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# Multi-layered Mentoring in the *Odyssey*

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How do we account for the rapport that clicks in place between father and son at the bow contest? What actions and events lead up to that climactic moment? How does Athena (in her various forms) prepare both Odysseus and Telemachus to be attuned to one another?

## Part I: Athena as Mentor

The poem's first word, *andra*, "the man," invites us to focus on the human world. The gods function at a separate level, in another realm. Though they may *appear* to control human action, their interventions in fact tend to duplicate what the humans would do on their own. [1] This is especially true of Athena. She not only manipulates the plot and helps define the traits of specific characters—two meta-functions—she also influences human action whenever she enters the story world as a character. At a dramatic level, a principle called "double causation" or "over-determination" is in play: gods and humans cause the same actions and impulses simultaneously, and both can be held responsible. [2] I do not deny that, for the characters, the gods are very real: for Odysseus, for example, and on occasion for Telemachus, Athena literally stands by and gives advice. Nevertheless, the principle of double causation is a powerful interpretive tool for understanding causation in epic.

Two exchanges on Mount Olympus frame the human actions of the poem, the first in Book 1, the last in Book 24. In both, Zeus and Athena discuss the plight of Odysseus. In Book 1 Zeus laments Aegisthus' failure to listen to the gods' explicit forewarning "not to kill the man (Agamemnon), nor court his lady for marriage" (1.32–43). [3] Though Aegisthus takes no personal responsibility for his reckless actions, Zeus blames him. [4] In contrast, Athena raises the question of a godly man, Odysseus. He deserves divine favor but is suffering, held captive on Ogygia for seven years. With Zeus' approval, she decides to "intervene" and set both Odysseus and Telemachus on their way. She will advance Odysseus' homecoming and jump-start the maturation of Telemachus, and, in doing so, she will define the role of mentor.

In the second exchange, in Book 24 Athena asks her father (24.473–476) whether the Ithacan factions are to have "evil fighting and terrible strife, or friendship." Zeus replies (24.478–480):

τέκνον ἐμόν, τί με ταῦτα διείρεαι ἠδὲ μεταλλᾷς;
οὐ γὰρ δὴ τοῦτον μὲν ἐβούλευσας νόον αὐτή,
ὡς ἦ τοι κείνους Ὀδυσεὺς ἀποτίσεται ἐλθών;

My child, why do you ask and question me in these matters?
For was not this your own intention, as you have counseled it,
how Odysseus should make his way back, and punish those others?

Here Zeus affirms Athena's role as "the guiding hand of the poet" [5] —in charge of the *nostos* and *tisis* plots. He sees her as a cunning schemer who moves the plot along. The plans she initiates have enabled Odysseus to reach his home, despite Poseidon's obstructions. The opposing actions of Athena and Poseidon have given structure to the *Odyssey* plot. The epic ends when Athena is satisfied, and Poseidon will be placated by Odysseus' planting of the oar. [6]

In the *Odyssey*, except for the final scene, the gods stay out of the human realm, in the background, rather than overtly pressuring humans to act one way or another. Often, an element of doubt as to a god's identity gives humans agency. They incur blame whenever recklessness, *atasthalia*, leads them astray, as in the case of Aegisthus, the crew of Odysseus, and the suitors.

Of the three major gods in the poem, only Athena enters the world of humans in human form. She advises and guides rather than using her divine authority to issue commands. [7] For example, she engineers Odysseus' release from captivity on Calypso's Island indirectly, by persuading Zeus to send Hermes to demand that release. And she herself goes to Ithaca, disguised as Mentes, then Mentor, to stir Telemachus to act. She hovers nearby after Odysseus returns to Ithaca, easing his transition to domestic life and distracting Penelope when that helps to advance his goals. She closes the epic by reassuming the guise of Mentor to persuade a willing Odysseus to end the quarrel and swear a solemn oath of peace ever after with the suitors' relatives.

## Part II. Athena and Telemachus

Before Athena's arrival, Telemachus has not yet come of age, though he is 20. With his father long absent and the suitors besieging his household's resources and threatening his inheritance as they woo his mother, he feels helpless. He daydreams of his father returning and scattering all the suitors and reclaiming his rightful place (1.115–117). Mentor, the Ithacan companion (*hetairos*) and elder (*geron*) to whom Odysseus entrusted all his household when he left for Troy (2.224–227), has been ineffective, unable to restrain the suitors and unable to help Telemachus mature. [8] Telemachus needs an avuncular mentor to help him become a man.

After her consultation with Zeus on Olympus (1.26–95), Athena arrives in Ithaca to fill that void. Her purpose, as she told Zeus, is to make her way to Ithaca,

ὄφρα οἱ υἱὸν
μᾶλλον ἐποτρύνω καί οἱ μένος ἐν φρεσὶ θείω,
εἰς ἀγορὴν καλέσαντα κάρη κομόωντας Ἀχαιοὺς
πᾶσι μνηστήρεσσιν ἀπειπέμεν, οἵ τέ οἱ αἰεὶ
μῆλ' ἁδινὰ σφάζουσι καὶ εἰλίποδας ἕλικας βοῦς.
πέμψω δ' ἐς Σπάρτην τε καὶ ἐς Πύλον ἠμαθόεντα
νόστον πευσόμενον πατρὸς φίλου, ἤν που ἀκούσῃ,
ἠδ' ἵνα μιν κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἔχῃσιν.

so that I may
stir up the son a little, and put some manly vigor (*menos* [9] ) in him
to summon into assembly the flowing-haired Achaeans
and make a statement to all the suitors, who now forever
slaughter his crowding sheep and lumbering horn-curved cattle;
and I will convey him into Sparta and to sandy Pylos
to ask after his dear father's homecoming, if he can hear something,
and so that among people he may win a good reputation (*kleos esthlon*).

1.88–95

Athena arrives at the threshold of the courtyard in Ithaca disguised as Mentes, the leader of the Taphians (105). There the suitors are gathered. Telemachus, the first to spot her, offers hospitality. As they converse (120–323), he tells Athena/Mentes what is going on in the palace and expresses his despair over the probable death of his father. Questioned, the goddess identifies herself as Mentes, guest-friend of Laertes (187–189). She listens attentively and, point for point, addresses his concerns. For example, after she learns about the current sorry state of the palace and hears his fantasy about what would happen "were they to see him return…" (163–165), she offers her own corresponding fantasy of Odysseus' returning:

εἰ γὰρ νῦν ἐλθὼν δόμου ἐν πρώτῃσι θύρῃσι
σταίη, ἔχων πήληκα καὶ ἀσπίδα καὶ δύο δοῦρε,
τοῖος ἐὼν οἷόν μιν ἐγὼ τὰ πρῶτ' ἐνόησα …

I wish he could come now to stand in the outer doorway
of his house, wearing a helmet and carrying a shield and two spears,
the way he was the first time that ever I saw him …

1.255–257

Their shared image of Odysseus at the threshold picks up on Telemachus' daydream before her arrival, when as he sat among the suitors, his heart was deep grieving with him,

ὀσσόμενος πατέρ' ἐσθλὸν ἐνὶ φρεσίν, εἴ ποθεν ἐλθὼν
μνηστήρων τῶν μὲν σκέδασιν κατὰ δώματα θείη,
τιμὴν δ' αὐτὸς ἔχοι καὶ δώμασιν οἷσιν ἀνάσσοι.

imagining in his mind his great father, how he might come back
and throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter,
and hold his rightful place and be lord of his own possessions.

1.115–117

When he claims his father has died by an evil fate (166) and lost his day of homecoming (168), his guest assures him that "no death on the land has befallen the great Odysseus." She attributes his long delay to captivity by savages (196–199), sparing him the mention of his father's dalliance with the nymph Calypso. Then she predicts his imminent return:

οὔ τοι ἔτι δηρόν γε φίλης ἀπὸ πατρίδος αἴης
ἔσσεται, οὐδ' εἴ πέρ τε σιδήρεα δέσματ' ἔχῃσιν·
φράσσεται ὥς κε νέηται, ἐπεὶ πολυμήχανός ἐστιν.

He will not long be absent from the beloved land of his fathers.
even if the bonds that hold him are iron, but he will be thinking (*phrassetai*)
of a way to come back, since he is a man of many resources (*polumechanos*).

1.203–205

Telemachus, still unsure of his own identity, complains that "Nobody really knows his own father" (216: οὐ γάρ πώ τις ἑὸν γόνον αὐτὸς ἀνέγνω). [10] Athena/Mentes counters by highlighting his physical resemblance to his absent father (208–209). To his vehement claim that the gods have caused his father to disappear (235) and the storm winds have carried him away, out of sight, out of knowledge (241–242), she responds with empathy and wishful thinking:

τοῖος ἐὼν μνηστῆρσιν ὁμιλήσειεν Ὀδυσσεύς·
πάντες κ' ὠκύμοροί τε γενοίατο πικρόγαμοί τε.

I wish that such an Odysseus would come now among the suitors.
Then all would find death was quick, and marriage a painful matter.

1.265–266

The more Athena/Mentes shares Telemachus' wish for Odysseus' return, the stronger their bond. They are becoming likeminded. The goddess is enterprising and resourceful (*polumechanos*), like her protegee. Using a maxim, she shifts from the optative to the indicative mood:

ἀλλ' ἦ τοι μὲν ταῦτα θεῶν ἐν γούνασι κεῖται,
ἤ κεν νοστήσας ἀποτίσεται, ἦε καὶ οὐκί,
οἷσιν ἐνὶ μεγάροισι· σὲ δὲ φράζεσθαι ἄνωγα,
ὅππως κε μνηστῆρας ἀπώσεαι ἐκ μεγάροιο.

But these things are lying upon the gods' knees:
whether he will come home to his vengeance, here in his household,
or whether he will not. Rather I will urge you to consider
some means by which you can force the suitors out of your household.

1.267–270

Turning to practical matters, she issues a series of orders that detail how *he* can thrust the suitors from the palace should his father not return (1.269–305). She proposes a set of "if-then" options that give him leeway to exercise his judgment as time moves forward. Citing the example of young Orestes exacting vengeance in Mycenae (1.298–302). she exhorts Telemachus to emulate him.

This combination of empathy and authority provides interpreters with a model for effective mentoring. To prepares a youth psychologically and practically for the tasks he will face, the mentor has toThe model I've extracted is emergent. And as with Proppian functions, [11] not all the elements will be present in every example of mentoring. But if too many elements are missing, the mentee will not advance toward manhood and self-actualization. And he will not heed the advice offered by the mentor unless the mentor has already established rapport. [12]

Athena's departure "like a bird soaring high into the air" (1.319–320) emboldens Telemachus. He suspects and later is certain that the visitor was Pallas Athena (420 and 444; cf. 323). He sends his mother to her chambers, claiming "Mine is the power (*kratos*) in the household" (359). And he confronts the two lead suitors, Antinous and Eurymachus, albeit to no effect.

As Book 1 ends, Telemachus is still pondering the goddess' advice. And in Book 2, he calls an assembly of townsmen and takes his seat, significantly, in his father's chair. His three speeches at the assembly closely follow the goddess' advice. He expresses his rage at the townsmen, whom he blames for their dishonoring Odysseus and failing to protect his household. Acknowledging his own inability to defend his household, he turns to the suitors present at the assembly and calls for recompense someday. He also forcefully announces to those assembled his intention to make a journey. He answers the objections first of Antinous, who blames Penelope, and then of Eurymachus, who tries to obstruct his plans. Mentor *in propria persona* speaks up toward the end of the assembly, to no avail. That's where we learn that he is the *hetairos* Odysseus left in charge, and where we observe his ineptitude: no one listens.

After the assembly, Athena in the form of Mentor appears to Telemachus and seamlessly takes over the mentoring role that the human Mentor should have played. In the guise of Telemachus, she secures a ship and assembles his agemates to man it. Telemachus himself collects supplies with the help of the nurse Eurycleia. He is beginning to take charge. Gradually, in stops and starts, accompanied first by Athena/Mentor (to Pylos) and then to Sparta by Peisistratus, Nestor's slightly older son, Telemachus shows signs that he is growing up. He still, on occasion, professes inadequacy and still receives reprimands and guidance from Athena/Mentor.

Why does Athena appear in two different guises? As Mentes, a stranger who brings the youth news from beyond the island of Ithaca, Athena sets him on a trajectory toward manhood. She starts the process by dislodging him from a child-like state of aporia and by proposing several plans of action. It will take an insider, Athena/Mentor, a native Ithacan whom everyone knows, to help him implement those plans: to speak at the assembly he convened, secure and man a ship, and sail to the Peloponnesus to visit Pylos and Sparta, where he is recognized and presents himself as Odysseus' son. [13] We can see Mentes as beginning the process and Mentor as moving that process along. Significantly, near the end of his journey, Athena appears to Telemachus in Sparta, undisguised. In a lie, she tells him that his mother is about to marry Eurymachus and he should hurry home (15.1–42). [14]

Athena, as we have seen, orchestrates much of the action that constitute the plot. [15] As a character in the story (as in the epic tradition), she champions Odysseus' successful homecoming and revenge. In like manner, she supports Telemachus, helping him to find news and hear stories of his father, and to claim his own identity as an adult.

Athena's eventual success at mentoring Telemachus contrasts with Zeus' failure to mentor Aegisthus (1.32–44). [16] The suitors too fail to be mentored and take no responsibility, frequently blaming Penelope, even in the Underworld. And, as we learn in the prologue, Odysseus "could not save his companions, hard though / he strove to; they were destroyed by their own wild recklessness, / fools, who devoured the oxen of Helios, the Sun God, / and he took away the day of their homecoming" (1.6–9). Not to listen to the advice or heed the warnings of a wise mentor is deadly; but humans are free to make that choice, and they suffer the consequences.

Athena stays outside the fray of activities in which Telemachus is engaged. She is known and respected like an uncle: supportive, instructive, and cooperative but not competitive. She understands and respects his need for agency. She focuses on his development of judgment and discretion. And she issues orders only after establishing rapport.

Curiously, Nestor intuits what is already happening in Telemachus' life, though he does not realize that Mentor is Athena:

εἰ γάρ σ' ὣς ἐθέλοι φιλέειν γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη,
ὡς τότ' Ὀδυσσῆος περικήδετο κυδαλίμοιο
δήμῳ ἔνι Τρώων, ὅθι πάσχομεν ἄλγε' Ἀχαιοί—
οὐ γάρ πω ἴδον ὧδε θεοὺς ἀναφανδὰ φιλεῦντας,
ὡς κείνῳ ἀναφανδὰ παρίστατο Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη—
εἴ σ' οὕτως ἐθέλοι φιλέειν κήδοιτό τε θυμῷ,
τῶ κέν τις κείνων γε καὶ ἐκλελάθοιτο γάμοιο.

If only gray-eyed Athena would deign to love you as in
those days she used so to take care of glorious Odysseus
in the Trojan country, where we Achaeans suffered miseries;
For I never saw the gods showing such open affection
as Pallas Athena, the way she stood beside him, openly;
If she would deign to love you as she did him, and care for you
In her heart, then some of those people might well forget about marrying.

3.218–224

## Part III. Athena and Odysseus

In Book 13, when the Phaeacian sailors have deposited a sleeping Odysseus on the Ithacan shores, Athena, in the guise of a young shepherd, greets him (13.221–224). They are alike in so many ways. She is a shapeshifter and a liar, he a liar and a skeptic. Both are pragmatic (*polukerdeos, polumechanos*). They banter on the shores of Ithaca, engaging in dialogue and repartee. In response to his lie about his identity and origins, taking the shape of a beautiful and tall women, Athena gives him (and us as interpreters) the most complete and most appreciative description of his character in the entire poem:

κερδαλέος κ' εἴη καὶ ἐπίκλοπος ὅς σε παρέλθοι
ἐν πάντεσσι δόλοισι, καὶ εἰ θεὸς ἀντιάσειε.
σχέτλιε, ποικιλομῆτα, δόλων ἆτ', οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλες,
οὐδ' ἐν σῇ περ ἐὼν γαίῃ, λήξειν ἀπατάων
μύθων τε κλοπίων, οἵ τοι πεδόθεν φίλοι εἰσίν.
ἀλλ' ἄγε, μηκέτι ταῦτα λεγώμεθα, εἰδότες ἄμφω
κέρδε', ἐπεὶ σὺ μέν ἐσσι βροτῶν ὄχ' ἄριστος ἁπάντων
βουλῇ καὶ μύθοισιν, ἐγὼ δ' ἐν πᾶσι θεοῖσι
μήτι τε κλέομαι καὶ κέρδεσιν: οὐδὲ σύ γ' ἔγνως
Παλλάδ' Ἀθηναίην, κούρην Διός, ἥ τέ τοι αἰεὶ
ἐν πάντεσσι πόνοισι παρίσταμαι ἠδὲ φυλάσσω.

It would be a sharp one, and a stealthy one, who would ever get past you
in any contriving; even if it were a god against you.
You wretch, so devious, never weary of tricks, then you would not
even in your own country give over your ways of deceiving
and your thievish tales. They are near to you in your very nature.
But come, let us talk no more of this, for you and I both know
sharp practice, since you are far the best of all mortal
men for counsel and stories, and I among all the divinities
am famous for wit and sharpness; and yet you never recognized
Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus, the one who is always
standing beside you and guarding you in every endeavor.

13.291–301

Odysseus complains of her prolonged abandonment of him and adds that it is difficult, even for a man of good understanding, to recognize her, for she assumes every shape (13.312–313). When he persists in being skeptical, she adds new descriptive terms, thereby further consolidating and even sanctioning his identity:

αἰεί τοι τοιοῦτον ἐνὶ στήθεσσι νόημα:
τῷ σε καὶ οὐ δύναμαι προλιπεῖν δύστηνον ἐόντα,
οὕνεκ' ἐπητής ἐσσι καὶ ἀγχίνοος καὶ ἐχέφρων.

Always you are the same, and such is the mind within you,
and so I cannot abandon you when you are unhappy,
because you are fluent, and reason closely, and keep your head always.

13.330–332

Then the goddess coaches Odysseus, helping him devise his plans, and warning him to endure much grief in silence, and not to reveal his identity. She treats him as if he were a youth coming of age, and he heeds her advice. He moves, in faltering steps, toward full agency in his recovery of his wife and in his triumph over the suitors. Later, in Book 16, outside Eumaeus' lodging, Athena suggests he not keep his identity from his son, and he complies. This, as well as his offer of his seat to Telemachus, sets the tone for his eventual success at mentoring Telemachus.

One reason for that success is his own experience of being mentored by Athena. Another is the fact that the same goddess has prepared Telemachus to receive his father's guidance. On his journey, Nestor in Pylos, and Menelaus and Helen in Sparta have reinforced his reverence for his father and his confidence that he really is the son Odysseus, whom he closely resembles. Moreover, in traveling to the Peloponnesus and returning safely, he has completed one component of his rite of passage and is nearly ready to take over the household in Ithaca. Odysseus, in a partial parallel, has reached a new stage in his life's journey when he and Telemachus first meet. He can afford to be non-competitive with his son, whom he treats as a near ally. He can mentor him if he develops their bond before issuing any orders, and if he doesn't lie. [17]

Odysseus' growth in his ability to mentor can best be appreciated by examining his interactions with two other young men, Euryalus and Amphinomus. As we have already seen, a mentor must build the confidence of his mentee, must be gentle and non-competitive, must not have his own agenda. An affinity between mentor and mentee is a prerequisite for success, and the mentee must be receptive to the mentor's guidance.

### Odysseus and Euryalus

On the island of Scheria—his last stop before reaching Ithaca—Odysseus encounters two youths, of whose rudeness princess Nausicaa has forewarned him. Not knowing who he is, they see him as a stranger with no status at all. When Leodamas invites him to participate in the games, he holds back, telling the prince that his priority is to get home:

Λαοδάμα, τί με ταῦτα κελεύετε κερτομέοντες;
κήδεά μοι καὶ μᾶλλον ἐνὶ φρεσὶν ἤ περ ἄεθλοι,
ὃς πρὶν μὲν μάλα πολλὰ πάθον καὶ πολλὰ μόγησα,
νῦν δὲ μεθ' ὑμετέρῃ ἀγορῇ νόστοιο χατίζων
ἧμαι, λισσόμενος βασιλῆά τε πάντα τε δῆμον.

Laodamas, why do you all urge me on provocatively
to do these things? Cares are more on my mind than games are,
I who before this have suffered much and had many hardships,
and sit here now in the middle of your assembly, longing
to go home, entreating your king for this, and all his people.

8.153–157

Euryalus then mocks the stranger, likening him to a merchant and not an athlete:

οὐ γάρ σ' οὐδέ, ξεῖνε, δαήμονι φωτὶ ἐίσκω
ἄθλων, οἷά τε πολλὰ μετ' ἀνθρώποισι πέλονται,
ἀλλὰ τῷ, ὅς θ' ἅμα νηὶ πολυκλήιδι θαμίζων,
ἀρχὸς ναυτάων οἵ τε πρηκτῆρες ἔασιν,
φόρτου τε μνήμων καὶ ἐπίσκοπος ᾖσιν ὁδαίων
κερδέων θ' ἁρπαλέων· οὐδ' ἀθλητῆρι ἔοικας.

No, stranger, for I do not see that you are like one versed
in contests, such as now are practiced much among people,
but rather to one who plies his ways in his many-locked vessel,
master over mariners who also are men of business,
a man who, careful of his cargo and grasping of profits,
goes carefully on his way. You do not resemble an athlete.

8.159–164

Provoked, Odysseus chides Euryalus. He calls his mind worthless and his words graceless. They spar. [18] His rebuke matches the youth's insult and uses some of the same diction:

ξεῖν', οὐ καλὸν ἔειπες· ἀτασθάλῳ ἀνδρὶ ἔοικας.
οὕτως οὐ πάντεσσι θεοὶ χαρίεντα διδοῦσιν
ἀνδράσιν, οὔτε φυὴν οὔτ' ἄρ φρένας οὔτ' ἀγορητύν.
ἄλλος μὲν γάρ τ' εἶδος ἀκιδνότερος πέλει ἀνήρ,
ἀλλὰ θεὸς μορφὴν ἔπεσι στέφει, οἱ δέ τ' ἐς αὐτὸν
τερπόμενοι λεύσσουσιν· ὁ δ' ἀσφαλέως ἀγορεύει
αἰδοῖ μειλιχίῃ, μετὰ δὲ πρέπει ἀγρομένοισιν,
ἐρχόμενον δ' ἀνὰ ἄστυ θεὸν ὣς εἰσορόωσιν.
ἄλλος δ' αὖ εἶδος μὲν ἀλίγκιος ἀθανάτοισιν,
ἀλλ' οὔ οἱ χάρις ἀμφιπεριστέφεται ἐπέεσσιν,
ὡς καὶ σοὶ εἶδος μὲν ἀριπρεπές, οὐδέ κεν ἄλλως
οὐδὲ θεὸς τεύξειε, νόον δ' ἀποφώλιός ἐσσι.

My friend, that was not well spoken; you seem like one a man who is reckless.
So it is that the gods do not bestow graces in all ways
on men, neither in stature nor yet in brains or eloquence;
for there is a certain kind of man, less noted for beauty,
but the god puts comeliness on his words, and they who look toward him
are filled with joy at the sight, and he speaks to them without faltering
in winning modesty, and shines among those who are gathered,
And people look on him as on a god when he walks in the city.
Another again in his appearance is like the immortals,
but upon his words there is no grace distilled, as in your case
the appearance is conspicuous, and not a god even
would make it otherwise, and yet the mind there is worthless.

8.166–177

The lengthy maxim—a generalization that he applies to the case in hand in the last two lines—lacks any suggestion of a pathway to improvement, or a strategy for combining good looks with intelligence and graceful words. Since Odysseus, as an outsider, has no standing with Euryalus, only a directive from the king can set the youth back on track.

In competing with the Phaeacian youths, Odysseus does not behave like a confident adult. Instead, he acts as if he is on their level, even though he belongs to an older generation. He is caught up with his own narrative role as an athletic hero, and he has some self-doubt over whether his *menos* (life-force) is still intact. His self-preoccupation interferes with his ability to guide a wayward youth.

… ἐγὼ δ' οὐ νῆις ἀέθλων,
ὡς σύ γε μυθεῖαι, ἀλλ' ἐν πρώτοισιν ὀίω
ἔμμεναι, ὄφρ' ἥβῃ τε πεποίθεα χερσί τ' ἐμῇσι.
νῦν δ' ἔχομαι κακότητι καὶ ἄλγεσι· πολλὰ γὰρ ἔτλην
ἀνδρῶν τε πτολέμους ἀλεγεινά τε κύματα πείρων.
ἀλλὰ καὶ ὥς, κακὰ πολλὰ παθών, πειρήσομ' ἀέθλων·
θυμοδακὴς γὰρ μῦθος, ἐπώτρυνας δέ με εἰπών.

… I am not such a new hand
at games as you say, but always, as I think, I have been
among the best when I still had trust in youth (*hebe*) and hands' strength.
Now I am held in evil condition and pain; for I had much
to suffer: the wars of men; hard crossing of the big waters.
But even so for all my troubles I will try your contests,
for your word bit in the heart, and you have stirred me by speaking.

8.179–185

Reflecting on his own capacities as an athlete (8.204–233), Odysseus boasts: "I am not bad in any of the contests where men strive" (214). He cites Philoctetes alone as surpassing him in archery (219). And he refuses to compare himself to men of earlier generations—Heracles or Eurytus of Oechalia—who competed against the immortals with the bow (223–229). [19]

When King Alcinous learns of the quarrel, he sides with Odysseus, and orders Euryalus to make amends "for having spoken out of due measure (*kata moiran*)." With the king's chiding and the fact that Odysseus has just proven his skill at discus throwing (186–198), the youth relents and apologizes. He gives his valued sword as a conciliatory gift (401–405), and bids Odysseus farewell with the respectful form of address: *Chaire, pater o xeine* ("Farewell, father and stranger"). He bids the storm winds catch and carry off any word that was improper and asks the gods to grant Odysseus a safe homecoming "since here, far from your own people, you must be suffering." Cordiality is restored. Odysseus accepts the gift, calls the youth "dear friend," and wishes him prosperity. By the time he departs, the two have formed a reciprocal bond. More importantly, King Alcinous has given his guest a model for reining in unruly youths.

### Odysseus and Amphinomus (18.112–157)

Amphinomus is the most sympathetic and least reckless of Penelope's suitors, the third ranked and said (by Athena) to be the favorite of Penelope for his good sense and discretion (16.398). Twice he opposes Antinous, persuading the other suitors not to murder Telemachus (16.400–405 and 20.240–247). Without having witnessed either of these scenes, Odysseus singles out Amphinomus as a youth with good sense and good lineage. And when he wishes the stranger future prosperity, Amphinomus uses the same formulaic, respectful address as Euryalus: *pater o xeine*, "father and stranger" (18.122–123).

Ζεύς τοι δοίη, ξεῖνε, καὶ ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι,
ὅττι μάλιστ' ἐθέλεις καί τοι φίλον ἔπλετο θυμῷ,
ὃς τοῦτον τὸν ἄναλτον ἀλητεύειν ἀπέπαυσας
ἐν δήμῳ· τάχα γάρ μιν ἀνάξομεν ἤπειρόνδε
εἰς Ἔχετον βασιλῆα, βροτῶν δηλήμονα πάντων.

May Zeus, stranger, and all the other immortals give you
what you want most of all and what is dear to your spirit,
for having stopped the wandering of this greedy creature
in our neighborhood. Soon we will take him across to the mainland
to Echetus, who preys on all men, and who is king there.

18.112–116

χαῖρε, πάτερ ὦ ξεῖνε, γένοιτό τοι ἔς περ ὀπίσσω
ὄλβος· ἀτὰρ μὲν νῦν γε κακοῖς ἔχεαι πολέεσσι.

Your health, **father and stranger**; may prosperous days befall you
hereafter; but now you are held in the grip of many misfortunes.

18.122–123

Though it ends in failure, their subsequent exchange has features of good mentoring. Odysseus begins appropriately by complimenting Amphinomus on his prudence and his lineage; then he urges him to listen to his advice:

Ἀμφίνομ', ἦ μάλα μοι δοκέεις πεπνυμένος εἶναι·
τοίου γὰρ καὶ πατρός, ἐπεὶ κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἄκουον,
Νῖσον Δουλιχιῆα ἐΰν τ' ἔμεν ἀφνειόν τε·
τοῦ σ' ἔκ φασι γενέσθαι, ἐπητῇ δ' ἀνδρὶ ἔοικας.
τοὔνεκά τοι ἐρέω, σὺ δὲ σύνθεο καί μευ ἄκουσον.

Amphinomus, you seem to be **very prudent**, being
the son of such a father, whose excellent fame I have heard of,
Nisos, that is, of Doulichion, both strong and prosperous;
they say you are his son, **and you seem like a man well-spoken**.
So I will tell you, and you in turn understand and listen.

18.125–129

Odysseus illustrates how helpless humans are and how precarious are their fortunes:

οὐδὲν ἀκιδνότερον γαῖα τρέφει ἀνθρώποιο,
πάντων ὅσσα τε γαῖαν ἔπι πνείει τε καὶ ἕρπει.
οὐ μὲν γάρ ποτέ φησι κακὸν πείσεσθαι ὀπίσσω,
ὄφρ' ἀρετὴν παρέχωσι θεοὶ καὶ γούνατ' ὀρώρῃ·
ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ καὶ λυγρὰ θεοὶ μάκαρες τελέσωσι,
καὶ τὰ φέρει ἀεκαζόμενος τετληότι θυμῷ·
τοῖος γὰρ νόος ἐστὶν ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων
οἷον ἐπ' ἦμαρ ἄγῃσι πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε.

Of all creatures that breathe and walk on the earth there is nothing
more helpless than a man is, of all that the earth fosters;
for he thinks that he will never suffer misfortune in future
days, while the gods grant him courage, and his knees have spring
in them. But when the blessed gods bring sad days upon him,
against his will he must suffer it with enduring spirit.
For the mind in men upon earth goes according to the fortunes
the father of gods and men, day by day, bestows upon them.

18.130–137

As a negative exemplum of someone who, through reckless acts, fell into his present misfortune, he points to his fabricated personal story:

καὶ γὰρ ἐγώ ποτ' ἔμελλον ἐν ἀνδράσιν ὄλβιος εἶναι,
πολλὰ δ' ἀτάσθαλ' ἔρεξα βίῃ καὶ κάρτεϊ εἴκων,

πατρί τ' ἐμῷ πίσυνος καὶ ἐμοῖσι κασιγνήτοισι.

For I myself once promised to be a man of prosperity,
but, giving way to force and violence, did many reckless
things, because I relied on my father and brothers.

18.138–140

Then he explicitly draws out the lesson for his potential mentee:

τῷ μή τίς ποτε πάμπαν ἀνὴρ ἀθεμίστιος εἴη,
ἀλλ' ὅ γε σιγῇ δῶρα θεῶν ἔχοι, ὅττι διδοῖεν.

Therefore let no man be altogether without the sense of righteousness,
but take in silence the gifts of the gods, whatever they give him.

18.141–142

He applies the lesson to the current situation, repeating *atasthala* and generalizing to all the suitors:

οἷ' ὁρόω μνηστῆρας ἀτάσθαλα μηχανόωντας,
κτήματα κείροντας καὶ ἀτιμάζοντας ἄκοιτιν.

Even so, now, I see the suitors, **their reckless devisings**,
how they show no respect to the wife, and despoil the possessions

18.143–144

Predicting that Odysseus is nearby, he warns Amphinomus to leave in time:

ἀνδρός, ὃν οὐκέτι φημὶ φίλων καὶ πατρίδος αἴης
δηρὸν ἀπέσσεσθαι· μάλα δὲ σχεδόν. ἀλλά σε δαίμων
οἴκαδ' ὑπεξαγάγοι, μηδ' ἀντιάσειας ἐκείνῳ,
ὁππότε νοστήσειε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν·
οὐ γὰρ ἀναιμωτί γε διακρινέεσθαι ὀίω
μνηστῆρας καὶ κεῖνον, ἐπεί κε μέλαθρον ὑπέλθῃ.

…of a man who, I think, will not for long be far from
his country and friends. He is very close by. But I hope your destiny
takes you home, out of his way. I hope you never will face him
at the time he comes back to the beloved land of his fathers.
For I believe that, once he enters his halls, there will be
a reckoning, not without blood, between that man and the suitors.

18.145–150

This avuncular advice echoes the encouragement that Athena/Mentes/Mentor earlier extended to a directionless Telemachus, who was also *pepnumenos* (prudent) and nearly grown up. Yet Amphinomus remains in the megaron: even though "in his spirit he saw the evil," he could not escape his doom. "Athena had bound him / fast, to be strongly killed by the hands and spear of Telemachus" (154–156).

By the principle of double causation, we can interpret "Athena had bound him" as his own mental block. We can assign responsibility and agency to him, as Zeus did with Aegisthus. Both are forewarned. Both succumb to recklessness. Both die young or before their appointed time. Athena's "intervention" when she binds him fast reflects Amphinomus' inability to act in time. This unreadiness functions as foil for Telemachus' timely action at the bow contest. Only with Telemachus does Odysseus arrive at such a close connection that he can issue a command simply with a look or a nod and be obeyed.

## Part IV. Odysseus and Telemachus—The Nod

Interpreters of the *Odyssey*—whether they are scholars or first-time readers—feel the heightened tension at the bow contest when Telemachus attempts to string his father's bow and would have succeeded on the fourth try had Odysseus not signaled to him to stop. [20] The counterfactual and the presence of three adjectives describing Telemachus' intense personal desire to string the bow mark that moment as highly dramatic. For Telemachus, stringing his father's bow is the high point of coming of age. Therefore, as he initiates the contest for his mother's hand, he himself volunteers to try.

καὶ δέ κεν αὐτὸς ἐγὼ τοῦ τόξου πειρησαίμην
εἰ δέ κεν ἐντανύσω διοϊστεύσω τε σιδήρου,
οὔ κέ μοι ἀχνυμένῳ τάδε δώματα πότνια μήτηρ
λείποι ἅμ' ἄλλῳ ἰοῦσ', ὅτ' ἐγὼ κατόπισθε λιποίμην
οἷός τ' ἤδη πατρὸς ἀέθλια κάλ' ἀνελέσθαι.

I myself am also willing to attempt the bow. Then
if I can put the string on it and shoot through the iron,
my queenly mother would not go off with another, and leave me
sorrowing here in the house, since I would still be found here
as one now able to take up his father's glorious prizes.

21.113–117

He begins by setting up the axes in an orderly manner (εὐκόσμως), though he has never seen them before. Wonder overtook the onlookers (τάφος δ' ἕλε πάντας ἰδόντας). Then he makes his attempt:

στῆ δ' ἄρ' ἐπ' οὐδὸν ἰὼν καὶ τόξου πειρήτιζε.
τρὶς μέν μιν πελέμιξεν ἐρύσσεσθαι μενεαίνων,
τρὶς δὲ μεθῆκε βίης, ἐπιελπόμενος τό γε θυμῷ,
νευρὴν ἐντανύειν διοϊστεύσειν τε σιδήρου.
καί νύ κε δή ῥ' ἐτάνυσσε βίῃ τὸ τέταρτον ἀνέλκων,
ἀλλ' Ὀδυσεὺς ἀνένευε καὶ ἔσχεθεν ἱέμενόν περ.

He went then and tried the bow, standing on the threshold.
Three times he made it vibrate, **straining** to bend it, and three times
he gave over the effort, yet in his heart was **hopeful**
of hooking the string to the bow and sending a shaft through the iron.
And now, pulling the bow for the fourth time, he would have strung it,
but Odysseus stopped him, **though he was eager**, making a signal
with his head.

21.124–129

At that moment, Odysseus nods, and despite his eagerness, Telemachus desists from stringing his father's bow. The father and the son "click," and Telemachus' Coming-of-Age story changes as the youth becomes his father's helper in the larger story of Return and Revenge. By holding back, Telemachus aligns himself with his father, whose recovery of his full identity as lord of the household (*anax oikou*), husband, father, and king (or lead citizen) (*basileus*) depends on his son's choice. Odysseus (by story logic) must be the one to string the bow and shoot the arrows through the axe heads and thereby "win" the bride-contest. He must be the one to begin the slaughter. Telemachus' self-restraint shows that he sees the big picture and intuitively knows what to do.

Telemachus feigns incompetence:

ὢ πόποι, ἦ καὶ ἔπειτα κακός τ' ἔσομαι καὶ ἄκικυς,
ἠὲ νεώτερός εἰμι καὶ οὔ πω χερσὶ πέποιθα
ἄνδρ' ἀπαμύνασθαι, ὅτε τις πρότερος χαλεπήνῃ.
ἀλλ' ἄγεθ', οἵ περ ἐμεῖο βίῃ προφερέστεροί ἐστε,
τόξου πειρήσασθε, καὶ ἐκτελέωμεν ἄεθλον.

Shame on me. I must be then a coward and weakling,
or else I am still young, and my hands have yet no confidence
to defend myself against a man who has started a quarrel.
Come then, you who in your strength are greater than I am,
make your attempts on the bow and let us finish the contest.

21.131–135

At Odysseus' first encounter with Telemachus in the swineherd's lodge (16.156–171), Athena, in the guise of a young woman, tells him "it is time now to tell your son the story; no longer/ hide it, so that, contriving death and doom for the suitors, / you two (dual) may go to the glorious city" (168–170). To a skeptical Telemachus, the father exclaims: "No other / Odysseus than I will ever come back to you. But here I am, / and I am as you see me, … back in my own country." They cry shrilly in a pulsing voice, more than the outcry of birds whose children have been stolen. Then Odysseus, also using the dual, informs Telemachus: "I have come to this place by the advice of Athena, / so we together can make our plans to slaughter our enemies." Shared knowledge of his identity fortifies their bond.

Odysseus is in a unique position to seamlessly move into the role that Athena has pioneered. Due to his long absence, he and his son do not know one another; on the plus side, there is none of the overt rivalry and antagonism that typically describes the dynamic between a youth and his father. Thanks to Athena and the trip she prompted, Telemachus now reveres the father he knows he resembles. He wants to emulate him. Odysseus too has learned about mentoring from his interactions with Athena. Both the father and the son are well rehearsed for their future interactions. Odysseus, having consolidated his own identity, is prepared to mentor an equally prepared Telemachus. They become a couple, a pair, mentor, and mentee. [21] Their bonding, begun at the swineherd's lodge, continues to grow during the bow contest and at the slaughter. In Book 24, at the battle with the suitors' relatives, Laertes makes the coupling of Odysseus and Telemachus official when he exclaims:

τίς νύ μοι ἡμέρη ἥδε, θεοὶ φίλοι; ἦ μάλα χαίρω·
υἱός θ' υἱωνός τ' ἀρετῆς πέρι δῆριν ἔχουσιν.

What day is this for me, dear gods? I rejoice very much:
My son and my son's son are contending **over their excellence**.

24.514–515

## Conclusion

The gradual formation of mentorship-bond of son and father depends on the preparedness of each to play his role. In the *Odyssey*, Athena as the "hand of plot" does this preparation, first with Telemachus in Ithaca and on his maturation journey, then with Odysseus once he comes home. Sensitive (like Athena/Mentes/Mentor) to Telemachus' need to prove his manhood, Odysseus treats his son with all the skills and insights of a mentor. His mentoring resembles hers in the way he builds his son's confidence, listens to his son's concerns, removes obstacles to his son's advancement, gives his son advice, deflects his son's over-reliance on him as a hero and a strategist, includes his son in planning the revenge, overlooks any slippage (like leaving the storeroom unlocked), and does not monopolize center-stage. It is uncanny how quickly Odysseus learns. It is as if he had witnessed Athena in action and had adopted her model.

Not only does he live up to his reputation as "a king like a gentle father"; he also grows into the role modeled in the text for efficacious mentoring.

Of course, it is the *interpreter* who connects Odysseus' mentoring of Telemachus with Athena's. The interpreter comes to understand how important it is for the mentor to respect the developmental needs of the youth approaching manhood and also to appreciate the range of Athena's activities as guiding hand of the poet. The goddess not only keeps the plot moving toward its *telos* when she intervenes at critical moments; she also actively participates in characterizations—especially of the central figure, Odysseus. And, most importantly, her actions as a mentor introduce a pattern of behavior that Odysseus himself seamlessly takes up with Telemachus, as he steps into a role that Athena has ingeniously designed and performed.

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## Footnotes

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[ back ] **2.** Dodds 1951 and Lesky 1961.

[ back ] **3.** I use Lattimore's translation 1967 throughout, adapted occasionally for greater clarity, and for the Greek text, Allen 1917–1919.

[ back ] **4.** On the moral implications of *atasthaliai* in Homeric epic, see especially Finkelberg 1995, with references. On Zeus' blame of humans and his self-exoneration, see Dova 2012.

[ back ] **5.** This is how Reinhart 1960:45 describes the poetic device that Zeus articulates in these lines.

[ back ] **6.** The Tiresian prophecy stipulates that Odysseus must journey inland, where he will plant an oar to propitiate Poseidon (11.100–137), information shared with Penelope at 23.264–284. We are not told in the *Odyssey* how soon he must leave, or for how long, or who will be left in charge. On the significance of the prophecy for the narratological structure of the epic, see Peradotto 1990. On its formal features, see De Jong 2001 ad loc. And on its connection to predictions of Odysseus' death and to the Telegony, see Burgess 2001:153–154.

[ back ] **7.** Athena's disguises vary: to Telemachus in the Telemachy she is Mentes, then Mentor and, briefly, Telemachus; to Odysseus on Scheria she is a young girl, and later, on Ithaca, she is a young shepherd and then a stately woman. She is Mentor at the Slaughter of the Suitors and at the Battle with their relatives. With a few humans, notably Telemachus in Book 15 and Odysseus in Book 13, she appears as the goddess herself.

[ back ] **8.** On Mentor's ineptitude and on the poem's inconsistency about Mentor's age-grade, see Dora 2012.

[ back ] **9.** On the etymological link between Mentor and *menos*, see Frame 2009.

[ back ] **10.** Telemachus' οὐ γάρ πώ τις may anticipate Odysseus' clever use of Οὖτις at 9.366–367, when he tells Polyphemus "Nobody is my name. My father and mother call me Nobody, as do all the others who are my companions." (Οὖτις ἐμοί γ' ὄνομα· Οὖτιν δέ με κικλήσκουσι μήτηρ ἠδὲ πατὴρ ἠδ' ἄλλοι πάντες ἑταῖροι.) (To appreciate this subtle parallel, an interpreter would have to know of the clever wordplay of Odysseus in Book 9. But a scholar-interpreter familiar with the whole text, might add this parallel to other correspondences between Telemachus' Adventures and those of Odysseus.)

[ back ] **11.** Propp 1968. His model emphasizes the regularities in the corpus of 100 Russian folktales. Not all the 31 functions he identifies, and names are present in each folktale, but when present, they come in a predictable order.

[ back ] **12.** Cf the tri-partite form of prayer, also a template: invocation — precedent or previous favor — request.

[ back ] **13.** At their reunion, Athena reassures Odysseus that Telemachus made his journey with her guidance and that he is safe from the suitors' deadly ambush (13.421–428).

[ back ] **14.** For an athlete, a warrior, and a prince, filling the father's shoes is more than a cliché. It is a sign of having achieved full manhood. The process of reaching that goal is complicated by variables such as a father's heroism, or inadequacy, or absence, or death.

[ back ] **15.** On Athena as "the hand of plot," see Reinhardt 1960:45.

[ back ] **16.** The contrast is striking: both Aegisthus and Telemachus grew up without a father; Aegisthus was not educable.

[ back ] **17.** Mentoring requires you be yourself—not to lie. Odysseus' lies to Eumaeus immediately precedes and thus underscores his openness with Telemachus. For the distinction between coaching and mentoring, and a contemporary model of the stages of mentoring, see Clutterbuck 2023. [ back ]

[ back ] **18.** Martin 1993 compares this Homeric sparring to "flyting," a speech genre in Irish poetry.

[ back ] **19.** Odysseus has to prove his virility through *arete* (excellence) in athletics and through his epinician style speech. He performs his excellence athletically and rhetorically. The issue of whether the sea has weakened him and lessoned his *menos* (manly life force, fighting spirit) is central to this episode of the Phaeacian Games—a precursor to Odysseus' competition with Iros and then with all the suitors once he arrives in Ithaca. On Odysseus' concerns about his *menos*, see Felson 2007.

[ back ] **20.** For a nuanced reading of this scene and a review of the secondary literature, see Thalmann 1998: 171–237.

[ back ] **21.** Since Odysseus has been away for twenty years, being a father and a husband and the lord of a household is a fresh challenge.


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