

THE QUEST OF TELEMACHUS

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What is the purpose of Telemachus' journey to Pylos and Sparta?¹ The poet uses the journey, according to some critics, as a means for relating the returns from Troy of certain Achaean heroes² or for showing the famed Helen at home.³ Another claims that Telemachus' absence allows Homer to make the suitors ultimately worthy, because of their attempted ambush, of pitiless punishment.⁴ Or, by means of Telemachus' adventures the poet reveals something of Odysseus through the eyes of his former companions.⁵ Many scholars have suggested that the journey is the instrument for Telemachus' psychological development, his education, his growth into manhood and strength of character,⁶ or, as some have expressed it, his initiation into his father's heroic world.⁷

Those especially who answer the problem in terms of the poet's characterization of Telemachus help us to appreciate the extraordinary complexity of Homer's art. All these commentators, however, slight Telemachus' immediate and repeatedly expressed motive—namely, to seek news of Odysseus. Perhaps the fact that he learns very

¹ The journey is narrated in Books 3, 4, and 15 of the *Odyssey*. The suggestion and the preparations occur in Books 1 and 2.

² G. S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge 1962) 359; W. J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford 1930) 209.

³ Woodhouse (above, note 2) 209.

⁴ E. Delebecque, *Télémaque et la Structure de l'Odyssée* (Aix-en-Provence 1958) 137.

⁵ J. A. Scott, "The Journey Made by Telemachus and Its Influence on the Action of the *Odyssey*," *CJ* 13 (1917-18) 420-21.

⁶ Delebecque (above, note 4) 137; Kirk (above, note 2) 359; K. Reinhardt, *Von Werken und Formen* (Godesberg 1948) 47; Scott (above, note 5) 423-27; Woodhouse (above, note 2) 210, 212.

⁷ A recent and important exponent is H. W. Clarke, *The Art of the Odyssey* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967) esp. 31-32.

little pertinent information about his father has led them to find other reasons for such an apparently unproductive adventure.

Yet, to seek news of Odysseus, with all that this will turn out to imply, is the most important answer to our initial question. Athena's remarks provide the clue to this answer and, thereby, to the major feature of Telemachus' role in the poem.

Just before leaving Olympus in Book 1, Athena briefly announces that, first, she will embolden Telemachus and instruct him to call a council in which to denounce the suitors; second, she will send him to Sparta and Pylos in order to find out whatever he can of his father's return and in order to gain *κλέος ἐσθλόν*, a good reputation, among men (1.88-95). Since Athena is utterly vague as to how Telemachus is to acquire his *kleos esthlon*—that is, what his particular *kleos* will denote—no interpretation of the voyage can found itself upon this speech.

However, when next Athena discusses the subject, the poet clarifies his intention, with subtlety, through the structure of her speech. At 1.269 ff. the protectress of Odysseus and his family delivers the instructions to Telemachus in a speech so remarkable that, upon the basis of its apparent anomalies, Denys Page and others have argued that the "Telemachy" does not belong integrally to the *Odyssey*.⁸ An excellent rebuttal is F. M. Combellack's review of Page's *The Homeric Odyssey*.⁹ For our purposes what is remarkable is the precision with which this speech, longer and more elaborate as it is, reproduces the structure and content of Athena's earlier speech. The significance of Telemachus' *kleos*, therefore, should become much clearer.

As in the former speech on Olympus, Athena's instructions fall under two headings—the council of the Achaeans and the voyage, in that order. Now, however, she tells Telemachus specifically what he must do at the council: he must invoke the gods as witnesses to his speech, which, as Athena had told Zeus (1.91), will ultimately be a denunciation of the suitors; he must order the suitors out of his house; and he must set into motion his mother's marriage, if she wills it (which, as Athena and we know, she does not).

⁸ D. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955) 53-63; Kirk (above, note 2) 229-30, accepts Page's view.

⁹ F. M. Combellack, *Gnomon* 28 (1956) 412-16.

All three specific steps constitute one great warning to the suitors.¹⁰ Why should defenseless Telemachus openly confront his enemies, ordering them to do what even he knows they will not do? The answer is that this warning is the first step in a momentous plan which, upon Athena's suggestion, Telemachus is consciously undertaking—a plan to exact vengeance *with or without his father*. Under these circumstances, to deliver a warning has the useful purpose of allowing the antagonist to prove his obstinate impiety and, thus, the need for the intended requital. Penelope's inevitable refusal to marry, together with the suitors' rejection of the warning, should leave no doubt in the minds of the Achaeans and of the gods that the suitors are unjustifiably and recklessly imposing themselves upon her and Odysseus' household.

But the second part of Athena's speech—instructions for the journey—will both demonstrate that revenge is Telemachus' plan and reveal its relation to the meaning of his *kleos esthlon*. The goddess now (1.279-96) advises Telemachus to make the journey and to find out about Odysseus' present condition; she had made both points to Zeus. She also expands upon the second point, explaining what depends upon the information he receives. If Odysseus lives, Telemachus can hold out another year (1.287-88). What then? Father and son would join in revenge, which is so obvious that Athena does not say so. Should Odysseus be dead, Telemachus must harden himself for manhood and carry the burden of justice alone (1.289-96)—that is, through the ultimate act of revenge he would become the hero of the poem. Thus, he must inquire after his father in order to determine the course of vengeance, and the voyage is necessary for the inquiries.

What about the third and final point in Athena's remarks to Zeus (1.95)? The parallel structure of her advice to Telemachus would lead us to expect a comment at this moment about winning *kleos esthlon*. The comment is there, indirect, but highly significant (1.296-302). Athena supports her demand that Telemachus kill the suitors by reminding him of the fame earned for a similar deed by that great young man, Orestes. Not only does Athena actually use the word *kleos* (1.298), but she closes her exhortation with the purpose clause, *ἵνα τις σε καὶ ὀψιγόνων ἐὺ εἴπῃ* (1.302). Telemachus now

¹⁰ Compare H. Hommel, "Aigisthos und die Freier," *Studium Generale* 8 (1955) 241-42.

understands that *kleos esthlon* will come through revenge, but exacting vengeance depends partly upon ascertaining the truth about Odysseus, which in turn necessitates the voyage to Pylos and Sparta. That is the fundamental relation between the journey and the winning of *kleos esthlon*.¹¹

A recent critic argues that Telemachus can win *kleos* simply by being in Pylos and Sparta, by mere exposure to those heroes and their values.¹² He explicitly states, moreover, that "Odysseus acts, Telemachus reacts," that "Telemachus' experiences, apart from the social, are vicarious—he listens, observes, absorbs." Although this applies correctly to his behavior while in Pylos and Sparta, it utterly overlooks the courage of his decision to make the journey, his crafty return to Ithaca, and his overall heroic intention to regain his *timê*. Surely one must do something, something courageous and valuable, to be awarded *kleos esthlon*—which is how Orestes, Homer's example for Telemachus, won his.¹³

This interpretation does not rely solely upon this speech by Athena. With Orestes as the model and with the same, crucial purpose clause, Nestor in Book 3 encourages Telemachus to take his revenge. Telemachus' reply juxtaposes Orestes' far-reaching fame with his own wish for such *dynamis*, the power to act boldly (3.195–207).

Evidence for my treatment of the voyage has come, thus far, from speeches. There is, in addition, another avenue toward such an interpretation. The greatness of the *Odyssey* is due partly to the poet's ability to use repeatedly an entire story, or nexus of motifs. To apply such a nexus of plot elements and character traits to more than one set of characters endows the poem with an important sort of unity.

Locating recurrent motifs does not depend simply upon finding repeated occurrences of a particular word, formula, formulaic system, or scene. Rather, any of these, plus the action itself, quite apart from the specific language, can signal a motif. There are several popular approaches to Homeric epic which, though similar, must not be confused with the search for motifs which recur in a pattern. One of

¹¹ Delebecque (above, note 4) 137, has a rather different opinion of the significance of *kleos* in this context: "motif allégué par Athéna dans un moment de hâte."

¹² Clarke (above, note 7) Ch. 2, "Telemachus and the *Telemacheia*." The following quotations appear on p. 41.

¹³ The poet confirms that the result of Athena's visit is a new *menos* and *tharsos* in Telemachus' *thumos* (1.320–21).

these investigates the so-called geometric ordering of motifs;¹⁴ another the "typical scenes"—sometimes called "themes"—such as assembly, feasting, and so forth, which, also, are recurrent.¹⁵ Still another employs anthropology and the comparative study of folklore as a means to illuminate the supposed underlying meaning of the poem.¹⁶ Regarding this last method, it is true that many motifs are known to have derived, or could have derived, from a folk-tale tradition;¹⁷ however, to investigate folklore would shed little light on the conscious, literary manipulation of motifs, in which Homer was clearly skilled. For this, the only source is the bare text.

Since the poet frequently disguises a motif, thereby compelling a critic to peer below the surface, one must be cautious not to see a disguised motif where none exists. Nevertheless, when we discover with reasonable assurance the recurrence of a particular motif, we should assume that the poet expected his audience both to recall important past occurrences of the motif within the poem and, by the same token, to be prepared for future occurrences.¹⁸ By so doing the audience allowed the poet another means for unifying a kind of poem which, because of its length and orality, needed every such device—hence, also, the typical scene and the geometric structure.

In the present instance, while attempting to elucidate the motivation for Telemachus' journey, we have come upon what may be called a

¹⁴ Notable critics who have postulated this sort of structuring are, for the *Iliad*, C. H. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) Ch. 11, and, for the *Odyssey*, J. L. Myres, "The Pattern of the *Odyssey*," *JHS* 72 (1952) 1-19.

¹⁵ See, for example, A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960) Ch. 4, and "Composition by Theme in Epos," *TAPA* 82 (1951) 71-80; also, for an analogous treatment in Old English oral poetry, see D. K. Crowne, "The Hero on the Beach," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 60:2 (1959) 362-72.

¹⁶ Rhys Carpenter, *Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1946) especially Chs. 6 and 7.

¹⁷ For a comparison of some motifs of the *Odyssey* with folk tales in other cultures, see, for example, Ludwig Radermacher, "Die Erzählungen der *Odyssee*," *Sitzungsber. Wien* 178 (1915) 1-59.

¹⁸ This mode of interpretation, although it does not assume that the listener would recall everything in the poem, is far different from the view expressed most forcefully by Page (above, note 8) 142: "It is very improbable that a poet who depends on nothing but his memory both for the making and for the preservation of his verses will so construct his plot that the true significance of an earlier part will emerge only in the light of a later part, and vice versa; except in very broad and simple conceptions integral to the main structure of his story."

particular revenge-pattern. Telemachus' situation is that of a man who has suffered some outrage or disgrace, specifically a violation of his hospitality by a suitor (in his case a host of suitors). Such, also, is the situation of Menelaus with respect to Paris, of Hephaestus with respect to Ares in the surprisingly relevant story in Book 8,¹⁹ of Orestes with respect to Aegisthus, and, of course, of Odysseus himself.

In all these stories, moreover, the avenging party is absent just prior to enacting his revenge and returns secretly for the encounter with his enemy,²⁰ who in every case has the advantage in numbers or physical strength. Actually, when the motif is in its most complete form, the avenging character absents himself purposely, as part of the revenge-plan, which he has initiated even before departing. In this complete form, the motif of departure and unexpected return for revenge does occur in the story of Menelaus and the Trojan War, in the song of Ares and Aphrodite, and in Telemachus' case. The Achaeans, who are Menelaus' agents in revenge, depart in their ships after leaving the horse, but return secretly to complete the destruction of Troy.²¹ Hephaestus feigns a journey to Lemnos after carefully laying the miraculous net on Aphrodite's bed. He returns unexpectedly without reaching Lemnos, to find Ares caught in the trap with Aphrodite. Finally, Telemachus has begun his revenge, as we have seen, with the calling of the council and the delivering of the warning. His journey is the second step in the projected revenge, and his return to Ithaca is an especially great surprise for the suitors, who had been prepared to ambush him.

Orestes and Odysseus also return unexpectedly from an absence and successfully accomplish their revenge. Missing from the motif is, obviously, a departure from home as part of the strategy. Nevertheless, the pattern is clear: the stories of the Trojan War, of Ares and Aphrodite, and, to a lesser extent, those of Orestes and Odysseus, strongly suggest a reason for Telemachus' journey from the point of view of oral compositional technique. He travels to Pylos and Sparta

¹⁹ 8.266-366; this is the subject of my doctoral dissertation (Berkeley).

²⁰ Clarke (above, note 7) 71-72, suggests very ancient origins for this motif: "The return of the day, of the spring, of the crops that sustain and the god that redeems is a primary and powerful theme. . . ."

²¹ At 8.500-2 of the *Odyssey*, Homer tells of the departure. The return, although not mentioned in the *Odyssey*, was assuredly part of the audience's prior knowledge.

because he has already commenced upon a revenge-plan and because such a plan for one in his dishonored plight involved an element, important elsewhere in the *Odyssey*, of purposeful departure and unexpected return. Telemachus, to be sure, is not aware that he is fulfilling a revenge-pattern; the pattern exists in the mind of the poet. Rather our analysis of Athena's role in Book 1 reveals that Telemachus is aware of his intention to become the avenger and to fulfil whatever this new role demands.

The present interpretation has the incidental advantage of explicating the literary purpose of a passage which has troubled some commentators. After telling Zeus of her plans for Telemachus (1.88-95), Athena is about to leave for Ithaca. But her preparations are curious: even though she intends simply to talk with him, she dons her *καλὰ πέδιλα*, her sandals, and brings her *ἄλκιμον ἔγχος*, the spear with which, the poet says (1.100-1),

δάμνησι σίχας ἀνδρῶν
 ἡρώων, τοῖσιν τε κοτέσεται ὀβριμοπάτρη.

Is Athena going off to war? Not exactly, but she is about to do for Telemachus what she will later do for Odysseus—namely, rouse him to what will virtually be a war. Athena in this poem represents the divine counterpart to Odysseus' and Telemachus' desire for vengeance. Accordingly, her accoutrements are entirely appropriate, inasmuch as she and Telemachus are going to set the revenge-plan into motion. In fact, so closely does the poet associate sandals and spear with Telemachus and his revenge, that, in all the other occurrences in the text of "*kala pedila*" and "*alkimon enchos*" in conjunction, it is Telemachus who wears them.²² He, so to speak, takes over from Athena even the external trappings, not to mention the inner resolve and fortitude, of the righteous avenger.

As for Athena's epithet, *ὀβριμοπάτρη*, its association here with her anger accords both with its probable etymology²³ and with its two other occurrences in the poem: Athena is referred to as *obrimopatré* when she is angry with the Achaeans after the sacking of Troy (3.135),

²² 15.551, 17.4, 20.127; *alkimon enchos* alone occurs only twice else—21.34 and 22.25—but not in connection with Telemachus.

²³ See Émile Boisacq, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Heidelberg and Paris 1916) 683.

and when at the very end of the epic she threatens Odysseus with the wrath of Zeus, if he persists in his assault upon the Ithacans (24.540). Ultimately motivating her visit to Telemachus is her anger against the suitors and, hence, her eagerness to impart to him the determination for revenge.

In this discussion of the purpose of Telemachus' journey, two major propositions have emerged, one concerning the poet's characterization of Telemachus, the other revealing an important facet of the compositional technique. To take the latter first: the voyage, as one step in the process of revenge upon the suitors, illustrates Homer's method of constructing or adapting a nexus of motifs and applying it more than once in a poem; in this poem the revenge-pattern, including the motif of absence and unexpected return prior to the revenge, occurs at least five times. More importantly than making the task of the bard easier, this method allows him to comment upon the main action by means of skilfully handled sub-plots and digressions, and *vice versa*. For, in this case—and this brings us to the other proposition—Telemachus' voyage helps to establish him as something of an Odysseus, that is, as a returning avenger in his own right and a secondary hero of the epic. Just as Odysseus becomes worthy of being Penelope's husband and Ithaca's king through action—not just any action but a series of positive steps toward the fulfilment of both personal revenge and divine justice—in precisely the same way Telemachus in the "Telemachy" gradually becomes worthy of being the son of Odysseus.