Notes on Homer’s *Odyssey* and Aristotle’s Poetic Analysis Thereof

1. The *Odyssey* is the story of the return of the king of Ithaca, Odysseus, from his heroic participation in the Trojan war to his palace, where his wife and son have awaited him for twenty years, and which has become occupied by the prominent young nobles of the kingdom (the “suitors”), who are trying to supplant him. The primary narrative of the *Odyssey* relates his liberation from captivity on her island Ogygia by the nymph Calypso, his survival of the ruin of his raft in a storm at sea, his sojourn among the hospitable and semi-divine Phaeacians, during which he tells his story and that of his men from the time they departed from Troy to his arrival, alone, shipwrecked, at Ogygia, the return to Ithaca with the help of the Phaeacians, Odysseus’ disguise as a beggar, the contest of the bow, and the final defeat and slaying of the suitors. The goddess Athena helps him and his son Telemachus at every step.

2. The *Odyssey* is divided into 24 books, easily falling thematically into six groups of four:
   a. Books I-IV: From the Council of the Gods on Mt. Olympus, at which it is decided that it is time to permit Odysseus to return home in spite of his having wronged Poseidon, and the summons of Telemachus in Ithaca by Athena to seek his father, to the council of the suitors and the departure of Telemachus from Ithaca. (I am convinced that Ithaca is either the modern island of Ithaca or one of the neighboring islands.)
   b. Books V-VIII: From the visit of Hermes to Calypso with the instructions from the Council of the Gods to release Odysseus through his arrival, shipwrecked, on the shore of Phaeacia and most of his stay there. (Opinions as to the locations of Ogygia and Phaeacia vary from the Eastern Mediterranean to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. According to Wikipedia, Ogygia was sometimes called “Atlantis” in antiquity.)
   c. Books IX-XII: Odysseus, having revealed his identity to the Phaeacians, tells the tale of his journey and that of his men from their victory at Troy to his arrival alone, shipwrecked, at Ogygia.
   e. Books XVIII-XX: The period of his interactions with the suitors and with his wife Penelope disguised as a beggar. The plan to stage the contest of the bow and kill the suitors.
   f. Books XXI: The climactic contest of the bow, the terrible slaying of the suitors, the war with the suitors’ families, and the final reconciliation.

3. Analysis in terms of Aristotle’s six parts of tragedy (according to Aristotle, the *Odyssey* is a tragedy, but one with a less than ideal plot structure).
   a. Plot (sequence of episodes, or action): as above. Although less than ideal, the plot of the *Odyssey* is complex, having both recognition and reversal.
b. Character: Heroic and noble, characterized by cleverness, wariness, and talent for deceit (all summed up in the epithet “Polytropon,” which ambiguously also signifies the extent of his travels). This attribute creates his problem in the poem, because by means of it he deceives and blinds the Cyclops Polyphemus, enabling him and most of his men to escape being eaten, but incurring the anger of Polyphemus' father, the god Poseidon, who obstructs his return.

c. Thought: Aristotle conceives of this as expressed by the tragic hero by means of rhetoric. Odysseus' primary uses of rhetoric are in his telling of his trials and thus winning the Phaeacians' help, his subjection of both the goddess Athena and his faithful wife Penelope to searching and deceptive examination, and his carrying out his plan against the suitors through disguise and trickery.

d. Language: in Aristotle's view, the language of Homer is matchless—clear and yet elevated, with appropriate and affecting use of metaphor. (The poetic effect of Homer's language, in my opinion, cannot be reproduced in translation.)

e. Spectacle: in Aristotle's view, spectacle is confined to dramatic, as opposed to epic tragedy, in which its role is played by narrative. Homer is the most imitative of poets, in that he puts more of the narrative in the mouth of the characters than do other poets. (A pet theory of mine is that Homer is actually the Character Demodocus, the blind bard of Phaeacia. (Homer in Greek means “blind.”) This would mean that 100% of the narrative is attributed to characters, since the poet himself is a character.)

f. Song: in epic, the totality of the poem is sung.