

# Playing God: Parallels between Ithaca's Royal Family and their Patron Goddess

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Dr. Ken Seigneurie's World Literature 100 course *What is World Literature?* The assignment was to write a literary paper on a course text, with little to no outside research. The objective of the assignment was to develop close-reading abilities in the context of an argumentative academic essay. The paper uses MLA citation style.

The first spoken words of *The Odyssey* don't come from its titular protagonist, but from the goddess Athena. It is the first of many instances when the goddess of wisdom interferes on behalf of Odysseus. Athena's patronage falls on Odysseus unsurprisingly: he is the hero behind the ploy of the Trojan Horse and his Homeric epithet as "the man of twists and turns" (Homer, 1.1) reflects his intelligence. Wit seems to run in his family: upon meeting Telemachus, Menelaus "recognized him at once" and claims that Telemachus has inherited his father's wisdom and manner of speech (4.229). When Odysseus returns, Penelope mirrors his skepticism and interrogates him, despite Telemachus' protests (23.64-230). However, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* describes Athena as a multi-faceted deity, simultaneously a warrior-goddess, city-goddess, the patroness of arts and manufacture, and by extension of these things an embodiment of wisdom (141). Her roles in *The Odyssey* are just as diverse. In this essay I will argue that each member of Odysseus' family embodies virtues associated with Athena, and that the goddess rewards them with council and assistance. Throughout the epic, Odysseus demonstrates military prowess, Telemachus rises to defend Ithaca, and Penelope dives into craftsmanship. Viewing Odysseus' family as a whole capable

of embodying the very essence of the divine reveals the Homeric ideal of the family unit.

To begin, Odysseus appeals and mirrors Athena's disposition as a war goddess. In Sparta (a notoriously martial city-state), Helen and King Menelaus recount Odysseus' victories:

Surely, I can't describe or even list them all,  
 the exploits crowding fearless Odysseus' record,  
 but what a feat that hero dared and carried off  
 in the land of Troy where you Achaeans suffered!  
 Scarring his own body with mortifying strokes,  
 throwing filthy rags on his back like any slave,  
 he slipped into the enemy's city, roamed its streets-  
 all disguised, a totally different man, a beggar,  
 hardly the figure he cut among Achaea's ships.  
 That's how Odysseus infiltrated Troy,  
 And no one knew him at all... (Homer 4.270-280)

In this segment, Helen establishes Odysseus' importance within the Achaean army. It is not only Odysseus' wit over the course of his reconnaissance mission or the Trojan Horse that he engineers as a result that ties him to Athena, goddess of military strategy.<sup>1</sup> By using disguises (to which he commits to the point of maiming himself) Odysseus mimics Athena's behavior. To name only a few of Athena's forms throughout the epic, she appears as Menthes (Homer 1.210), a bird (1.319), a young girl holding a pitcher (7.22), and a shepherd boy (13.252). Even out of disguise, Athena's appearance ranges from beautiful goddess (13.388) to terrifying warrior (22.311). In Book XXII, Athena helps Odysseus face the suitors and reconnects him to his past gallantry and martial nature, saying: "Where's it gone, Odysseus- your power, your fighting heart? / The great soldier who fought for famous white-armed Helen, (...) you who seized the broad streets of Troy/ with your fine strategic stroke!" (Homer 22.236-241) Here, Athena recognizes Odysseus' prowess outright, but Homer goes on: "Rousing words-/ but she gave no all-out turning of the tide, not yet, / she kept on testing Odysseus and

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas Ares represented the bloodlust and violence of warfare (Hard 141).

his gallant son, / putting their force and fighting hearts to proof" (Homer 22.246-249). Later, Athena will join Telemachus and Odysseus in battle. This sequence of events and the poet's insight into the goddess' mind demonstrates that though she is willing to assist Odysseus, he must merit her aid first. To summarize, by emulating Athena's martial aspect in *The Odyssey* Odysseus deserves her assistance and stimulates divine intervention.

Where Odysseus reflects Athena's martial aspect, Telemachus embodies another facet of Athena: protector of cities (Hard 141). When a disguised Athena and the reader meet Telemachus for the first time, he is hospitable and apologizes for the presence of the suitors, described as such:

All the nobles who rule the islands round about,  
 down to the last man they court my mother,  
 they lay waste my house! And mother...  
 she neither rejects a marriage she despises  
 nor can she bear to bring the courting to an end-  
 while they continue to bleed my household white.

Soon – you wait – they'll grind *me* down as well. (Homer 1.285-293)

This passage reveals Telemachus' goal early in the epic: rid his home of its parasitic invaders. The association and amalgamation of household, throne,<sup>2</sup> and self is telling of how attached he is to Ithaca despite the losing battle he faces. He even personifies the home by comparing it to a bloodless human corpse. When Athena asks Telemachus about Odysseus, he admits that their only real connection is that "they say I am his son" (Homer 1.255). Keeping in mind Telemachus' nonexistent relationship with Odysseus, his priority in the epic becomes Ithaca's protection, which is simply facilitated by Odysseus' return. Once Telemachus has revealed this to Athena, she launches him on the path that will bring him to Sparta, Pylos, and Odysseus. In short, the chronology of events in Book I demonstrate that by intending to protect and preserve Ithaca, Telemachus embodies an aspect of the goddess of Athena and is rewarded by her guidance.

Finally, Odysseus' wife Penelope also embodies attributes of the goddess Athena, thus earning her patronage and protection. Athena is a virgin goddess, a

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<sup>2</sup> Represented here by Penelope's hand in marriage.

trait which Penelope as a mother and wife cannot embody, but parallels. When she is reunited with Odysseus she states:

In my heart of hearts I always cringed with fear  
 some fraud might come, beguile me with his talk;  
 the world is full of the sort.  
 Remember Helen of Argos, Zeus's daughter-  
 would *she* have sported so in a stranger's bed  
 if she had dreamed that Achaea's sons were doomed  
 to fight and die to bring her home again? (23.242-249)

The reference to Helen of Troy may seem incongruous, but Telemachus' earlier visit to Sparta and Iliadic intertextuality established Helen as a disloyal, wanton woman, making her a useful foil to Penelope. Homer will later refer to Penelope as "the wife he / loved, the soul of loyalty" (Homer 23.260-261). Penelope's modesty and restraint parallel Athena's virginity. To maintain this parallel, Penelope resorts to ingenuity to evade her suitors.<sup>3</sup> Here is Penelope's account of her ruse:

... I would lead them on: 'Young men,  
 my suitors, now that King Odysseus is no more,  
 go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until  
 I can finish off this web... (...)  
 So by day I'd weave at my great and growing web-  
 by night, by the light of torches set beside me,  
 I would unravel all I'd done. Three whole years  
 I deceived them blind, seduced them with this scheme. (Homer 19.156-170)  
 Ironically, Odysseus is exactly the man that *would* be seduced by this scheme.

The brilliance of her ploy is further accentuated since it was only a maid's betrayal that led to its failure (Homer 19.173-174). Beyond its wit, the act of weaving itself is connected to Athena's role as patronnes of crafts and to the myth of Arachne, the woman Athena turned into a spider after she challenged the goddess' weaving abilities. The shroud being compared to a 'great and growing web'

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Penelope's cautious approach to marriage shows an impressive socio-political awareness.

reflects this intertextuality and connects Athena and Penelope furthermore. However, spending so much time evading the suitors and waiting for Odysseus' return causes Penelope immense difficulties and pain, which Athena acknowledges and frequently soothes by "sealing her eyes with welcome sleep" (Homer 1.419 and 19.681 for example). In brief, Penelope appeals to Athena as a patroness of crafts and as virgin goddess, and the goddess helps Penelope in return.

In conclusion, each member of Odysseus' family embodies virtues associated with Athena, hence earning the goddess' patronage and support throughout the epic. Odysseus demonstrates an aptitude for military strategy, Telemachus rises as Ithaca's protector, and Penelope mixes wit and craftsmanship while evading marriage thus paralleling Athena's virginity. Together, Penelope, Telemachus, and Odysseus surpass their mortality and are capable of embodying the essence of the divine. Their unity is further illustrated since the help Athena offers one member of the family helps all of them as a result: by sending good winds to Odysseus, Athena is by extension helping Telemachus protect his estate and helping Penelope take another step towards ridding herself of the suitors... For Homer, the ideal family is then stronger, more capable, symbiotic unit. Homer's perception of the Ithacan royals as the ideal family is enhanced by the multiple examples throughout the text of families ruined by the Trojan War, such as Agamemnon's clan, which through their disunity and disloyalty serve as foils.

## Works Cited

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. NY: Penguin Books, 1990.

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