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The Plan of Athena

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The Plan of Athena

Abstract
The *Odyssey* opens by dramatizing the Olympian negotiations behind its action, and the goddess Athena quickly emerges as the source and sponsor of the plot that follows. All of the gods except Poseidon are gathered in the halls of Zeus listening to his meditations on a story that is already concluded, the story of Agamemnon. Athena tactfully shifts Zeus’ attention to the story that is on her mind, the still-unconcluded story of Odysseus. When Zeus allows that it is indeed time for Odysseus to return, she responds with a ready set of plans that constitute the two lines of action occupying the next twelve books of the poem: the adventures of Telemachos, initiated by her own visit to Ithaka in the guise of Mentes, and Odysseus’ release from the island of Kalypso, initiated by Hermes sent as a messenger from Zeus (1.80-95). At the end of that phase of the action, Athena takes an even more direct hand in events, meeting with Odysseus as he reaches the shore of Ithaka in Book 13 and devising with him the plot that will control the second half of the poem.

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The Plan of Athena

Sheila Mumaghan

The Odyssey opens by dramatizing the Olympian negotiations behind its action, and the goddess Athena quickly emerges as the source and sponsor of the plot that follows. All of the gods except Poseidon are gathered in the halls of Zeus listening to his meditations on a story that is already concluded, the story of Agamemnon. Athena tactfully shifts Zeus' attention to the story that is on her mind, the still-unconcluded story of Odysseus. When Zeus allows that it is indeed time for Odysseus to return, she responds with a ready set of plans that constitute the two lines of action occupying the next twelve books of the poem: the adventures of Telemachos, initiated by her own visit to Ithaka in the guise of Mentes, and Odysseus' release from the island of Kalypso, initiated by Hermes sent as a messenger from Zeus (1.80–95). At the end of that phase of the action, Athena takes an even more direct hand in events, meeting with Odysseus as he reaches the shore of Ithaka in Book 13 and devising with him the plot that will control the second half of the poem.

The Odyssey, then, goes out of its way to identify the story it tells as Athena's project and, in doing so, signals both its concern with issues of gender and its finally conservative position on those issues. Athena has a distinctive role in the Greek mythological tradition as a figure who resolves conflicts between male and female powers. The resolutions she effects involve both the acknowledgment of female strength and the establishment of hierarchies in which the female is subordinated to the male. Through her own origins and nature and
through her interventions in human situations, Athena neutralizes the
threats that the female is felt to pose for the male and enlists female
figures as willing participants in stable, male-dominated social struc-
tures.

These characteristics are already expressed at the moment of
Athena’s birth. As we learn from the account of cosmic history given in
Hesiod’s Theogony, Athena’s birth is the event that allows Zeus to
become the supreme and permanent ruler of the universe. It repres-
sents his ability to halt the process of cosmic evolution whereby male
gods are repeatedly displaced as their female consorts give birth to
male heirs, who then usurp their fathers’ powers. Zeus swallows
Athena’s mother, Metis, when she is pregnant and gives birth to
Athena himself, through his head. He thus overcomes the threat of
the female by preventing Metis from going on to bear him a son who
could displace him, by gaining control of the normally female func-
tions of generation, and by appropriating the potentially subversive
cleverness that is associated with women and expressed in Metis’
name, which can be translated “cunning intelligence.”

Athena’s nature is true to her origins. Her unique combination of
male and female traits makes her the ideal child for Zeus, one who
resembles her father but does not threaten to displace him or to
disturb the world order he controls. She is a warrior goddess who
possesses the highly prized masculine qualities of strength and cun-
n ing in battle, but she lacks the brutality and irrationality of the male
war god, Ares. Thus she is closely identified with civilization and with
the victory of civilization over barbarism, as in the Greek victory over
the Persians (from the Greek perspective), commemorated in Athens
in the temple of Athena Nike. She is associated with the city as an
institution and with civilized crafts, especially the male craft of ship-
building and the female craft of weaving. How Athena’s warrior iden-
tity is tempered by her femaleness can be seen in an anecdote about
her birth, which forms the subject of the brief Homeric Hymn to
Athena. When Athena bursts forth from Zeus’ head fully armed and
brandishing a spear, the gods are deeply alarmed and the cosmos reels
in horror until she strips her armor from her shoulders, at which point
Zeus rejoices.

At the same time, Athena possesses none of the dangerous quali-
ties typically associated with women—as this episode in which the
uncovering of the female body proves entirely reassuring and un-
seductive makes clear. Above all, she is a virgin goddess who avoids
the volatile realm of sexuality and the divided loyalties of marriage
and motherhood. As an externalized version of her mother, Metis,
whom Zeus has literally incorporated, Athena exercises her characteristically female cleverness through resourcefulness in carrying out the plans and projects of her father.

The literary text in which Athena plays out her role most explicitly is Aeschylus' *Orestes*, a tragic trilogy of the fifth century that looks back to the older traditions reflected in Hesiod and recasts them in the context of the expanding city-state, in particular, the city of which Athena was patron, Athens. The trilogy tells a story of proliferating gender conflicts that issue, in the third play, the *Eumenides*, in a deadlock between Orestes, who has killed his mother, Klytaimestra to avenge her killing of his father, Agamemnon, and the Erinyes, or Furies, female spirits who demand Orestes' death on behalf of the dead Klytaimestra. This deadlock is broken by a jury trial in a court that Athena founds, in which she casts the deciding vote. She votes for Orestes' release from punishment for his matricide, making it clear as she does that she is carrying out the wishes of her father, Zeus, and expressing her ultimate allegiance to the male over the female. This allegiance causes her to value Agamemnon and his champion Orestes as military leaders over Klytaimestra, the mother whose role appears, from the perspective of Athena's own history, negligible. But Athena's role in concluding the action is not complete until she has won over Orestes' female adversaries, the Erinyes. Drawing both on her feminine powers of persuasion and her access to the weapons of Zeus, she convinces the Erinyes to accept her judgment in Orestes' favor and to take on an honored but subordinate role in the reconstituted social order that her decision has made possible.3

As she initiates and guides the action of the *Odyssey*, Athena similarly acts as the female upholder of male-dominated social structures, both Olympian and mortal, and of the value systems that support them. Thus she is a fitting emblem for a poem that at once acknowledges the power of women and equates the successful conclusion of its story with the enlistment of female characters in the male-centered project of the hero's Return. As several of the essays in this volume and other recent studies have shown,4 the *Odyssey* is remarkably attuned to the nature of female experience and to the ways in which women can be powerful figures within the constraints of Homeric society, and it often uses female voices to show how its own values might be called into question; at the same time, it constructs a narrative in which female power is channeled into the reestablishment of a patriarchal order, and thus its own values are finally reaffirmed. Under Athena's watchful supervision, Odysseus overcomes the dangers posed by female figures and returns to restore Ithaka to a
flourishing and ordered society with an authoritative husband and cooperative wife at its center. Like Athena herself, the Odyssey testifies to the importance of the female without departing from the prevalent male-dominated ideology of ancient Greek culture.\footnote{5}

By putting Athena in charge of a plot that leads to the triumph of the male hero and the regeneration of the society he leads, the Odyssey casts in a favorable light the very activity of plotting, an activity that is especially associated with women (whose cleverness often expresses itself in devious schemes) and that is often viewed with suspicion. The feminine associations of plotting are often expressed through metaphors of weaving, an activity pursued by women, ideally to the advantage of their households but sometimes in service of their own private and subversive schemes.\footnote{6} The Odyssey offers the paramount example of how these two activities intersect in its account of Penelope’s concoction of a plot that literally depends on weaving, her scheme of forestalling her Suitors by weaving—and secretly unweaving—a shroud for Laertes. It also offers a particularly pointed use of the metaphor of weaving when in Book 13, as the action enters its final phase, Athena appears openly to Odysseus and announces that she is there to weave a plot with him ("hina toi sun mētin huphēnō," 13.303, cf. 13.386).

The plot that Athena metaphorically weaves in concert with Odysseus supersedes Penelope’s plot with the shroud, which, by the time the Odyssey’s narrative begins, has outlived its usefulness and has been exposed. As the goddess in charge of weaving, Athena is able to perform both the literal handicraft and the more metaphorical devising of plots much more successfully than any mortal. The Odyssey highlights her success as a plotter through the structure of its narrative. With its famously nonlinear plot, the poem establishes a distinction between the events that take place in its own narrative present, which are narrated by the Muses operating through the poet, and earlier events, which are narrated by human characters in flashbacks within the poem. These earlier events include not only Penelope’s temporary scheme to keep her Suitors at bay but also the entire history of Odysseus’ adventures between his departure from Troy and the end of his seven-year stay with Kalypso, which is narrated by Odysseus himself in an extensive flashback spanning Books 9 through 12 of the poem.

Athena, who so prominently controls the narrative present, is markedly detached from Odysseus’ cause during the earlier phase of the adventures, first because she is angry at all the returning Achaeans (3.135) and then because she is obliged to cede control of
events to Poseidon, who is angry at Odysseus’ treatment of his son, the Kyklops Polyphemos (13.339–43). The division of the Odyssey’s action into two phases, one controlled by Poseidon and the other by Athena, expresses an opposition between the two divinities that runs through the mythological tradition. This opposition is presented as an outright competition in the story of their contest for recognition as the patron deity of Athens. The contest is won by Athena when the olive tree she produces is judged to be more useful to the city—which is to say more conducive to the human control of nature—than the salt spring produced by Poseidon, and Athena’s activities in the spheres where she and Poseidon overlap, such as navigation and horsemanship, generally involve the imposition of order on natural forces whose unruliness Poseidon leaves unchecked.

Beginning as it does when Athena reasserts control over Odysseus’ fate, the Odyssey represents another version of her ultimate victory over Poseidon. This victory is associated with civilization, as Odysseus both returns to civilization and restores civilized values on Ithaka, and with the cooperation of female figures in furthering the hero’s goals. The phase of the action controlled by Poseidon is set in a fantastic and anarchic realm that lacks the familiar structures of human social organization and in which conventional gender roles are frequently overturned. This is a realm in which, as Schein points out, the unruliness of women seems to stand for the challenges of the sea itself, the element with which Odysseus must contend and over which Poseidon rules. This is where Odysseus confronts the most powerful and menacing female figures: the terrifying, gigantic daughter and wife of the Laistrygonian king Antiphates; the voracious monsters Skylla and Charybdis. This is where we hear the most autonomous female voices: the voices of the Sirens and of the dead heroines who tell their stories to Odysseus in the underworld. And this is where the seductiveness of women—in particular of the two weaving, singing goddesses, Kirke and Kalypso—threatens to deflect Odysseus from his project of returning home to Ithaka and Penelope. This section of the narrative ends in an impasse with Odysseus trapped on the island of Kalypso. Subject to her desire for him, even though he does not reciprocate it, he is held there in a feminized state of passivity and grief.

Once Athena breaks this impasse and a new phase of the action begins under her guidance, the female figures whom Odysseus encounters are enlisted as willing helpers in his Return. Kalypso receives an Olympian injunction to release Odysseus and speed his journey, at which point he regains his male, heroic capacity for action.
Significantly, his first act is within the sphere of Athena: He builds a ship. From then on, Athena guarantees the cooperation of numerous female accomplices—Ino, Nausikaa, Arete, Eurykleia, and Penelope—until Odysseus is restored to his allotted place in the social order, at the center of a flourishing household built around a harmonious, but asymmetrical partnership between Odysseus himself and his wife, Penelope (cf. 23.350–65).

Athena’s methods for controlling the action of the Odyssey reflect her allegiance to the social order she is helping to restore. As she makes her first moves to spur Telemachos to action, she adopts the identities of male figures who stand in socially important relationships of solidarity to Odysseus and his family, first Odysseus’ foreign guest-friend Mentes and then his loyal Ithacan ally and future battle companion, Mentor. In these disguises, she acts as wise advisor and surrogate father for Telemachos, anticipating the helpful bonds he will forge under her guidance with Odysseus’ Trojan War comrades Nestor and Menelaos. As she stimulates the extension of mutually supportive relationships between aristocratic males from father to son, she activates the very process of heredity on which the aristocratic and patriarchal culture of the poem is based.

Athena’s promotion of these socially important ties between men is complemented by the control she exercises over the volatile realm of female sexuality, which is perceived as a major threat to the social order. Athena intervenes at key points in the narrative by stimulating either women’s own sexual feelings or men’s anxieties about female sexuality. This mode of operation is in accord both with her traditional identity as a virgin who resists all sexual experience herself and with her traditional mastery of chaotic forces that often stand for sexuality, such as the sea or the wild spirit of horses, both significantly associated with Poseidon.

Probably the most memorable instance of Athena’s working through a woman’s sexuality is her role in bringing Nausikaa to the Phaeacian shore so that she can clothe and welcome Odysseus. As Odysseus sleeps on the shore, recovering from his struggle with the sea, Athena goes to the house of Alkinoos “planning the Return (noston) of great-hearted Odysseus” (6.14). There she appears to Nausikaa in a dream in the form of her contemporary and close friend, the daughter of Dumas, and turns Nausikaa’s thoughts to her impending marriage and thus to the laundry that must be done in preparation for it. Here Athena reveals the sympathy for women and for the bonds that they form among themselves that accompanies her allegiance to male interests. She works on Nausikaa through the kind of friendship
among young women that is occasionally glimpsed in our surviving literary texts, most notably in the poems of Sappho. To the extent that those friendships are portrayed, they tend to be treated mournfully and nostalgically, evoked in the context of their dissolution as the women involved are separated by marriage. In *Odyssey* 6, however, Athena uses this relationship as a way of promoting that separation, and in accord with its values, the *Odyssey* portrays only Nausikaa's eagerness for the socially central, male-oriented institution of marriage.

Athena's immediate reason for awakening that eagerness is not, however, to promote Nausikaa's marriage, although that is certainly a byproduct of her efforts, but to further Odysseus' project of returning to Penelope. To do that, she deftly manipulates emotions that are both necessary to a young woman's successful transition to marriage and potentially disruptive in that the woman's newfound sexual feelings may complicate or compromise her safe placement in a approved union. Athena here pulls off the difficult task of exploiting Nausikaa's attraction to Odysseus so that she helps him achieve his own purposes without jeopardizing Nausikaa's eligibility as a wife for one of her many Phaeacian suitors. Not only does she send Nausikaa to the shore but she also sees that Odysseus wakes up in time to approach Nausikaa before she leaves (6.110–18), instills Nausikaa with the boldness necessary to face Odysseus when he appears to her (6.139–40), and enhances Odysseus' physical appeal as he dresses himself in the clothes Nausikaa lends him (6.229–35). Thus she creates an erotically charged situation that is nonetheless kept from leading to a dangerous entanglement through the civilized behavior of her protégés: Odysseus' careful diplomacy and Nausikaa's sense of modesty and propriety keep all thoughts of a union between them safely hypothetical. Odysseus' successful negotiation of the delicate situation in which he finds himself on Phaiakia transposes Athena's victory over Poseidon to the sphere of social life: Under her guidance he wins the confidence of a community of seafarers who are wary of outsiders and devoted to Poseidon (6.266; 7.27–36).

Athena also operates by manipulating men's anxieties about women's sexual feelings and especially about their ability to transfer their affections from one man to another. A good example is her intervention at the beginning of Book 15, where she sends Telemachos home from Sparta so he can help Odysseus regain his household. She appears to Telemachos as he sleeps in the palace of Menelaos and urges him to return home so he can catch up with his mother who, she claims, is being urged by her father and brothers to marry
the richest of her Suitors, Europyntos. Athena is noncommittal about Penelope’s own response to this supposed pressure (of which we hear nothing elsewhere in the poem), but makes sure that Telemachos is worried by alluding in general terms to the mobility of women’s feelings.

You know what sort of heart is in the breast of a woman; she wants to help the household of whichever man marries her, and no longer remembers her earlier children or her beloved husband now that he is dead, nor does she think about them. (15.20–24)

As the effectiveness of this strategy shows, the poem presents Penelope’s response to her Suitors and to the competing pressures that she faces as crucial to the successful outcome of its plot. The Odyssey stresses the importance of Penelope’s frame of mind by generating a certain degree of mystery about it, at times leaving her thoughts opaque and inaccessible. At other times, however, Athena becomes actively involved in making sure that Penelope’s thoughts are properly under control and not veering in directions that might undermine Odysseus’ success.

Her first such intervention occurs at the end of Book 4, where she responds to an anxious prayer from Penelope by sending her a dream. Penelope has just learned of both Telemachos’ absence and the Suitors’ plot to ambush and kill him on his return, and she is distraught with worry about his safety. Eurykleia urges her to pray to Athena, which she does before falling asleep. Athena responds by fashioning an image of Penelope’s sister Iphthime, once again working through those bonds between women that are necessarily sacrificed to marriage. In this case, that sacrifice is poignantly evoked as Penelope addresses the image with amazement: “Why have you come here, sister? Never before this / did you come, since you inhabit a house that is very far away” (4.810–11).

Penelope then goes on to rehearse her troubles, first the loss of her husband, and now the risky journey undertaken by her inexperienced son. As she does so, she also gives priority to her concern for Telemachos: “For this one I grieve even more than for that one” (Odyssey 4.819). Penelope here voices an overriding maternal concern that is understandable in her circumstances and yet is potentially dangerous from the point of view of Odysseus’ interests, to which Athena is wholly dedicated. Early Greek poetry expresses a recurrent concern that a mother’s tie to a son can prove troublesome for her mate, most dramatically in the Succession Myth of Hesiod’s The-
ogony, where in each generation sons unite with their mothers to overthrow their fathers—until Zeus contrives, in the episode previously described, literally to contain the power of his mate and to limit her offspring to Athena. In the Odyssey, the growing crisis that makes Odysseus’ Return urgently necessary centers on Telemachos’ maturity and the pressure it brings on Penelope to serve his interests—at the expense of Odysseus—by marrying one of the Suitors.

Through her surrogate, Athena works to counteract these pressures. The dream image offers Penelope complete reassurance about Telemachos, informing her that he has the company and guidance of none other than Athena herself. But when Penelope then asks her for information about Odysseus, she remains tantalizingly mysterious: “Where that one is concerned, I won’t tell you the whole story / whether he lives or has died. It is bad to speak idly” (4.836–37). In this way, Athena redirects Penelope’s interest and concern away from her son and toward her absent husband, discouraging her from giving him up for lost and preparing her to reassume, rather than abandon, her role as wife.

When the action of the Odyssey enters its most intense phase in Book 13, with Odysseus’ arrival on the shore of Ithaka and Athena’s more overt involvement on his behalf, Athena makes use of Penelope in a more complicated way. The plot that she concocts with Odysseus centers on concealing Odysseus’ identity, and Penelope—along with the Suitors—is a target of that disguise. In encouraging Odysseus to conceal himself from Penelope, Athena operates much as she later will with Telemachos when she inspires him to return from Sparta. Without claiming that Penelope is inclined toward the Suitors—in fact, while assuring him that she is entirely loyal—she nonetheless encourages Odysseus to exercise his characteristic wiliness in relation specifically to Penelope (13.335–38), playing on his generalized anxieties about the possible treachery of women. Odysseus shows how susceptible he is to these anxieties when his first response on hearing about the Suitors is to think of the death of Agamemnon, which was brought about by the paradigmatic disloyal wife, Klytaimnestra (13.383–85).14

Keeping Penelope in the dark allows Athena and Odysseus to use her in a particularly daring and masterful way, exploiting for Odysseus’ advantage the growing willingness to marry one of the Suitors that Penelope feels as time marches on and Telemachos’ needs become more pressing. This is a brilliantly successful strategy, which culminates in the bow contest when Penelope’s decisive step toward remarriage brings about Odysseus’ triumph over the Suitors. It is also
risky; there is always the possibility that Penelope herself will experience that shift of loyalty to a new husband that Athena evokes to Telemachos, with damaging consequences both for Odysseus’ goal of regaining his place as Penelope’s husband and for Penelope’s reputation for fidelity.

One consequence of Athena’s firm control over the Odyssey’s plot is that, although this risk is occasionally evoked in provocative ways, most notably in Penelope’s trick with the marriage bed, it is never realized. Before their plan is launched, Athena offers Odysseus authoritative testimony to Penelope’s fidelity (13.336–38). When she most blatantly exploits Penelope’s attractiveness to the Suitors, in the episode in Book 18 in which Penelope appears in the hall and extracts gifts from them, the narrative makes it clear that Athena is working not with Penelope’s own inclinations, as in almost all cases of divine intervention in Homer, but against them.

The incident is clearly masterminded by Athena; the account of it begins with the statement that Athena put it in Penelope’s mind to appear before the Suitors “so that she might especially stir up the hearts of the Suitors and appear more precious to her husband and son than she had been before” (18.160–1). But Penelope herself is portrayed as repeatedly resisting the sexual dimension of Athena’s plan even as she carries it out. When she registers the impulse to appear before the Suitors in a speech to her servant Eurynome, she expresses great surprise at it and immediately reinterprets it as a desire to speak to Telemachos and warn him against the Suitors (18.164–68). Here her maternal concern for Telemachos, although implicated in her growing willingness to accept one of the Suitors, nonetheless serves as a far more acceptable screen for an impulse to engage the Suitors sexually. When Eurynome responds by encouraging her to beautify herself, Penelope refuses to hear of it, and Athena has to put Penelope to sleep and do it herself; when Penelope awakens, she offers a spontaneous avowal of loyalty to Odysseus, expressing a wish to die so she could stop her perpetual grieving for her lost husband.

Once Penelope has arrived in the hall, she ignores the Suitors and their strong erotic response to her presence and speaks only to Telemachos. When Eurymachos draws her into conversation by praising her beauty and attractiveness, she brusquely denies that she possesses these qualities and launches into the account of how Odysseus instructed her on his departure to remarry once Telemachos was grown, which makes it clear that any move she makes in that direction should be interpreted as loyalty to Odysseus rather than attraction to
any of them. Her demand for gifts comes only after this extensive series of refusals to enter into the sexual atmosphere of the encounter, and it is hardly surprising—even if it is not strictly logical—that Odysseus rejoices and concludes, even as she enchants the Suitors' hearts, that "her mind had other intentions" (18.283). Athena's control over female sexuality here takes the form of creating and exploiting a sexual dimension to Penelope's behavior that Penelope herself resists and denies.

Athena's management of Penelope, which is both unusually manipulative and unusually at odds with the inclinations of the human character involved, contrasts markedly with the extraordinary partnership she establishes with Odysseus in Book 13. While Athena is notable for her tendency to stand by the heroes she favors, and both Homeric epics include references to her special attention to Odysseus at Troy (e.g., Iliad 23.783; Odyssey 3.377–79), the openness and completeness of her support for Odysseus in the second half of the Odyssey are unparalleled. The encounter between Odysseus and Athena in Book 13 dramatizes the formation of a partnership unlike any other, either between a god and a human or between a female and a male.

In this episode, Athena and Odysseus carry out an extensive negotiation of their relationship in which the tensions between female and male that run through the poem are addressed and resolved. Her first act is to trick him by disguising Ithaca itself with a transforming mist. By doing this, she exercises the power associated with the female of making things seem other than they really are and appears to fulfill the threat, also associated with the female, of depriving the hero of what he most desires, in Odysseus' case, his Return. When she reveals herself and offers him reassurance, he responds by charging her with what he fears most from women: abandonment of his cause and seduction (13.312–28). He complains that, although she was "gentle" (épiē) toward him at Troy, she was nowhere to be seen once he embarked on his homeward journey. He goes on to say that he doubts that he has really come to Ithaka as she claims: "For I think you are teasing me/ when you say that, so that you may seduce my mind" (13.326–27).

The verb used here for "seduce," éperopeuō, has general connotations of deception and cajoling, but is especially associated with sexual seduction. Odysseus is responding to the muted but evident sexuality of Athena's approach to him, which involves her transformation out of her first disguise as a young shepherd into a beautiful woman, a smile (which can denote sexual allure, as in Aphrodite's epithet philommeidēs, "smile-loving"), and the intimate gesture of stroking him with her hand (13.286–88). She, in turn, counters his fears by explaining
her absence during his journey as necessary deference to Poseidon and revealing to him that he really is on Ithaka; the appearance of his longed-for native land becomes the token of her continuous good faith.

Athena’s Olympian stature, which means that her designs are endorsed by Zeus himself, makes her a more reliable and confident ally than any of the other female figures on whom Odysseus must depend in the course of the poem, and her prominently deployed partnership with Odysseus eclipses all other such relationships, even that between Odysseus and Penelope. Thus the poem’s most emphatic account of homophrosynē, “like-mindedness,” the defining characteristic of a successful marriage (6.180–85), comes in Athena’s declaration to Odysseus in Book 13.

Only a sly and thievish one could outdo you in all sorts of tricks, even if a god were to encounter you. Scoundrel, clever-minded, full of tricks, you were not about, even in your own land, to give up deceptions and treacherous words, which are dear to your nature. But come, let’s not say any more about that, since we both are versed in sharp dealings, for you are by far the best of all mortals at laying plans and spinning tales, and I among all the gods am renowned for cunning and sharp dealings. (13.291–99)

Shortly afterward, she makes it clear that this like-mindedness is the basis for her unwavering devotion.

Always such thinking is in your heart! That is why I cannot abandon you, wretched as you are, because you are alert, and quick-witted, and careful. (13.330–32)

Athena explicitly presents herself as a better ally for Odysseus than Penelope. Complimenting him on his instinct to test his wife before revealing himself to her, she adds,

Yet she all the same stays in the great hall, and always bitter nights and days wear her away as she weeps. But I, on the other hand, never doubted, but in my heart I knew that you would get home. . . . (13.336–40)

Penelope’s limited mortal knowledge leads her to despair, and although that despair is a sign of her emotional commitment to Odysseus, it is also implicated in her growing willingness to consider remarriage, which threatens Odysseus’ success.
With her Olympian power and omniscience, Athena need have no doubts about the wisdom of complete loyalty to Odysseus. Not only does she make a point of announcing her own constancy but she also goes out of her way to accentuate Penelope’s relative unreliability, playing an especially aggressive role in assuring that Odysseus never joins forces with his wife until the danger of the Suitors has been overcome. We learn in Book 13 that her purpose in obscuring Ithaka from Odysseus is to assure that he not reveal himself to Penelope, among others (13.189–93). When Odysseus taxes Athena with her seeming abandonment of him and expresses doubt that he really is on Ithaka, Athena supplies as the motive for his wariness that “it doesn’t suit you to expose yourself by asking questions/ until you test your wife” (13.335–36). If Odysseus is here directing against Athena the general complaints that male Homeric heroes have about women, Athena is encouraging Odysseus to apply those general complaints to Penelope: She urges him to treat Penelope as if she were disloyal even though she is not. Following her allegiance to a male perspective, Athena reinforces the misogynistic assumptions of which Penelope is, in effect, a victim.

As the narrative progresses, Athena makes sure that Penelope does not recognize Odysseus until the Suitors are defeated. To this end, she again intervenes more crudely than usual for a Homeric god: In the footwashing scene in Book 19, when Eurykleia wants to let Penelope know that the stranger is Odysseus, Athena simply makes it impossible for her to get Penelope’s attention (19.476–79). Once she has set the contest, Penelope, as a mortal woman, has no role in the battle against the Suitors, and she is sent from the hall by Telemachos and put to sleep by Athena (21.343–58). Of course, Athena, in her divine androgyny, plays a vital role in the battle. As the archery contest is followed by a full-scale spear battle, she appears first as Odysseus’ ally Mentor, then as a swallow perched on a roof beam; from this vantage point, she directs Odysseus’ triumph, causing the Suitors’ spears to go astray and finally imposing on them a wild mania that contrasts with the purposeful onslaught of her favorites (22.297–309). Only when the Suitors have been eliminated does Athena promote an open reunion between husband and wife, restore Odysseus to his youthful appearance so that Penelope can recognize him (23.156–63), and hold back the night so that they can enjoy at leisure their return to their marriage bed (23.241–46).

The reunion of Odysseus and Penelope echoes many of the themes of the Book 13 encounter between Odysseus and Athena, and, in the course of it, Penelope emerges as a partner who shares many of
Athena’s qualities. Her trick with the marriage bed reveals that she too is endowed with *mētis* and resembles Athena’s disguise of Ithaka as a sign of seeming betrayal that is really a proof of constancy. Penelope’s *homophrosynē* with Odysseus is also stressed, although less directly in a simile: It is experienced by the characters, but it is not articulated between them (23.233–40).

On the other hand, although Odysseus’ reunion with Penelope has an undeniable emotional power, its strategic significance is relatively small; the role of Odysseus’ active female partner in his recovery of his home has been taken over by his divine patron. Moreover, although both episodes end with a scene of plotting, in which the alliance that has just been renegotiated is acted out, the hierarchies operating in each are different. Athena is clearly Odysseus’ superior, and she is the one who dictates their plot, announcing that she will disguise him and that he must go first to the hut of the swineherd Eumaios while she fetches Telemachos back from Sparta (13.397–415). With Penelope the balance of power is reversed, so that Odysseus presents her with a plan that expresses a classic gender asymmetry: He will go out and attend to matters beyond the house, while she must remain quietly inside (23.350–65).

Despite the hint of flirtatiousness in her dealings with Odysseus, Athena’s efficacy in managing the *Odyssey*’s plot—as in her other mythical exploits—rests on the fact that she is a virgin as well as a goddess. Her aloofness from marriage detaches her from a relationship that inevitably involves divided and shifting loyalties; a wife’s loyalties shift from father to husband and possibly again from one husband to another, as various characters in the *Odyssey* fear will happen with Penelope. Athena’s undivided loyalty to her father, Zeus, gives her the influence with him that enables her to bring about Odysseus’ triumph over Penelope’s Suitors. Having no sexual designs on Odysseus, Athena lacks the reluctance to let him return to Penelope found in Kirke and especially in Kalypso; having no sexual designs on anyone else, she lacks the motives for betrayal found in Helen and Klytaimnestra, whose behavior colors the *Odyssey*’s presentation of Penelope.

In addition, Athena’s virginity detaches her from the other relationship that comes with marriage and female sexuality, namely, motherhood, which entails a further division of loyalty between father and son. Athena’s difference from Penelope in this respect is expressed in the way her actions, especially her orchestration of their reunion in Book 16, promote harmonious cooperation between Odysseus and Telemachos, while Penelope is portrayed as painfully torn
between her duties as Odysseus’ wife and as Telemachos’ mother (e.g., 19.512–34).

The advantage of Athena’s lack of motherhood can be seen by comparing her relationship to Odysseus to the closely parallel relationship between the goddess Thetis and her mortal son, Achilles, in the *Iliad*. In both poems, the goddess’s advocacy of her mortal protégé effectively structures the plot. Like Athena in *Odyssey* 1, Thetis sets the plot of the *Iliad* in motion by appealing to Zeus on behalf of Achilles and gaining Zeus’ assent to a plan to restore to Achilles what he has lost, in his case the honor that went with his war prize Briseis. Each goddess also appears at the end of the poem to bring the story to a close: Thetis is sent from Zeus to tell Achilles he must return Hektor’s body to Priam, while Athena makes a concluding epiphany to construct a truce between Odysseus and the Suitors’ relatives.

The similarity of these goddesses’ supportive roles is underscored by the parallel construction of the key episodes in which each comes to her hero’s aid. In Book 1 of the *Iliad*, Achilles, desperate over his mistreatment by Agamemnon, goes alone to the shore and prays to his mother, at which point she emerges from the sea to console and help him. In Book 13 of the *Odyssey*, Athena appears to Odysseus as his open and unconditional supporter when he too is wandering unhappily along a shore. Despondent over his seeming failure to reach Ithaka, Odysseus is slapping his thighs (a sign of mortality), bemoaning his fate, and dragging himself along *thina poluphoisboio thalasseis*, “the strand of the much-echoing sea” (*Odyssey* 13.220).

The solicitude that Athena displays toward Odysseus, both in *Odyssey* 13 and elsewhere in the Homeric epics, is reminiscent of a mother’s care as well as a lover’s. Indeed, during the funeral games in *Iliad* 23, when Athena causes Ajax to lose to Odysseus in the running race, Ajax ruefully refers to her as the goddess who “like a mother stands by Odysseus and brings him help” (*Iliad* 23.783). But, for all the eloquence of this simile in measuring Athena’s devotion to Odysseus, her ultimate success in helping him depends on the fact that she is not his mother or anyone else’s mother. Despite the structural similarities between the roles of Thetis and Athena, Thetis is not able to secure for Achilles the happy outcome to his struggles that Athena achieves for Odysseus, and this failure is closely tied to Thetis’ maternity.

In the mythological tradition that lies behind the *Iliad*, Thetis is a double for Athena’s mother, Metis. She is a powerful and alluring sea goddess with whom Zeus is eager to mate until he learns that she is destined to bear a son who will be stronger than his father. As with
Metis, Zeus forestalls this threat, in this case by marrying Thetis off to a mortal, Peleus, to whom she bears Achilles, the mortal hero who is indeed greater than his mortal father, but who cannot challenge Zeus. Zeus secures his sovereignty by depriving Thetis and Achilles of the greater glory that might have been theirs, and this is the source of their power over him, of the ability to enlist him in their plan that is dramatized at the beginning of the Iliad. This power cannot, however, offset the pain that Zeus' maneuver costs each of them, in Achilles' case the pain of mortality and in Thetis', the pain of seeing her own son suffer and die.

As generative mother and challenging son, Thetis and Achilles remain troublesome figures for Zeus, in contrast to Athena, in whom—as a virgin rather than a mother and as a daughter rather than a son—the threats posed by those roles have been neutralized. Thus Zeus' agreement with Thetis at the beginning of the Iliad has a wholly different character from his agreement with Athena at the beginning of the Odyssey. He enters into Thetis' plan only reluctantly and secretly, and his acquiescence causes him trouble with both his legitimate consort, Hera, and his beloved daughter, Athena (e.g., Iliad 8.438–84).

Furthermore, although the outcome Athena negotiates for Odysseus is straightforward and clearly beneficial, the plan to which Thetis wins Zeus' agreement is murkier and full of unexpected consequences. With Athena's help, Odysseus manages to transcend a hero's normal limitations, adding a successful homecoming (nostos) to the winning of glory (kleos). But, for all of Thetis' advocacy, Achilles' achievement remains circumscribed by the necessity of choosing between homecoming and glory (Iliad 9.410–16) and Thetis' plan of having Achilles win glory through Trojan victories during his absence from battle bears the unforeseen cost of Patroklos' death. The stark limits on what Thetis can do for Achilles are highlighted at the end of the Iliad when Zeus summons Thetis to Olympos and instructs her to tell Achilles he must return Hektor's body, imposing on Achilles an action that acknowledges his mortal limitation and subjection to divine will.

Thetis' fulfillment of Zeus' command brings formal symmetry to the Iliad's plot, echoing and reversing her actions in Book 1, where she induces Zeus to act on Achilles' behalf. Her action also promotes a return to civilized values, as Achilles is forced to give up his savage and pointless punishment of Hektor's body. That return to civilization, however, brings with it a check on the personal aspirations of the human hero Achilles and has a limited impact; the brief and fragile
truce between Achilles and Priam has no effect on the ongoing course of the war.

Like the Iliad, the Odyssey ends with the goddess who has initiated the poem's plot bringing it to a close. But, in accord with her closer and more comfortable relationship with Zeus, Athena's role at the end of the Odyssey is both more prominent and more happily effective than that of Thetis in the Iliad. The Odyssey's conclusion, like its beginning, is worked out in a conversation between Zeus and Athena that Athena initiates. As the Suitors' relatives begin their vengeful attack on Odysseus, Athena turns to her father and asks him his intentions: whether he will bring about war among the Ithacans or a harmonious alliance.

Zeus responds to Athena's characteristic deference by reminding her that this story has so far been her project and ceding control to her: "Did not you yourself devise this plan, by which Odysseus, returning, took vengeance on those men? Arrange things as you wish." But he also goes on to tell her what outcome would be fitting (hōs epeoiken), and it is typical of the relationship between Zeus and Athena that what is fitting to him is also what is most pleasing to her: lasting peace and prosperity among the Ithacans, continuous rule for Odysseus, and a miraculous forgetting of the slaughter of the Suitors (24.482–86).

Authorized by Zeus to carry out what she already desires (24.487), Athena orchestrates a brief, final episode in which Odysseus' paramount good fortune is rehearsed. She allows the war between Odysseus and the Suitors' relatives to proceed just long enough for the superiority of Odysseus' side to be put on display. What is particularly stressed here is the power of the aristocratic, patriarchal family as Odysseus enjoins Telemachos to live up to the glory of his forefathers, Telemachos assures his father that he will do so, and Laertes rejoices that his son and his grandson are competing in valor. The power of the family is bound up with the favor of Athena, who appears as Mentor to encourage them and, in that role, urges Laertes to pray to herself. He duly does so and is rewarded when she causes his spear to hit Antinoos' father, Eupeithes, the leader of their opponents. But when Odysseus and Telemachos move in to follow up on this success, Athena brings the war to an abrupt halt, sending the Ithacans into terrified flight and preventing Odysseus from going after them. With the backing of her father, she insists that the quarrel be ended and arranges the truce between the sides, in accord with her identity as a goddess of war who nonetheless upholds civilization and peaceful order.
Athena’s final intervention in this plot that she has created and guided throughout constitutes an endorsement of the Homeric oikos, the hereditary extended household to which Odysseus has made his arduous, glorious Return. The oikos is identified as the basis of Odysseus’ power, as Athena creates an invincible fighting force out of three generations of his family. Athena’s action also reveals the oikos as the sphere in which Odysseus can enjoy the unqualified success that distinguishes him from other heroes; she assures a happy ending to his story by cutting it short just as he begins to move aggressively beyond the boundaries of his estate.21 Yet if Odysseus’ story, like Achilles’, ends with the gods imposing limits on the individual hero, Zeus’ proposal to Athena makes it clear that that limitation will be painless: Odysseus will retain his preeminence in Ithaka, and the entire population will flourish. The hero’s violent obliteration of his rivals will go unavenged for the sake of peace.

The image of the oikos celebrated in this final episode is dominated by men; it is encapsulated in the unbroken male heritage represented by Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachos. Through a plot constructed around the danger posed by Penelope’s Suitors, the Odyssey presents the oikos as having to be protected by force, and that means that it can function properly only with a male hero at its center. Although the poem has done much to indicate the importance of women to the functioning of the oikos and to its preservation, women are notably absent from its concluding pageant. Even Penelope—who has contrived to preserve Odysseus’ household in his absence and who has helped to create the biological tie between Odysseus and his son—is hidden from view in the inner part of the house. Instead, Odysseus has at his side the one female figure on whom a male hero can most surely depend: the goddess Athena, who devotes to his cause both her masculine ability as a fighter and her feminine skill as a weaver of plots, devising an end to his story that is at once the restoration of society and the fulfillment of his desires.

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Jane Espy Gordon, whose early arrival prevented it from being finished on time. My thanks to Beth Cohen for the good grace with which she tolerated the delay and for helpful editorial comments.

1. The definitive study of métis in Greek thought is Detienne and Vernant, 1978.
2. For a concise survey of Athena’s various attributes, see Burkert, 1985, 139–43.
5. I am extending here an argument I have made elsewhere in connection with Penelope. See Murnaghan, 1986; 1987, 118–47; 1994. On the sexual ideology of the Odyssey, see also Wohl, 1993.
6. Among the many discussions of this metaphor, Bergren, 1983, 71–73, has been especially influential.
7. For the argument that Athena’s failure to help Odysseus during his adventures stems from anger at him personally, see Clay, 1983.
8. On the interactions between Athena and Poseidon in these realms, see Detienne and Vernant, 1978, 187–258.
9. Schein, Chapter 2, this volume.
10. Ino appears to Odysseus in the form of an aithuia or sea crow, a bird identified with Athena in her capacity as navigator. See Detienne and Vernant, 1978, 218.
11. For the way fifth-century vase painters depicting the meeting of Odysseus and Nausikaa emphasized both the involvement of Athena and the sexual dimension of the encounter, see Shapiro, Chapter 8, this volume, who also includes bibliographical references to the main discussions of the episode. The prominence of Athena in representations of this scene is especially notable because, as Buitron-Oliver and Cohen point out (Chapter 3, this volume), she is otherwise rarely included in depictions of scenes from the Odyssey.
12. For other examples, see the portrayal of Persephone and her companions in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Alkman’s first Partheneion, and the surviving fragment of Erinna’s Distaff.
13. For an outright admission that marriage promotes primarily the interests of men, a situation that is implicit throughout ancient Greek literature and cultural institutions, see Athena’s comment at Eumenides 737 that her refusal to marry is the only respect in which she does not automatically side with the male.
14. For further discussion of the paradox that Athena and Odysseus exclude Penelope from the disguise plot even though she is loyal to Odysseus, see Murnaghan, 1986; 1987.
15. For a thorough account of the marriage bed and its role as a symbol of fidelity, see Zeitlin, Chapter 7, this volume.
17. For the wary attitude toward motherhood expressed in Homeric poetry, see Murnaghan, 1992.
19. Athena does undergo a reluctant, deflected, and virginal version of motherhood through her role in the origins of the legendary Athenian king
Erichthonios. Hephaistos attempts to rape Athena but she resists and his semen falls on her thigh; she wipes it off with a piece of wool, which she throws to the ground; at the place where it falls, Erichthonios springs from the earth. See Frazer, 1979, 2:90–91 for Apollodoros' account of this story and references to other versions.


THE DISTAFF SIDE

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