Orphaned Prince:

Telemachos' Father in Homer's Odyssey

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For a boy growing up during Homeric times, no person holds greater sway over his developing prosperity, reputation, profession, and character than his father. He is known in his community and introduced to strangers by his father's name, and he is judged according to that standard: is he descended of noble or heavenly stock? Is his father renowned as a man of excellence? Has he strayed from his father's footsteps? Does he surpass his father, or does he fail to live up to his name?

Telemachos, crippled by the lack of a father to observe and emulate, takes a torturous path from boyhood to manhood in Homer's Odyssey. Unable to mature in a house filled with barbaric suitors and overshadowed by Penelope's despair, he travels across Greece, adopting as surrogate fathers men such as Menelaos, Nestor, Eumaios, and even the goddess Pallas Athene (disguised as Mentor). Yet Odysseus, though absent, nevertheless holds the greatest influence over Telemachos' development. Each stage in the prince's maturation is marked by a revision of the image of Odysseus that he carries within him, and it is Telemachos' impression of his father and his imagination of how Odysseus would behave that guides his conduct at every critical turn. By following Odysseus' evolution in the eyes of Telemachos from near-god to legendary man to elder peer, we can understand Telemachos' shifts from overgrown boy to uncertain adult to confident and competent leader.

From the very first moment we see Telemachos, it is clear that his father has often been on his mind, and has there developed into a larger-than-life caricature of the perfect king. Surrounded by a host of uncivilized men against which he cannot possibly fight, Telemachos constantly imagines Odysseus returning to the palace and brushing aside the ranks of suitors with casual ease before restoring the proper social order with his mere presence.[1] The first two books are filled with imagery reflecting Telemachos' worship of his father … when the goddess Athene comes to visit disguised as Mentes, Telemachos places her spear directly alongside those of his father, hinting that a rack adequate for the tools of Odysseus is adequate for the tools of the gods. Later, as Athene reveals herself to be a god and departs into the air, Telemachos' first thought is of his father, who he remembers "even more than he had before" (1.322). In book II, Telemachos refers to his father as "Zeus-sprung Odysseus" (2.351-352), placing him clearly above the realm of normal men.

This image of Odysseus as nearly divine is both positive and negative for Telemachos. Without a father from whom he could learn the ways of society and proper behavior, Telemachos has his entire life turned to this ideal Odysseus for inspiration and guidance. As a result, his behavior is motivated not by emulation of a flawed and realistic father but by a constant struggle to measure up to a perfect standard. It is while musing about his father that Telemachos notices a guest standing unwelcomed at the doors and is scandalized – such a thing would never happen if *Odysseus* were around. It is after talking of his father with Athene and having his exalted image enhanced by her departure that Telemachos realizes he must try to exercise control of the household and begins to fight for order against his mother and the suitors.[2] Telemachos acts upon his ideas of what his father would do in each situation, and since he thinks of his father as perfect, his actions approximate moral and social perfection to the greatest degree possible within the confines of his weakness and his immaturity. But to a large extent, that weakness and that

[1] See 1.113-117, Telemachos dreaming bitterly while sitting among the suitors, or 2.58-62, when he labels the elderly Achaians and the household personnel as unable to drive the suitors away because they are not men "such as Odysseus was." Telemachos views Odysseus not only as a powerful warrior, but also as a benevolent and just ruler, as in 2.46-47, when he speaks of Odysseus as "one who / was king over you here, and was kind to you like a father." This particular statement also highlights his bitterness at being the one person who never got a chance to be son to Odysseus, as he imagines the men of Ithaka did, and his disappointment in how little gratitude they seem to show for his past kindness.

[2] 2.345-359, the dismissal of Penelope and the claiming of power; 2.368-380, the insulting of the suitors and the declaration that they must leave or face the wrath of Zeus.

immaturity are *caused* by this veneration of his absent father. Nearing twenty, he is only just beginning to see that Odysseus may not be returning to Ithaka; he has spent the last nineteen years of his life feeling no great pressure to improve the sad situation of the household because he has always believed that Odysseus would return and set everything to rights, the same way every small child believes in the ultimate power of his parents. Now that he *is* coming to grips with the possibility that he is on his own, he is crippled by an internalized sense of inferiority.[3] No matter how hard he tried in the past, he never achieved the same level of perfection as his imaginary father, and thus he sees no reason to believe that he will be equal to the task of restoring order, of controlling the household, or of reestablishing kingship over Ithaka. This self-doubt is what drives him to seek help from the elders of the island, and what brings him to plead for intercession on the part of Zeus. His inability to sway public opinion against the suitors only further convinces him that he can accomplish nothing at home, and in a final echo of his childish hope for rescue[4], he embarks for Pylos.

Fortunately, while he learns nothing factual of Odysseus' fate, Telemachos is able for the first time to speak with men who knew him, not as a god, but as an equal. Both by listening to their tales of his father and by studying the heroes themselves, Telemachos is able to see for the first time what Odysseus really was: a man (legendary, yes, but a human being nonetheless). Freed from the shackles of his imagined inferiority, Telemachos' growth while at Pylos and Lakedaimon is nothing short of remarkable. Though he reveres Nestor and Menelaos and in no way thinks of himself as their equal, he is able to watch them, to learn from them, and to disagree with them, and he takes his first steps towards autonomy when he comes to see his father as closer to them than to the immortals.

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[3] See again 2.62, where Telemachos states that "I would defend myself if the power were in me." This fits perfectly with his world view: having dreamt of Odysseus, he knows the *right* thing to do, but having never been able to match himself against his father and discover his own worth, he is certain of his inability to accomplish it. Also consider 2.50-58, where Telemachos discusses the improper conduct of the suitors towards his mother … he finds the young men lacking when compared with his ideal father, but, more importantly, he finds *himself* inferior to *them*, since he is unable to remove them from his home. His despair is thus reinforced by the fact that he cannot even measure up to such paltry specimens as Antinoös and Eurymachos.

[4] His childishness in this move is debatable. We have already seen signs of his movement to a higher stage of maturation, and it could be that an instinctive sense of the gaps in his upbringing is driving him to seek out men who knew his father so that he may come to understand better what it is he is meant to become. Interestingly, it is not until 2.2 and 2.35 that Telemachos is referred to by Homer as the "dear son of Odysseus;" perhaps the title was reserved until the second book to highlight the fact that he is more ready to assume it than he was in the first.

Telemachos first begins to identify with his father on a human level as Nestor comments on the similarity between their ways of speaking. This initial blow to Odysseus' godhead is followed by Nestor's recount of the hectic departure from Troy, wherein Odysseus chose to remain with Agamemnon in supplication to the gods and missed his opportunity to safely cross the sea as a result. Telemachos responds to this humanizing tale with his first realistic comment about Odysseus: "His homecoming is no longer a real thing, but already / the immortal gods must have contrived his death" (2.241-242)[5]. This statement marks the end of Odysseus-as-ideal and brings him fully into the realm of humankind, for the crucial difference between the gods and man is the reality of death. We see the finality of Telemachos' shift in viewpoint later in the story when, instead of reflecting on the magnificence of Odysseus, he lies awake "with anxious thoughts of his father" (15.8). Odysseus now stands in Telemachos' head not as a remote icon, but as a mortal man whose achievements can be matched and whose life can serve as an applicable model to his son. Most importantly, by his absence, Odysseus has vacated a niche in the world (amongst Menelaos and Nestor, as king in Ithaka, as a model of virtue and civility) that Telemachos realizes requires no unnatural power to occupy but that he himself may fill.

The change this brings about in Telemachos' manner is by no means immediate. As he arrives in Pylos, it takes the prodding of Athene (both in word and in divine motivation) to convince him to speak straightforwardly with Nestor, and admit that he comes seeking news of his father … clearly, he is treating Nestor with the same awe as he had Odysseus. However, by the time he reaches Menelaos, he not only requests information unprompted but also plainly states the nature of his plight at home, a subject he approached quite slowly with Nestor. While at Lakedaimon, Telemachos begins to test his newfound confidence in himself when he calls for the end of the gathering in which Helen and Menelaos told stories of Odysseus' exploits in the war … it is difficult to imagine the Telemachos we first met ordering such a distinguished group to bed. Later, feeling himself

[5] Telemachos had spoken earlier of his father being dead, at 1.166 and obliquely at 1.234-242, but in neither case did his words carry the weight of conviction, since they were followed by contrary words or further reflections on Odysseus' glory. In this example, however, Telemachos makes his statement and quickly changes the topic, as if the thought were painfully real in a way it had not been before. At 4.113-116, in the house of Menelaos, Telemachos will for the first time shed tears over his father, another sign that until Odysseus became human, Telemachos could not really think of him as dead.

ever more equal to the task of controlling his own life, Telemachos refuses the improper gift of Menelaos, decides to skirt the hospitality of Nestor in the interest of time, and willingly takes a fugitive suppliant under his protection as a guest. Each of these actions highlight Telemachos' growing autonomy and maturity as he tries not to emulate his father, but to act as one equal to him in power, authority, and dignity. The decision to shelter Theoklymenos is particularly notable when compared to Telemachos' earlier reaction to Nestor's proposal that he remove the suitors himself: "…what you have said will not be accomplished. / What you mean is too big. It bewilders me. That which I hope for / could never happen to me, not even if the gods so willed it." The youth who balked at the thought of resisting the suitors even with the help of the gods has been replaced by an independent adult ready to assume the reins of power and responsibility, even to the point of offering sanctuary to one pursued by armed men[6].

A final change in what Odysseus means to Telemachos comes in the sixteenth book, when the two men are finally reunited. Having only just resolved his inner conflict over both men's identities and stepped into the shoes of a fully-fledged adult, Telemachos now faces the possibility of return to the subordinate role he went through so much trouble to escape. Though life would undoubtedly be different with Odysseus there to fill the previously empty role of father, Telemachos nevertheless cannot go back. Over the course of the cleansing of the house, Telemachos must reconcile his new independence with his deference to his legendary father and come to accept Odysseus as a peer, greater perhaps in experience and fame, but fundamentally no different from himself.

Telemachos begins this last transformation immediately after Odysseus reveals himself, when he is asked about the number of suitors in the house. Telemachos, whose knowledge of their predicament is far more accurate than his father's, tries to curb Odysseus' enthusiasm and bring him to the realization that there are simply too many suitors for two men to defeat them all. Odysseus counters with a slightly sarcastic remark about the gods

[6] His maturity is further emphasized when, having rescued Theoklymenos from the men of Lakedaimon, Telemachos also has the courage and foresight to refuse him guestright in the house of Odysseus (15.513-517). Interestingly, he first advises the seer to seek shelter with Eurymachos, either to remove the potential threat that such an unknown man represents, or to burden the suitor with the task of defending the fugitive. It is only after Theoklymenos' portent in his favor that Telemachos decides to genuinely trust him, and assigns Peiraios – a friend – to care for him.

and Telemachos yields, but that first contradiction opens the younger man to the idea that perhaps his legendary father can be mistaken and that he, Telemachos, can correct him. This realistic doubt in Odysseus' ability is a far cry from Telemachos' musings in books I and II, and demonstrates just how much the prince has grown. His new independence of opinion is what allows Telemachos to admit to having left the door to the armory open during the battle with the suitors. In earlier times, such an admission and the disapproval it would have brought from his perfect father would have been enough to crush Telemachos forever; now, though, he sees that he and his father both are fallible humans and freely admits the mistake, secure in his own worth as a warrior and confident of his image in the eyes of the real Odysseus. Perhaps the strongest example of how Telemachos has revised his image of the flawless father comes at the very end of the battle, when he orders Odysseus to spare the bard and the herald[7]. Telemachos clearly believes that his father could potentially not only have been mistaken about the loyalties of these two servants, but also that he might have been so caught up in battle rage that he would have slaughtered them before giving them a chance to demonstrate their innocence – *even if they kneeled before him as supplicants*. This belief is incompatible with Telemachos' earlier image of Odysseus as the model of civility and strength, a man who could do no wrong and who was a pillar of strength for the weak and the needful.

In keeping with each other step along the road to adulthood, the final maturation of Telemachos' relationship with Odysseus is coupled with his movement into the ultimate state of maturity. After returning from his journey, Telemachos bravely follows up on the firm precedent he had tried to set with the suitors before leaving: as he seats Odysseus within the hall, he declares once more that the house is his to control, and daringly threatens any suitor who would defy his authority. During the challenge of the bow, Telemachos asserts power over both his mother and the suitors, dismissing her to her work

[7] It is important to remember that Telemachos has not thoroughly overstepped the bounds of propriety and filial respect at this point. At 22.356-360, Telemachos states "Hold fast. Do not strike this man with the bronze. He is innocent. / And let us spare Medon our herald, a man who has always / taken care of me when I was a child in your palace; / unless, that is, Philoitios or the swineherd has killed him / or unless he came in your way as you stormed through the palace." There is no uncertainty in Telemachos' speech; he is very clearly giving a command that brooks no argument. However, he couches this order in respectful language, indicating that if a mistake has already been made there is no reason for conflict over it, and identifying himself with Odysseus in the words "let us" so that it is clear he himself is obeying the same order and is not trying to overtake Odysseus' authority.

at the looms and threatening Eumaios for obeying the commands of the other men when he falters in carrying the bow to Odysseus. Neither of these demonstrations of maturity, however, illustrate the change that has come over him as much as the very fact that he took part in the contest at all. The immature Telemachos of the earliest books would have trembled at the thought of touching the bow of Odysseus and would have had no confidence in his ability to string it; the newly changed Telemachos boldly wagers with the suitors and fails to string the bow out of willing deference to his father's plan, not out of any fundamental inadequacy. Clearly, his new identification with Odysseus as an equal has brought him to recognize a dormant inner strength with which he can confidently face the troubles of his life. In the aftermath of the battles, at the conclusion of Telemachos' involvement with the story, we see him obey a command from Odysseus because "you have the best mind among men for craft, and there is / no other man among mortal men who can contend with you" (23.125-26). Telemachos has matured fully, as he would have had his father remained at home all along: he obeys him because of those qualities which set him apart above all men, not simply because Odysseus *is* his father. He is answerable now only to those men whose merit commands his respect, and there is no truer sign of adulthood.

Homer's Odyssey is a tale of restoration, of debts repaid and imbalances corrected. It is only fitting, therefore, that the fundamental imbalance in the life of Telemachos should be resolved by the conclusion of the story. Telemachos' plight is one central to the ideals of his time, for in a patriarchal society, few questions are of greater concern than that of what one should do if one has no father. We see in his life a series of compromises that serve to "get him by" until he is finally able to break free of his disadvantaged youth and become the man he was meant to be. As Telemachos believes first in an impossible idol, later in a legendary warrior, and finally in a very real man, he moves from a troubled dependence to an uncertain autonomy to a healthy adulthood. His story is no less central to the meaning of the Odyssey than the wanderings of Odysseus himself, for it reflects one of the accepted truths of the Homeric times: to become a truly great man, you must first understand your own father.