

The Complexity of Mentorship

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the relationship between Odysseus and Athena, with Athena serving both as Odysseus' mentor and helper throughout the epic, services as a cornerstone to the narrative arc. This association is paralleled by Odysseus and Telemachus, with Odysseus serving as guide and teacher in the pair; however, Odysseus ultimately hampers Telemachus by cutting off the completion of his growth. The parallels and juxtapositions between the two relationships, as examined in the scene of the suitor's slaughter, reveals there is no definite limit of abilities between mortals, necessitating that for any mortal mentor-mentee relationship the mentee must usurp the mentor in order to complete his or her growth.

The power balance of both relationships is tested by the ambiguity in the hierarchy of authority and competency. As Athena decides to help Odysseus in his slaughter of the suitors, she influences their minds, "*Like a herd of cattle that an iridescent gadfly / Goads along on a warm spring afternoon*" (22. 319-320). This epic simile serves to illustrate Athena's influence, but the almost benign nature of a gadfly goading a herd undercuts her authoritative power. In contrast, the following lines describe Odysseus and his men "*Like vultures with crooked talons and hooked beaks / Descending from the mountains upon a flock / Of smaller birds, who fly low under the clouds / And over the plain. The vultures swoop down / To pick them off; the smaller birds cannot escape, / And men thrill to see the chase in the sky*" (22. 322-327). Unlike the harmless gadfly, Odysseus and his men are compared to vultures preying and feeding on weaker birds, lofting them up to be almost more powerful and influential in this fight than Athena is. Despite this, the epic similes also draw a subtle contrast between Athena and Odysseus, as Athena is described as a creature different from the ones she is tormenting, while Odysseus and the suitors are both birds, even if different breeds. Consequently, Athena's position as a goddess and Odysseus' as a mortal man - like the suitors - are finely wrought into the simile, emphasizing

that even when Odysseus is acting in a godlike way, he can never truly achieve the status of the Gods.

Like Odysseus, Telemachus portrays his ability to equal his mentor's influence. Telemachus vouches for the bard Phemius, claiming, "He's innocent; don't kill him. / And let's spare the herald, Medon" (22. 380-381). His word wins over Odysseus, who tells Phemius, "Don't worry, [Telemachus'] saved you" (22. 396). The interaction between Telemachus and his father illustrates the influence Telemachus has and the equality of authority he shares in some situations. Even with this authority, Telemachus still places himself in an inferior position by giving Odysseus final say on Phemius' fate, an artificial limitation he takes on in order to show reverence to his father. This contrasts with Athena and Odysseus, where the distinction between the two is inherent with their positions as deity and mortal, and not created by either party.

While there remains some ambiguity in the relative power of Odysseus and Athena, the hierarchical order of the mentorship relationship is reinforced by Athena's unmatched godly characteristics. As the suitors attempt to skewer Odysseus and his men with spears, "Athena made their shots all come to nothing... Odysseus and his men / Weren't even nicked" (22. 271-276). The negative in the phrase "weren't even nicked" creates the implication that such a volley of spears would usually in the least make some contact with their target. Athena's ability to create a nearly impossible outcome by controlling the trajectory of the spears illustrates the Gods' unmatched abilities. Her protection of Odysseus disbands most of the ambiguity behind their power balance, restoring Athena's rightful and natural place as the superior in the relationship.

In contrast, the ambiguity between Odysseus and Telemachus is reinforced by the manner in which the epic attempts to illustrate Odysseus as the superior. When the suitors arm

themselves with the storeroom weapons, Odysseus accuses Melanthius of helping his enemy, but “Telemachus, cool-headed under fire: / ‘No, it’s my fault, Father, and no one else’s. / I must have left the storeroom door open, / And one of them spotted it” (22. 158-161). Telemachus makes a critical mistake in allowing the suitors to suit up, demonstrating his inexperience and highlighting a deficiency in his growth, painting him as Odysseus’ inferior; however, over the course of the epic Odysseus commits many critical errors that at times are far worse than Telemachus’. Moreover, the flattering phrase “cool-headed under fire” once again creates internal contrasts, as it exemplifies Telemachus’ poise and his maturity in owning up to his mistake immediately. Telemachus’ control and maturity shined through even as he erred, combining to maintain and even heighten the ambiguity between him and his father, emphasizing that the only distinction between the two is self-imposed, not natural.

The juxtaposition of the artificial limit placed on Telemachus and the natural limit between Athena and Odysseus reveals a clear distinction between Gods and humans while emphasizing that there is no natural barrier between the capacity of humans; furthermore, the lack of clear distinction between two humans’ capabilities necessitates that for a pupil to gain mastery over his or her craft or goal, they must replace whomever is ahead of them. Before the slaughter of the suitors began, Telemachus sets up the bow and axe competition, and “Everyone was amazed / That he made such a neat job of it / When he had never seen it done before” (21. 122-124). Telemachus invokes the image of his father, setting up his father’s competition with skill and ease without having seen it done before – a cunning characteristic of Odysseus. When Telemachus himself attempts to string the bow, “He would have succeeded in muscling the string / Onto its notch, but Odysseus reined him in, / Signaling him to stop with an upward nod” (21. 130-133). Telemachus was about do what only Odysseus could do when Odysseus himself

stopped his progression, placing Telemachus in the inferior position when he has the capacity to be equals. The only way for Telemachus to fulfill his potential would be to disobey his mentor and successfully string the bow, symbolically completing his narrative arc to gain control over his household, while simultaneously overcoming Odysseus' position.

Unlike Odysseus and Telemachus, Athena does not inhibit Odysseus' growth because she leaves room at the top of human capacity for Odysseus to fill. After the slaughter, Odysseus stands among the slain bodies, "*A lion that has just fed upon an ox in a field / Has his chest and cheeks smeared with blood, / And his face is terrible to look upon. / So too Odysseus*" (22. 426-429). Odysseus is compared with a lion in the epic simile, evoking the image of the mighty animal and thus correlating a similar might in Odysseus. His ultimate triumph, as well as his glorious post-slaughter image as the lion illustrated in the simile, serve not only to complete Odysseus' narrative arc, but also to display that he has suffered no barriers in doing so. Odysseus has room to grow and complete his goals because there is a clear distinction between Athena and Odysseus – the distinction between Gods and men – and this limit allows for Odysseus to attain mastery without threatening Athena's position.

The comparison of Odysseus and Telemachus to Odysseus and Athena illustrate that between mortals, there is no clear natural limit or barrier between their capabilities. The *Odyssey* thus implicates that while there are limitations on what humans can do, they can still compete and grow to the stature and capabilities of other mortals – no one human has a capacity that no one else can reach. As such, for the mentee to complete their growth and arc, they must replace or usurp their mentor; otherwise, they force upon themselves a condition of inferiority.