of soldiers. His explicitly ugly appearance does not undercut his perfectly rational and logical challenge. Homer is aware that appearance and reality do not always jibe; cf. the very theme of the return of the disguised husband. Thalmann (1988), esp. 26-28, sketches issues of “heroic ideology” in the Iliad, esp. the Thersites incident, as he liberates that epic from univocal “aristocratic” ideology. Odysseus of the Odyssey achieves what Odysseus of the Iliad prevented Thersites from doing.
5. Conclusions

The suitors’ stratagem turns Odysseus’ private estate into public property (δήμος: 20.264-65). By dining without permission, against the heir’s or master’s will (1.374-80, 1.403 [hypocritical], 2.311, 3.213, 16.94: ἀέκτητι), and in their despite (14.164, 18.144: ἀτιμάζειν), without counter-service or reciprocated meals (1.375-76 =2.129-40; νήπιοιον: 1.160, 377 =2.142, 14.417, 18.280, etc.), the suitors intend to impoverish or remove Telemakhos. Telemakhos is wasting away: τὰ δὲ πολλὰ κατάνεται (2.55-67, 17.537, 19.530-34). He becomes victim, not companion, source of booty and mirth rather than granter of big-man largesse. The suitors act without warrant as banquet-masters (κοιρανεύοντι: 13.377, 20.234; ἀνάγκη), commanding food and epic poems while mishandling sacral libation, sacrifice, and secular geras (20.297), mark of exceptional consideration. Their friendly words and gestures for Telemakhos are decoded by derisive sounds and lethal preparations for his murder.

Telemakhos’ original denunciation, a plan to eject them through help of an assembly, had exposed their villainy. Their elaborate show, however, cannot be fully discredited by ordinary male means or womanly tact and guile, but only by superior force or another show that manipulates rules that everyone acknowledges. Odysseus in disguise employs less confrontational stratagems of deferral that succeed by temporarily acknowledging the orthodox codes enforced by the suitors themselves. Although beggars may be disqualified by social status from the noble “game,” he and Penelope know that the concept of letting the “best man win” (something) has even wider legitimacy.

At the climax, the suitors have resumed eating Telemakhos’ inheritance (as Agelaos notes: 20.336). Homer deploys a strong alimentary metaphor after Theoklymenos’ anticipatory vision. He closes the scene of merriment over their sweet “heart’s desire” dinner (δείπνον ... ἡ δύ τε καὶ μενοεκέσ) and grand, numerous sacrifice, but their actual end-of-day meal (δόρπον) was to be the most unpleasant possible—the attack that Odysseus and Athene will “set before” them (20.390-94). They will be forced to eat their death. Odysseus, after his prefatory bowshot, resumes the grim metaphor: “Now it’s time for the Akhaians to order their dinner, in daylight” (21.428-29: νῦν δ’ ἔρη καὶ δόρπον Ἀχιοίσσιν τετυκέθαι / ἐν φάτει). Odysseus repeats only the latter, less feast-like term for a meal. The suitors’ sin is expressed by their punishment. Further, Antinoos has raised the wine-cup when the arrow hits him fittingly in the gullet. He drops the cup, he upsets bread and meat with a spastic kick, and, in long-delayed recompense, he bleeds quantities like a pipe (22.8-21). Cup, bread, and meat are likewise spilt, spoiled, and scattered by his clone Eurymakhos (22.83-88). The epic ends near where it began: mannerless banqueteers despoiling another man’s banquet hall. But the moral mess in an immoral, bloodied messhall now at last will be cleaned out.

57. The suitors’ counterplot balances Mentes’ original solution to Telemakhos’ dilemma; cf. 1.274-97 and 16.383-92. See 2.301-22, 4.663-73, 16.369-73. In the English idiom, their discrepant deeds “speak louder than words.”

58. This paragraph is indebted to Simpson (1992) 190-91.
Odysseus has shed mendicant’s cover, assumed identity as victim and “game,” for heroic identity and posture as lethal bowman in Book 22. The suitors’ artificial group loyalties are exposed by ludicrous attempts to shift blame to the ringleaders. They try to ransom their lives by golden reparation, and to desert longtime comrades (22.48-59). The social and personal identities, however, that they have long since freely chosen, cannot now be lightly shrugged off. Their chosen self-images imprison the cowards in flagrantly false self-exculpation. Their disclaimers evince a sudden, equitable, cooperative prudence—transparent at once and, as soon as their plea bargains are rejected, soon belied. When their mask or front of superiority has been spoiled, in a pinch, bargaining with dropped “front,” the surviving suitors try to negotiate as equals. The abortive effort to realign themselves fails because no bonds of obligation survive. They turn to force, but just as princes keep “table dogs” for show, dogs that have no strength or skill, so the handsome suitors, Penelope’s ornamental geese of the dream, muster inadequate fight (17.307-17). Tactical failures mirror social failures and misrecognition. Their nonverbal behaviors both display and emphasize incompetence in heroic “give and take.” Their freedom of movement is now controlled by the hero’s lethal force. They are cattle, then fish caught in a net and stacked in a pile (22.299-300, 383-89), sacrificial victims or less. The showdown not only resolves the plot’s crises for son, wife, and master, but it also reverses again, now rightside up, the foregoing, suitor-imposed inversions of face and place.

What causes the suitors’ common problems? In a modern “real life” clinical analysis, we might diagnose such individuals and the gang as having brain dysfunction, emotional difficulties, criminal tendencies, or lack of proper experience for learning appropriate etiquette and nonverbal behavior. Obviously such an approach does not apply to oral-traditional or literary creations, folkloric villains, and/or creatures of a “tale-type.” The suitors exist to prove the heroes’ merit, courage, prudence, and martial skill. Their faux pas highlight the heroic couple’s pas de deux. Their brutality serves as a foil to the heroes’ punctilious etiquette. They are not biologically dysfunctional or ready for “remediation.” Their deficits, social, economic, heroic, verbal and nonverbal, acts of commission and omission, advance the narrative. They are, in terms of storytelling desiderata, necessary evils, delightfully wicked devils, some with individualized traits, who oscillate between oppressive interference (blocking moves) and ineffective one-upmanship. Their “character” is defined by the semi-rigid deployment of an epic Gestalt and folktale motifs that they embody. Their words, acts, and gestures proliferate as Homer walks us through their objectionable daily routine. By turns villains and clowns, Homer allows the squatters only one whit of sympathy.

The suitors demonstrate noteworthy nonverbal communication deficit. Such a deficit has two aspects. (1) They fail to read correctly the signals that others emit. This receiving category includes their usually obtuse reactions to Telemakhos’ growing impatience, Theoklymenos’ prophecies, the beggar’s foreshadowing fight with Iros and his passive aggression towards his “betters,”
and Penelope’s penultimate “flirting and fleeing” maneuvers. They mismanage even verbal quarrel contests, in which the beggar successfully denigrates his opponents. (2) The other aspect consists of failure to express appropriate and effective signals of one’s own. This *sending* category for the suitors includes rowdy crowding into the manor house, speaking out of turn and out of place, and social-control maneuvers that misfire and appear as unwarranted bullying (e.g., “ageist” insults about baldness). Homer ascribes to the suitors nearly everything nasty but halitosis and body odor. They show systemic disrespect for, and disregard of, others’ time and territory—they are out-of-bounds “space invaders,” short on “excuse me” awareness.  

The suitors are locked up in a pleasant present, an option that Odysseus rejected in Lotus-land, among Kirke’s well-fed pigs, and faced with Kalypso’s offer of her eternal youth. They misconstrue social amenities and divine signs while sipping their aperitifs. They fail to control Penelope, then Telemakhos, even the vagabond, and eventually their own actions.  

The blundering louts pose no threat, Athene knows, but Austin is wrong to deny them “any significant part.” By the bow contest, Penelope invites them to compete with the hero who disappeared twenty years ago. Their failure even to string it proves once again their unworthiness, even in brute strength. They fail many tests in both *metis* and *bie*; this is but the penultimate. Their inadequacy plays the foil to Odysseus’ ambidextrous competence.

The suitors’ collective bad faith consistently tries to box in, confine, and define Laertid personnel. Melantho/ios is suborned, Laertes and Eumaios are driven far off. Telemakhos is nearly silenced and removed by threats and taunts; Penelope is severely constrained by gossip and by the automatic gender-policing that patrols the narrow perimeter of the beautiful, nubile princess on Skheria or Ithaka.

The priceless princess and the once feckless little prince must bluff past jailers and control time and tempo even when they cannot restore altered social rules. Their mobilizing capacity (fighting men) is small, so also their redeemable symbolic capital (favors owed, prestige acquired, honors due). The suitors’ grip on institutions seems effective until one outlander refuses to remain complicitously silent. The idlers’ socially sanctioned usurpation, “euphemized violence,” superficially shows respect for persons—Penelope’s unpleasant spousal choice, Telemakhos’ precarious inheritance, and one beggar’s handouts. Nevertheless, their gifts, piety, and social honor barely mask physical force and verbal violence (browbeating, taunts, talk of mutilation) lurking in the wings for all “unequals.” The suitors will not decamp until Penelope chooses one of their number, they try to kill the legitimate heir, and they assault and batter the Zeus-protected beggar repeatedly. All household servants and extramural parasites

60. 20.49-51; Austin (1975) 223.
live under perpetual threat. The suitors’ latent violence honors the heroic code of conduct mainly “in the breach,” and only when it suits their perceived self-interest.

The suitors, although their part is more essential to the story than Thersites’ to his, are easy to reduce to bumptious clowns, to caricatures of swains and villains. They are, indeed, multifunctional, serving the folktale’s necessity for heroic competitors for the bride’s hand, upstart challengers and unjust guests, and indictments of the lower rungs of the basileis system.

The Odyssey—like Hesiod’s Works and Days—criticizes the system endorsed by greedy basileis. For instance, King Alkinoos needs reminding about accepting a suppliant; Menelaos’ gatekeeping companion Eteoneus forgets his manners; the “upper-class” suitors ignore Athene/Mentes at the door; Menelaos disregards his own proverbs about excessive hospitality. Penelope’s praise of Odysseus clearly implies a less satisfactory average ruler (4.686-95). The abuses and gaffes of noblemen and “kings” are opposed to generous receptions provided by the poor and/or (relatively) powerless: Nausikaa, Telemakhos, Philoities, Penelope, and pig-driver Eumaios, the perfect host who shames supposed superiors and exhibits best the disjunction between imposed status and true civility.

Thus the suitors’ nonverbal behavior belies and overrides their words. This incongruity between external forms and internal sentiment is thematic. In Book 1 Telemakhos says nothing of Athene’s epiphany to guests or mother but prepares for departure; Eurykleia is suborned to deceive mother; Odysseus develops identities and suitable mannerisms for friend and foe; Eumaios entertains the veteran and perhaps recognized master lavishly while apologizing for furnishing meager fare to a stranger; Eurykleia recognizes Odysseus’ scar but is forbidden to announce it; Penelope recognizes husband before her gestures admit it; Eurykleia is again prohibited from voicing joy. Body language is designed to deceive. Suitors’ smiles hide lethal plans; beggarly humble postures and gestures conceal plots to seize control; Telemakhos manipulates his image of helpless youth; Penelope’s seductive cameo appearance(s) support a stalling strategy, not sexual surrender.

Expressive behaviors often convey the polar opposite of actual intent or sentiment. The poet’s ultimate ironies center on the bow, the significant, even defining object. We observe the entreating beggar’s last begging and musings about strength destroyed (21.281-84); the mistress’ scorn for suitors who fear losing the grand prize (her) to the stranger/guest of Odysseus, Ἀνδροκόρος; and Eumaios’ oscillations while toting the bow. Finally, seated
Odysseus controls the bow in a way verbally so like, yet utterly unlike Eurymakhos' ineffective fondling and wrestling with it (21.393-95; cf. 245-46; also implied comparison to their courting):

... ὃ δ' ἡδη τόξον ἐνώμα
πάντη ἀναστρωφῶν, πειρώμενος ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα.

... Odysseus now handled the bow
Turning it up and down every which way, testing it here and there.

The pattern insists that “things cannot be trusted to be what they seem.” The obtuse suitors have not learned that basic fact. They only analyze correctly when they sarcastically and insincerely praise the stranger as “connoisseur, bow-thief, bow-owner, bow-maker, expert at villainy” (21.397-400). Odysseus has set up the suitors for a surprise. Homer sets up the blind audience repeatedly for “thwarted expectations.” Odysseus tests and scrutinizes everyone and everything before revelation. The Odyssey’s most ominous nonverbal communication is the twang emitted by the tested bowstring, like a swallow’s intelligible speech: χελιδών εἰκέλη σὺδήν. Only here and only now do the suitors understand their perilous situation, somewhat prematurely and beyond the facts as Homeric Analysts point out, and their responding emotion, “big fear,” leaks an involuntary nonverbal behavior, a sudden enjambed pallor: πάσι δ’ ἄρα χρώσ / ἐτράπετο. Mightily does this display of affect override verbal communication in the ensuing lethal interaction.