

# Prodigal sons? Odysseus, Telemachus and the dark side of being a father

Emma Greensmith

There is much that bonds Odysseus and Telemachus. Two ‘only children’ in a heroic world filled with siblings (the two brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon, the many, many children of Priam), the *Odyssey*’s plot is about the reunion of father and son as much as of husband and wife. Emma Greensmith explores the relationship between the epic hero, Odysseus, and his son, Telemachus, revealing that it is more complex, uneasy, and competitive than might at first be assumed for this apparently close-knit father-and-son pair.

Telemachus spends the first books of the poem (often called the *Telemachy*, so focused is the narrative on him) on a vast quest in search of news of his father. Once Odysseus finally comes home, he meets his son emotionally in Eumaeus’ hut. Together they plot to destroy the Suitors: testing them in the palace, staging the bow contest, and slaughtering them all in the ‘battle in the banquet hall’. The poem ends with a triumphant image of three generations – Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachus – fighting together to see off the final threat to Ithacan peace (*Od.* 24. 496–505).

However, there are moments which complicate this happy vision of father and son united. Scholars ancient and modern have often puzzled over why Odysseus is so cruel to his aged father Laertes – why, at the start of book 24, he feels the need to deceive and trick him, before revealing his true identity. But is there something even more unsettling about Odysseus’ behaviour towards his *son*? If we read the *Odyssey* another way, focusing on the tense, rather than the triumphant moments in Homer’s constantly twisty poem, it becomes clear that Odysseus is not the perfect father to his developing heroic child. As Telemachus comes of age throughout the epic, Odysseus does not just celebrate the man that his son has, in his absence, become. Instead he *curtails* his heroic advancement, revealing, in subtle ways, how uncomfortable and threatened is he by Telemachus’ role in the household, and in the epic. His treatment of Telemachus, in fact, leaves us with a more awkward, difficult image of the

Ithacan homecoming than may at first seem to be the case. In a poem which starts with the single man (ἄνδρα: *Od.* 1. 1), Homer’s central hero is unwilling to share his heroic crown with anyone. In his attempts to hold his son back, we can see Odysseus’ continual struggle to keep the *Odyssey* his own: a struggle which continues into the epic’s final verses, and out beyond them.

## Renegade reunion: Odysseus, Telemachus, the Suitors

When he meets his father in Eumaeus’ hut, Telemachus has, to put it mildly, had enough of the Suitors. They have pursued his mother relentlessly, pillaged his household, rejected his authority (*Od.* 2. 1–259), and even hatched a plan to murder him once he returns from his voyage (*Od.* 4. 625–74). Now that Odysseus has returned, his son is poised: ready and eager to work with his father to stop them once and for all.

As they devise their scheme – how Odysseus will first approach the Suitors in his disguise as a beggar, to ask them for food and test how they treat impoverished strangers – Odysseus tells Telemachus that, no matter how harshly they are treated, they are both to behave calmly and rationally, cajoling their enemy ‘with gentle words’ (*Od.* 16. 274–9).

However, once they arrive in the palace, things do not quite proceed accordingly. The Suitors, true to form, react to the beggar with hostility: some give bread, ‘pitying him’, but Antinous – the leading

and worst of the gang – treats this new guest badly. He insults him, hurls a footstool at him, and, when challenged by Telemachus, rounds on him too. This appears to be a neat and consistent picture of father and son staying strong against the outrages being committed in their house: biding their time until the moment is right to strike.

And yet Odysseus’ behaviour here is not so straightforward. Rather than accepting serenely Antinous’ refusal to give him food, he provokes him further (δός, φίλος: ‘give, friend’, he asks him, *Od.* 17. 415). Then, in their subsequent exchange, Odysseus becomes heated and hyper: he spars at length with his insulter, and the two even start to echo one another’s speech patterns and words:

| Odysseus                                                                                                                                                     | Antinous                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Zeus...the son of Cronus<br>Ζεὺς...Κρονίων (17.424)<br>To go to Egypt...<br>Αἴγυπτόνδ’ ἰέναι (17.426)<br>But (he took) me to Cyprus<br>ἐς Κύπρον... (17.442) | What god...<br>τίς δαίμων (17.446)<br>Egypt...<br>Αἴγυπτον (17.448)<br>Cyprus...<br>Κύπρον... (17.448) |
| Antinous                                                                                                                                                     | Odysseus                                                                                               |
| There is plenty beside each man<br>πάρα πολλά ἐκάστω (17.452)                                                                                                | There is plenty beside (you)<br>τὰ δὲ πολλά πάρεστιν (17.457)                                          |

In the most remarkable of these examples, Antinous’ use of the phrase πάρα πολλά ἐκάστω (452 – ‘there is plenty [of bread] beside each man’) is closely mimicked by Odysseus, when he says, τὰ δὲ πολλά πάρεστιν – ‘there is plenty beside you’. Nowhere else in the whole of Homeric epic is the preposition πάρα (‘besides’) juxtaposed with πολλά (‘much’): and yet here it happens, twice in five lines, once in the mouth of the most horrific suitor, repeated by the homecoming hero.

There is no such verbal mirroring between Telemachus and the Suitors. Nor – tellingly – between Telemachus and Odysseus. Rhetorically speaking, the son is out on his own. When Odysseus later enters into a physical fight with the beggar Irus (*Od.* 18. 1–107) Telemachus is even

further removed from the action; watching as a bystander in this mock-heroic brawl.

This is all *not* part of Telemachus' plan. This boisterous sequence of events is a far cry from the 'gentle words' that they agreed that Odysseus would pursue. Whereas Telemachus continues simply to be insulted by the Suitors as he has been throughout the poem, Odysseus seems on some level to *enjoy* his interactions with this group. They rile him up, excite him, and even influence his speech. Interpreted in this way, rather than bringing father and son closer together, this testing scene actually moves them further apart. As Odysseus actively mingles with the Suitors, Telemachus, the 'only' son, is left isolated and alone once more.

### The stringing of the bow: paternal anxiety

Odysseus' subtle disengagement with Telemachus in the beggar sequence paves the way for his most chilling moment of fatherly defiance. Once the 'testing' of the Suitors is complete, the weapons are hidden, and the stage for the final slaughter is set, father and son host the famous bow contest (*Od.* 21). Ostensibly designed to select a new husband for Penelope, the event presents the foil for Odysseus to reveal himself; and, together with his son and their allies, finally to bring the Suitors down. To all intents and purposes, this plan works perfectly. Odysseus successfully strings and shoots the bow, casts off his disguise, and the *mnesterophonia* ('slaughter of the suitors') begins.

And yet something strange happens immediately before this moment of triumph. As he is setting up the axes for the Suitors to compete, Telemachus himself stands forward to have a go. And he almost – *almost* – succeeds. Three times, Homer tells us, he began to try the bow. And three times he made it quiver, eager and hoping to shoot the arrow through the iron (*Od.* 21. 124–7). Then at last, as he has a go for the fourth time, he would have actually strung it. But he does not do it. Because his *father* stops him. Odysseus 'nodded in dissent' (ἀνένενε) and checked him, eager though he was (*Od.* 21. 129).

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil stages his own version of this restraint. In book 9, during Aeneas' absence from the war at Latium, his son Ascanius throws himself into the fray, launching a formidable assault, and (his biggest feat) killing Numanus Remulus, a leading, antagonistic figure on the Italian side. Whilst he is exulting in this achievement, Apollo descends to rein the young hero back in (*Aeneid* 9. 641–56). He first congratulates Ascanius on his new valour (*Macte nova virtute, puer* 641) and first taste of glory: and prophesies

with confidence that he will, one day, 'reach the stars': win wars and 'be the father of gods to come'. But for now, he cautions, he must let this killing of Numanus Remulus be enough. At present he should go no further: *parce, puer, bello* ('refrain, child, from war').

In Virgil's version, then, it is a god who holds Ascanius back, and he does so with a lengthy and self-conscious explanation: it is not that Ascanius cannot take up the heroic mantle, but rather, it is not right for him to do so *yet*. His time will come, where he shall assume the role as ruler of the new Roman kingdom, head of the 'empire without end'. There is no such promise for Telemachus. Odysseus simply nods, and with that wordless gesture, this 'child' is forced to withdraw. In preventing his achievement with the bow, Odysseus reminds his son of his emphatically secondary role in this revenge plot; and, perhaps, in the entire epic. This is not the *Telemachy* any more.

### Final roar: fatherly frustration

Odysseus' unease towards Telemachus, his competitive desire to preserve his own heroic and narrative control, continues even after the revenge is complete, and the homecoming plan has been fulfilled. During the final battle with the Suitors' aggrieved relatives (*Od.* 24), it appears that family co-operation is at its most effective. Laertes is now un-duped, Telemachus (apparently) is unrestrained, and the three generations, as we have seen, enter into battle side by side. Homer even gives an emphatic statement of father-son duality: Odysseus and 'his glorious son' work together, he tells us, 'thrusting their swords and spears' to combine their might against this final foe (*Od.* 24. 526–7).

Telemachus then plays a starring role of his own in this battle, and is praised explicitly by Athena, in the guise of Mentor, for the honour that he is bringing to his paternal line (*Od.* 24. 506–9); a divine compliment to which he replies, addressing Odysseus, with dignity and restraint:

ὄψαι, αἵ κ' ἐθέλησθα, πάτερ  
φίλε, τῶδ' ἐπὶ θυμῷ  
οὐ τι κατασχύνοντα τεὸν γένος,  
ὥς ἀγορεύεις. (*Od.* 24. 511–2)

*'You shall see me, if you wish, dear father, as far as my present mood goes, bringing no disgrace whatsoever on your lineage, as you suggest.'*

Odysseus himself, however, is still not content. When Athena descends once more, this time to tell them to cease from fighting – to prevent the destructive cycle of revenge from continuing forever – all of the others concede (*Od.* 24. 528–35).

Telemachus now does not reply. In contrast to his conversation with Athena-cum-Mentor, he has merged back into the collective, receded into the background. Odysseus, however, fights on, and before he finally obeys the goddess, he rushes forwards and screams terribly. The last 'speech' of epic poetry's most silver-tongued speaker is an inarticulate roar:

μερδαλέον δ' ἐβόησε  
πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,  
οἴμησεν δὲ ἀλεις ὥς τ' αἰετὸς  
ὕψιπετής. (*Od.* 24. 537–8)

*Terribly then shouted the much-enduring, noble Odysseus, and gathering himself together he swooped upon them like an eagle of lofty flight.*

In this parting cry, Odysseus on the one hand asserts his final dominance over the poem's narrative: it is his voice that we end with, not his son's. But on the other hand, the fact that this final voice is a scream, not a speech – Odysseus ends the poem with less self-restraint, and less articulacy, than his son – suggests just how incomplete his heroic journey really is. Odysseus is back, but he is not settled. His continual struggle against Telemachus, his recasting of his strongest ally into the role of an outsider or even a threat, reflects his *own* insecurities and anxieties, about his role in a kingdom and household that has existed for many years without him, and about his own identity in these domestic and familial structures. These anxieties are expressed most forcefully in his final howl: a roar of defiance, but also a cry of frustration.

### Coda: Telegonus and the Epic Cycle – the son strikes back

In the *Telegony*, a poem from the 'Epic Cycle', composed some two hundred years after the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but based on myths from the same repertoire, we hear the story of what happened to Odysseus *next*. After the closing lines of the *Odyssey*, he does not stay at home for long. Instead, in accordance with Tiresias' prophecy, he has to go a-roving again. Leaving Ithaca for Elis and Thesprotia, Odysseus marries queen Callicte, fights a war against the Brygians, and eventually, back in Ithaca, meets his end. *How* he dies, however, is both unexpected and revealing.

For the *Telegony* imagines that Odysseus had another son. Telemachus is not an only child any more. Telegonus (after whom the poem is named) is the offspring of Odysseus and Circe, born after Odysseus had departed from the witch's island. So once again Odysseus has sailed off leaving a son to grow up without him – but this time, it is a son that

he never knew that he had.

In this story, it is Telegonus who kills Odysseus. After he is forced onto Ithaca by a storm, not realizing where he is, he sets about stealing the island's cattle (a mistake, as know from the *Odyssey*, that can cost epic voyagers dearly). Odysseus comes to defend his property, and during the ensuing fight, Telegonus kills him with a spear tipped with the poison of a stingray. In this 'tragic' case of mistaken identity, the son unwillingly kills his father because he does not recognize him. Odysseus dies, in this sense, *because of* his failings as a father: because he was absent for so long, and because in the moment of 'reunion' he is aggressive, rash, and unable to communicate. In the darker moments of Odysseus' relationship with Telemachus we can see the inspiration for this end. The tense separation between father and son, the family anxiety lurking within the *Odyssey* itself, is here pursued to its most devastating, disastrous conclusion.

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