ARISTOTLE AND THE WOUNDING OF ODYSSEUS
ON MT. PARNASSUS (POETICS 1451 a 22-30)

In the 8th chapter of the Poetics, where Aristotle continues his discussion on the requirements of the plot (μύθος, σύστασις τῶν πραγμάτων) and centers on the unity of the plot, there is one serious problem which interpreters have dealt with in various ways without solving it satisfactorily. It is in the sentence (51 a 22 ff.) in which Aristotle opposes Homer to the other epic poets who have failed to see the characteristics that make a plot ‘one’; they think that a plot is one when it concerns one individual, and have written epics on Heracles and Theseus without taking into account that ‘many things, yes an infinite number, happen to one man, some of which do not establish unity at all, and in the same way one man has many actions, out of which no action which is one can result’.

Homer, on the contrary, did not make this error: ‘Οδύσσειαν ποιῶν οὔχ ἐποίησεν ἵππον δοκεὶ αὐτῷ συνεβῆ, οὐν πληγήκας μὲν ἐν τῷ Παρνασσῷ, μανήκαι δὲ προσποιήσασθαι ἐν τῷ ἀγερμῷ, ὃν οὐδὲν βατέρου γενομένου ἀναγκαῖον ἦν ἢ εἰκός βάτερον γενόθηκαι, ἀλλὰ περὶ μίαν πράξιν οὐκ ἠλάτομον τὴν Ὁδύσσειαν συνέστησε, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὴν Τιθάδα. The problem with this sentence is that Aristotle seems to stipulate that Homer did not incorporate the wounding scene of Odysseus on Parnassus (πληγήγας μὲν ἐν τῷ Παρνασσῷ) in the Odyssey, because it would disturb the unity of the plot, whereas in fact the wounding of Odysseus is told at length in the Odyssey (19, 399-466).

Apart from suggestions as though Aristotle possessed a text of the Odyssey in which this scene was missing, or that he had fallen victim to a lapsus memoriae, both of which are very improbable, one solution seems to be accepted by most modern interpreters: Aristotle regarded the wounding scene not as part of the plot of the Odyssey, but as an episode which may be admitted in epic poetry for the sake of variety, provided that it is an oἰκεῖον ἐπεισόδιον. The champions of this solution refer to Aristotle’s treatment of epic poetry, esp. to 59 a 35 ff. (a passage which shows great resemblance in subject matter with our passus in ch. 8) and to 59 b 28-31. This is a plausible solution, but not without its difficulties. In this article I shall first discuss these difficulties; then I shall propose another way of interpreting this sentence, which is proof against these objections and which makes the episode solution superfluous.

The first objection is that Aristotle does not, in this context, enunciate his theory of episodes in epic poetry and actually has not, at this point, so much as mentioned the term ‘episode’ (except at 49 a 28, but there the word refers to the episodes of tragedy). He discusses the coherence of the plot of a tragedy and illustrates this with examples derived from epic: and he is fully justified in doing so because of the great similarity between epic and tragedy, which he has emphasized in 49 b 16-20. Now the admissibility of episodes in epic is one of the most important features in which epic poetry differs from tragedy. It seems very unlikely (for it makes

the text needlessly complicated and confusing) that the whole complex of thought on epic poetry and on episodes is implicitly present in ch. 8 and manifest to the reading public or audience of this part of the text, who have not yet heard anything about episodes and who are no doubt quite familiar with the Odyssey. The second objection is that the other scene, of Odysseus feigning madness at the muster (μονήσει δὲ προσποιήσασθαι ἐν τῷ ἄγεμῳ) does not appear in the Odyssey at all⁶ and is, therefore, not even to be regarded as an episode of the poem, whereas it is mentioned by Aristotle immediately after the example of the wounding scene; thus the distinction between plot and episode seems to have no significance in this context. In addition to this, no modern interpreter has as yet given an adequate explanation of the presence and the function of the particles μὲν and δὲ in this sentence⁷. The third objection is the wording ὡς ἐποίησεν ἀπαντα κτλ. To fit the episode interpretation, the meaning of ποιεῖν must be narrowed into ‘construct a plot’, and the phrase ὡς ἐποίησεν ἀπαντα must be interpreted as ‘he did not incorporate in the plot everything ...’. It is questionable, however, whether the use of ποιεῖν justifies such a specific interpretation⁸, and it is even more doubtful whether one is allowed to do so with an appeal to the verb συνέστησεν (51 a 29): it seems more likely that this distribution of terms marks a distinction in meaning between the general word ποιεῖν and the specific term (in the Poetics) συνιστάναι⁹).

I propose a different interpretation of the passage which steers clear of these difficulties: Aristotle does not state that the wounding scene does not occur in the Odyssey. He intends to emphasize that unity of plot is only established if the events told are coherent with each other and are connected by a necessary or probable relation. He censures poets who concatenate events which happen to one individual without being necessarily or probably related to each other. His scope is not the appropriateness of each scene per se, but the function and place of every scene with regard to the other scenes within the umbrella context of the action. We must, then, paraphrase 51 a 24 ff. as follows: ‘Homer, when writing the Odyssey, did not write down everything that happened to Odysseus in the context of one poem, e.g. that he was wounded on Parnassus and in the context of the same poem that he feigned madness at the muster; for it is not necessary or likely that when the one occurs, the other occurs too’. Aristotle argues that Homer did not connect the wounding scene with the other scene, as may well have been done in a different epic on Odysseus (the text says ὡς ἐποίησεν ποιεῖν, without definite article: ‘writing an Odyssey’) which showed the same defects as the poems on Heracles and Theseus¹⁰. On the contrary, Aristotle may have thought, the wounding scene is dealt with by Homer with great skill because in his Odyssey it occurs in a context (the Νίπτεια) in which it is highly significant and appropriate.

Arguments in favour of this interpretation are the following. (1) The wounding scene actually occurs in the Odyssey. It is extremely unlikely that Aristotle overlooked this, or that he intended to say that Homer did not