

**THE TRIALS OF TELEMACHUS:
WHO WAS THE *ODYSSEY* MEANT FOR?**

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A consideration of Telemachus's role in the *Odyssey* can start with a modern poem: Linda Pastan's "The Son," first published in 1988 as part of a seven-poem sequence entitled "Re-Reading the *Odyssey* in Middle Age." Because Pastan's poem presents itself as a response to reading the *Odyssey*, the possible affinities between what a modern poet does in retelling a story found in an ancient text and what a modern critic does in interpreting or "reading" an ancient text are particularly close to the surface here. Pastan's record of her experience as a reader is also a telling account of the interpretive challenges posed by Homer's presentation of Telemachus.

"Then the thoughtful Telemachus said to her in answer:
. . . nobody really knows his own father."

The Odyssey, Book 1

If life is simply a lesson
in how we should have lived it,
perhaps the *Odyssey* was meant for Telemachus—
a kind of primer, a head start.
Even the parts about the mother distracted
at her loom, the dog whining on the doorsill,
and the kitchen so busy with ox and sheep
to feed the suitors, that the boy was told,
and told again, to play outside. When Athena
finally came to stir him up, he was like a child
whose toy bow has suddenly arched to the size

of a rainbow, as later the stranger's
 would seem to in the Great Hall.
 After his own difficult journey—the men
 all mocking him at first, real dangers
 barely averted, his voice hoarsening
 with manhood, even authority—
 what it came down to in the end
 was his wily father home at last,
 perfection itself, and more
 critical than in those boyish dreams
 of rescue. The man even warned his son,
 who had braved so much alone, not to shame
 the blood of Odysseus. So was the lesson
 Patience or Valor? Power or Wisdom?
 Or was it simply family feeling:
 long evenings to come in Ithaca, Penelope
 weaving both men tunics, with only
 hearth fires burning now. And stories,
 Ah the stories! Through the chilly night.¹

Commenting on the *Odyssey* through a poem, Pastan makes moves that are prohibited for a critic. She projects Telemachus out of the text in which, from a stricter perspective, he has his sole existence, turning him into a reader of the *Odyssey* as well as a character in it. In fact she makes him its intended audience, speculating that “perhaps the *Odyssey* was meant for Telemachus— / a kind of primer,” imagining the poem as having been composed for the purpose of educating Telemachus. Beyond that, she does not stick to the text as we have it, but invents new episodes to support her reading. She makes the point that being Telemachus in the *Odyssey* does not seem to be either easy or fun by alluding to parts of the poem that are actually her own invention: “Even the parts about the mother distracted” and so forth. More subtly, she retells the episodes that are in the poem, but adds a new perspective, evoking a subjectivity that is absent from the original. She leads up to the state of perplexity in which she asks “So was the lesson / Patience or Valor? Power or Wisdom?” by reviewing the *Odyssey*'s plot

1 “The Son” from *The Imperfect Paradise* by Linda Pastan. Copyright 1988 by Linda Pastan. Reprinted with permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

from Telemachus's perspective and showing it to be disappointing and even embittering. She touches on key moments in Telemachus's story: the arrival of Athena disguised as Mentès, the recognition scene with Odysseus in Book 16, the contest of the bow, and the final battle with the suitors' relatives in which Odysseus enjoins Telemachus (*Od.* 24.508–09):²

μή τι κατασχύνειν πατέρων γένος, οἷ τὸ πάρος περ
ἀλκῆ τ' ἠγορέη τε κεκάσμεθα πᾶσαν ἐπ' αἴαν.

you must be certain
not to shame the blood of your fathers, for we in time
past
all across the world have surpassed in manhood and
valor.

As this quotation confirms, the episodes Pastan evokes are certainly present in the *Odyssey*. What is not there is the tone in which they are evoked. In response to a sense that Telemachus's adventures are ignored and belittled, Pastan rehearses them in terms that suggest an effort to claim that they should be taken seriously as truly impressive and challenging:

After his *own* difficult journey—the men
all mocking him at first, *real* dangers
barely averted, his voice hoarsening
With manhood, *even* authority—

Pastan's evocation of an emotional register that is suggested by the *Odyssey* but absent from it brings certain aspects of Homer's poem into clearer focus. The *Odyssey* does open with the promise that Telemachus is on the brink of a great adventure, but then shows him having experiences and meeting challenges that can't possibly compete with those of Odysseus or those of the other heroes whose stories are alluded to in the poem. The *Odyssey* does present Telemachus as needing to take charge of his situation and learning to do so, only to relegate him to a secondary, accessory role as his father's helper once Odysseus returns himself to settle matters on Ithaca.

2 All translations are from the version by Richmond Lattimore, which is the one used by Pastan.

But what the *Odyssey* does not do is acknowledge that these features of its own plot are troubling. There are a few hints of unhappiness in places to which Pastan deftly draws our attention. For example, Telemachus responds quite assertively to the admonition quoted above not to shame the family (*Od.* 24.511–12):

ὄψεται, αἴ κ' ἐθέλησθα, πάτερ φίλε, τῶδ' ἐπὶ θυμῶ
οὗ τι καταισχύνοντα τεὸν γένος, ὡς ἀγορεύεις.

You will see, dear father, if you wish, that as far as my
will goes,
I will not shame my blood that comes from you, which
you speak of.

This moment of tension has to be resolved by Laertes, who re-describes it as a competition to be rejoiced at as a sign of family vigor (*Od.* 24.514–15):

τίς νύ μοι ἡμέρη ἦδε, θεοὶ φίλοι; ἦ μάλα χαίρω·
υἱός θ' υἱωνός τ' ἀρετῆς πέρι δῆριν ἔχουσι.

What day is this for me, dear gods? I am very happy.
My son and my son's son are contending over their
courage.

And Odysseus is surprisingly critical of Telemachus at the moment of their reunion. Telemachus quite reasonably expresses doubt that this person who has just undergone a whirlwind transition from an old beggar to a radiant hero can really be his father, and Odysseus answers quite impatiently (*Od.* 16.202–06):

Τηλέμαχ', οὗ σε ἔοικε φίλον πατέρ' ἔνδον ἔόντα
οὔτε τι θαυμάζειν περιώσιον οὔτ' ἀγάσθαι·
οὐ μὲν γάρ τοι ἔτ' ἄλλος ἐλεύσεται ἐνθάδ' Ὀδυσσεύς,
ἀλλ' ὅδ' ἐγὼ τοιόσδε, παθὼν κακά, πολλὰ δ' ἀληθείς,
ἤλυθον εἰκοστῶ ἔτει ἐς πατρίδα γαίαν.

Telemachos, it does not become you to wonder too
much
at your own father when he is here, nor doubt him. No
other

Odysseus than I will ever come back to you. But here I
 am,
 and I am as you see me, and after hardships and
 suffering
 much I have come, in the twentieth year, back to my
 own country.

But these are only hints and, although Pastan makes shrewd use of them to construct an account of Telemachus's dissatisfaction with his lot, the *Odyssey* itself generally suggests that neither Telemachus himself nor Odysseus is unhappy with the role that Telemachus plays in the poem. It gives no indication that Telemachus's experiences should be viewed as anything other than a success story. Rather, as Nancy Felson has shown (1999), it presents Telemachus's experience as part of an idealized relationship between a gentle and generous father—a *πατήρ ἥπιος*—and a happily obedient son.³ There is a contradiction built into the *Odyssey*'s presentation of Telemachus between the implicit claim that Telemachus's story is as glorious and heroic as his father's and the actual experiences he is allowed to have.⁴ Pastan registers this contradiction both by attributing to him feelings of resentment and frustration and by representing the bafflement of her reader, who cannot figure out what Telemachus—or we—should conclude from his experiences. Was it valor? Was he supposed to aspire to heroism in the mold of the great warrior heroes of Troy, like his father? Or was it patience? Was he supposed to fulfill his destiny for greatness by waiting and serving, more in the manner of his famously patient mother Penelope?

Looking at the *Odyssey* in its own terms, we can relate this built-in contradiction to the fact that, unlike Pastan's short poem, the *Odyssey* is not really about Telemachus but rather about Odysseus, which could be another way of stating what she sees as the problem with it. While the *Odyssey* claims to portray a relationship of happy equality between father and son, its own interest and attention are not evenly divided. The *Odyssey* is, above all, designed to draw attention to Odysseus and to present him as the most supremely successful of the heroes who fought at Troy, and it deploys the story of Telemachus's relatively mundane coming of age to promote this

3 On the *Odyssey* as depicting father-son competition in its most positive and socially beneficial form, see also Wöhrle 1999.117–43.

4 On the contradictory character of the *Odyssey*'s depiction of Telemachus, see also the excellent discussion by Thalmann 1998.206–23.

project. In itself, the Telemachy is closely parallel to a group of stand-alone Serbo-Croatian epics about youthful initiation that also involve relatively unadventurous and inconclusive quests and concern heroes who are not otherwise especially notable (Bynum 1968). But in those poems, the young hero, however mundane his achievements, remains the central character. Homer's Telemachy takes on a different, potentially troubling valence through its integration into the larger *Odyssey*. Telemachus is like his Serbo-Croatian counterparts in that he completes his initiation by trying, and yet also failing, to find his father; in those other poems, that fruitful failure presumably leaves the young hero with the ground clear for further self-assertion. But Telemachus's father succeeds in returning nonetheless and, in doing so, claims center stage for himself and mutes the significance of the young hero's successful initiation.

The *Odyssey* appropriates Telemachus's story and uses it to further its own celebration of Odysseus in several ways. One is to complete the picture of Odysseus's unparalleled success by endowing him with not only both *kleos* and *nostos* but also the assurance of a continued lineage, of being followed by a son who is a worthy successor to his father—and it allows him to enjoy all of these rewards while he is still alive. Unlike Achilles and Agamemnon, who learn of their worthy sons only after they have died, Odysseus lives to see his own successor in action. His encounters with Telemachus are, in this way, comparable with his encounters with Demodocus through which he is able to experience his own commemoration in song without having to die. The emphasis on succession that is so deeply embedded in the heroic and aristocratic values of the Homeric epics generates a concept of Odysseus's achievement that is incoherent in that it requires Telemachus to play the role of Odysseus's successor and yet not to displace him either in the sense of taking over as head of the household and king of Ithaca or in the sense of performing actions that could compete for the audience's attention and admiration with those of his father.

Most of Telemachus's actions consist of finding out things about Odysseus, and this is related to another way in which the *Odyssey* can be said to use him. Telemachus's quest for information about Odysseus serves as an elegant means by which the poet tells us about Odysseus without actually presenting him to us directly. It is a way in which the poem replicates its own hero's strategy of keeping himself hidden until the most opportune moment. From the point of view of Pastan, who is concerned with the problem of what it means for one person's life to be subordinated to another's—an issue she also takes up in relation to Penelope in the same

poem cycle—the *Odyssey*'s use of Telemachus in these ways seems like exploitation. She registers that sense through the emotion of disappointment: the disappointment of Telemachus, whose experiences do not seem to be as wonderful for him or as fully appreciated by others as he might have hoped, and the parallel disappointment of the reader, who has trouble seeing what lesson could be drawn from a set of events that are, after all, presented as an education. The promise of some gain to Telemachus in coming to know his unknown father, held out in the line Pastan quotes as an epigraph, seems to be blighted in the eventual appearance of an overshadowing giant who is “perfection itself.” But from the perspective of the *Odyssey*'s own goals, the role of Telemachus fulfills the poem's mission of envisioning for its hero the most successful of human lives and reflects its technique, which is to present that hero only gradually and obliquely.

Pastan's sense, conveyed in her image of the *Odyssey* as a primer, that the story of Telemachus is, in some way, one of education, clearly responds to something in the poem, and it has, of course, been shared by many other readers. But, as her *aporia* reminds us, it is less clear exactly what Telemachus is being educated for. This unclarity can perhaps best be understood in relation to the poem's requirement that Telemachus play the inherently contradictory role of unsucceeding successor, a role that we see him learning as he feels his way into his part. In appreciating the *Odyssey*'s presentation of Telemachus's education, we have to acknowledge the paradoxical goal of that education and to pay attention to how the poem finesses, or tries to finesse, the problem identified by Pastan, namely that the messages conveyed to Telemachus are so bafflingly mixed.

This project can be furthered by another of Pastan's insights, her suggestive depiction of Telemachus as the *Odyssey*'s intended reader. Fanciful as this image may seem, it actually dovetails strikingly with the observations of many recent critics of the *Odyssey*, including several who are represented in this collection, that Telemachus functions in the *Odyssey* as an internal audience, a representative within the poem of its external auditors and readers. This point is made in an especially shrewd and sensitive way by John Peradotto, who writes in *Man in the Middle Voice* of how Books 1 through 4 of the *Odyssey* are structured in such a way as to “invite the reader or audience to realize their common plight with Telemachus, some entering the text with more knowledge of its hero, some with less, others perhaps with nothing but the name, like Telemachus, forced to conjure imaginary visions in his mind's eye . . . then bit by bit to shape a presumptive semblance of his father out of the fragments of other people's

memories" (1990.117–18). (And here the phrase "common plight" wonderfully reveals the sense of humane sympathy that co-exists in Peradotto's work with a rigorously theoretical approach.)

Like Peradotto, Nancy Felson in *Regarding Penelope* calls attention to the element of spectatorship in Telemachus's initial appearance in the poem, where we see him "imagining in his mind his great father, how he might come back / and all throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter, / and hold his rightful place and be lord of his own possessions" (*Od.* 1.115–17). As she puts it, "Telemakhos—in an act consonant with the epic language for the making of epic—literally envisions a narrative" (1997.143). Discussing the first episode of poetic performance described within the poem, in which Telemachus defends and authorizes the song of Phemius that Penelope has asked Phemius to stop singing, Pietro Pucci memorably characterizes Telemachus as an "intoxicated reader" (1987.201). In her extensive study of internal audiences in the *Odyssey*, Lillian Doherty points out that Telemachus, in his visits to Pylos and Sparta, represents a mini-version of the typical Homeric audience, which is, like him, aristocratic and male (1995.73, 131).

An especially challenging version of the view that Telemachus represents the poem's audience, and one that also addresses the gap between the opportunities and achievements accorded to father and son that bothers Pastan, is that of Richard Martin in an essay entitled "Telemachus and the Last Hero Song." Martin sees that gap not as a source of confusion and unfairness to someone looking at the poem from Telemachus's point of view but rather as the *Odyssey's* way of representing its own relationship to history. For Martin, Telemachus, in his ordinariness, represents the historical audience of heroic poetry that looks back to an earlier period of greater glory. For him, the superiority of Odysseus over Telemachus represents not a problem that the son must wrestle with in defining the meaning of his own life but a historical transition from the heroic era to the mere iron age, and he links this to the theme that pervades the *Odyssey* of the end of the heroic age, the sense that the era in which figures like Agamemnon and Achilles were active is reaching its end as the action of the poem unfolds and we find those heroes located in the world of the dead.

As Martin puts it, "We receive the poem filtered through an internal audience who desires and listens to Odysseus's story. This audience of one, Telemachus, has his own small adventure story . . . but we cannot fail to notice that Telemachus at the end of the poem is back in a subordinate position" (1993.239). By casting Telemachus in the role of audience, the

poet signals that the experiences described in heroic song have come to an end and that, with them, the poetic tradition is reaching its conclusion as well. “By preposing the Telemachy . . . the poet of the *Odyssey* made a conscious attempt to perform a poem about the *end* of a tradition.” “Moreover,” he continues, “to speak of the end of heroic tradition, tailing out with the quite ordinary Telemachus, is also to comment on the end of a *poetic* tradition, epic verse as practiced by the poet of the *Odyssey* itself, for the two are symbiotic” (1993.240, emphasis in original).

When juxtaposed with Pastan’s implicit critique of the *Odyssey* for making Telemachus’s experiences so unfulfilling, Martin’s argument becomes an interesting version of a certain type of critical move, the claim that a problem in an ancient text that is located by a modern critic is not a flaw overlooked by the author but a problem that the ancient author recognizes and aims to represent. Another interesting example in recent *Odyssey*-criticism would be the argument found in Peradotto’s *Man in the Middle Voice* and in Marilyn Katz’s *Penelope’s Renown* that indeterminacy of meaning is not a problem that handicaps the poet of the *Odyssey* but a theme that he embraces and addresses. From the point of view of Martin’s argument, Pastan’s concern about Telemachus’s foreshortened experiences responds to the poet’s attempt to represent a concern of his own, although it is differently formulated, a concern about a diminished world. Martin see the *Odyssey* as asking how “can oral poets compose if the audience is made up of young men like Telemachus” and as expressing a concern about “the very social conditions that might (but eventually in fact failed to) allow epic art to grow” (1993.240).

Successful as it is in pinpointing what makes Telemachus’s role so hard to assimilate as straightforward character portrayal, Martin’s reading—and any reading that sees Telemachus as primarily an internal surrogate for the poem’s external audience—is nonetheless incomplete. Such a reading underplays the *Odyssey*’s own stubborn refusal to acknowledge Telemachus’s secondariness, its persistent insistence that he really is achieving something comparable to what Odysseus does, even though he is mostly hearing the stories of others. There is a dynamic dimension to Telemachus’s role as audience. He does not display the typical passivity and detachment of a Homeric audience (such as, for example, the Phaeacians), but has to do something with the stories that he hears: he has to use them to create an identity of his own. Martin’s interpretation does not quite capture the way in which Telemachus is at once an audience and a character in the work whose own story we have to take seriously. This *is* brought out by Pastan’s illogical

but arresting image of Telemachus reading in advance about events in which he is also the principal actor.⁵

Far from presenting Telemachus as only a belated auditor of others' unmatched exploits, the *Odyssey* makes an adventure out of the process by which Telemachus discovers his peculiar role as Odysseus's unsucceeding successor. He is presented as achieving something significant as he picks his way through the plots, both past stories and possible future scenarios, that are presented to him in the course of his quest for information about his father. This quest is closely guided by Athena, the figure who supervises the *Odyssey's* plot throughout, always with a primary allegiance to Odysseus himself, making sure that the *Odyssey* becomes what it is and not some other poem. Telemachus's discovery of his role represents his development of an identity, not through the psychological experiences of self-fulfillment that Pastan seeks, but is frustrated not to find, but rather through a process of positioning himself and being positioned in relation to spoken traditions.

This process reflects the expressive idiom of Homeric poetry in which the experiences of characters are conceived and understood in relation to previous narrative traditions to an extent that we, without direct access to those traditions, can only surmise. This way of conceiving experience is particularly apt for Telemachus because the roles he is expected both to play and not to play—survivor, successor—are closely linked to the experiences attributed within early hexameter poetry to audiences, who are notable for the composure with which they hear about the suffering of others. In a poetic tradition infused with the language and concerns of lamentation, audiences are like survivors who have passed through grief and can move forward with restored equanimity.⁶ The ambiguity of Telemachus's role is embedded in Athena's formulation of his journey as a quest for Odysseus's νόστος (*Od.* 1.87), for the term νόστος can denote either a homecoming or a song about homecoming (Nagy 1999a.97). From the

5 Olson responds to this contradiction by at once acknowledging the picture evoked by Martin and finding it ironic, and therefore invalid. Like Martin, Olson links Telemachus's audience-like quality to his belatedness: "Very much like Homer's external audience, he is trapped from the first between the exemplary κλέος of his father and who he knows (or thinks) he is, and stranded in an imperfect and apparently pointless world which seems incapable of being restored to how it once supposedly was." But he goes on to add that "the most significant irony of the *Odyssey* is that Telemachos is wrong in his assessment of himself and of the situation he confronts" (Olson 1995.63).

6 On the relationship between Homeric epic and lamentation, see Murnaghan 1999 and the works cited there.

outset, it is thus open to question whether Telemachus is seeking to become an accomplice in his father's return or an auditor of the song of his father, a song that would replace him after his death (Murnaghan 1987.158–68).

Throughout the *Odyssey*'s account of Telemachus's coming of age, the idea of Telemachus as Odysseus's successor is repeatedly summoned up to function as the source of Telemachus's new-found energy, but is then submerged again, deflected as a possible blueprint for Telemachus's role in the poem.⁷ It is through the evocation and modification of a scenario in which Odysseus is dead and Telemachus takes his place that the *Odyssey* works out Telemachus's role in a way that we can both notice appreciatively and recognize as involving the mixture of messages that troubles Pastan. As the recipient of those mixed messages, Telemachus is hard to construe as a coherent character with a consistent position or a stable psychology. In a valiant attempt to do so, Douglas Olson concludes that Telemachus is depicted as emotionally volatile: the "lack of clarity in Telemachos's treatment of the idea of Odysseus . . . characterizes him as trapped between desperate hope and utter despair." Olson also differentiates Telemachus's statements from his beliefs: his self-contradiction "merely continues a well-established pattern of behavior and proves nothing about his deepest convictions" (Olson 1995.77). Pastan's solution of imagining Telemachus as confused and somewhat embittered is more successful as an exercise in character portrayal, but, in its unmistakable departure from the *Odyssey*, it also points up the way in which the problem remains a constitutive feature of Homer's poem.⁸

When Athena first comes upon Telemachus at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, he is both fantasizing about his father's return and expressing a mournful conviction that Odysseus is dead. The instructions she gives him include a number of possibilities, one of which involves taking over if he can discover that his father is dead (*Od.* 1.289–92):

εἰ δέ κε τεθνηῶτος ἀκούσης μηδ' ἔτ' ἔοντος,
 νοστήσας δὴ ἔπειτα φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
 σῆμά τέ οἱ χεῦναι καὶ ἐπὶ κτέρεα κτερείζαι
 πολλὰ μάλ', ὅσσα ἔοικε, καὶ ἀνέρι μητέρα δοῦναι.

7 In this context, it is worth remembering that failure to bring the father home is a constitutive feature of Serbo-Croatian songs of youthful initiation (Bynum 1968.1300–01).

8 Yet another solution is that of Norman Austin, who argues that Telemachus's apparent self-contradiction is the result of a deliberate strategy, reflecting his acquisition of cunning like that of Odysseus (Austin 1963).

But if you hear he has died and lives no longer,
 then make your way home to the beloved land of your
 fathers,
 and pile up a tomb in his honor, and there make
 sacrifices
 in great amount, as is fitting. And give your mother to a
 husband.

The energizing effect of this possible scenario on Telemachus can be seen in the episode involving Phemius's first song towards the end of Book 1. There Telemachus's role as an auditor of poetry involves active construction of the plot in which he thinks he is participating and is linked to self-assertion. The poet only gives us a very general account of the subject of Phemius's song: the νόστον . . . λυγρόν, the "bitter homecoming" of the Achaeans (*Od.* 1.326–27). It is left to Telemachus in his response to Penelope to specify the contents in a way that suits him; as he asserts his desire to hear the song, he also, in effect, dictates the contents of the song he wants to hear. And that song includes Odysseus's death (*Od.* 1.353–55):

σοὶ δ' ἐπιτολμάτω κραδίη καὶ θυμὸς ἀκούειν·
 οὐ γὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς οἷς ἀπώλεσε νόστιμον ἡμᾶρ
 ἐν Τροίῃ, πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι φῶτες ὄλοντο.

So let your heart and let your spirit be hardened to listen.
 Odysseus is not the only one who lost his homecoming
 day at Troy. There were many others who perished,
 besides him.

Not only, according to Telemachus, is Odysseus dead, but he is one of many, not significantly different from numerous other heroes who went to Troy. Telemachus displays the assertiveness he needs to play his role in the *Odyssey* by inserting himself into a poem that is decidedly *not* the *Odyssey*. This is both a necessary first step for him and a false start that has to be corrected.⁹ Telemachus's willingness to listen to Phemius's song puts him at

9 As Pucci puts it, the author of the *Odyssey* has to resurrect "the hero whom the other text had lost somewhere" (1987.203).

odds with Penelope and allies him with the suitors, who represent the unheroic passivity of audiences in a sinister and destructive form, whose tolerance for the death of heroes as a subject of song is linked to the active pursuit of murder.

The connection between Telemachus's rising confidence and his belief in his father's death can be traced in the ups and downs of his subsequent attempts to stand up to the suitors. In the interchange at the end of Book 1 in which he calls an assembly for the next day and responds forcefully to Antinoos's declaration that he hopes Telemachus will never be king in Ithaca, Telemachus twice declares that Odysseus has died (*Od.* 1.396, 413). Early in the assembly, he explains that he has called it in response to a situation in which he has lost the noblest of fathers (*Od.* 2.46). But when Antinoos stands up to him, blaming Penelope for the problem and challenging Telemachus to do something about it, Telemachus's confidence falters and he retreats from his conviction that Odysseus is dead. He answers Antinoos by at once confessing his powerlessness and his uncertainty about Odysseus's fate (*Od.* 2.130–33):

Ἄντινο', οὐ πως ἔστι δόμων ἀέκουσαν ἀπῶσαι
 ἢ μ' ἔτεχ', ἢ μ' ἔθρεψε· πατὴρ δ' ἐμὸς ἄλλοθι γαίης,
 ζῶει ὃ γ' ἢ τέθνηκε· κακὸν δέ με πόλλ' ἀποτίνειν
 Ἰκαρίῳ, αἴ κ' αὐτὸς ἐκὼν ἀπὸ μητέρα πέμψω.

Antinoös, I cannot thrust the mother who bore me,
 who raised me, out of the house against her will. My
 father,
 alive or dead, is elsewhere in the world. It will be hard
 to pay back Ikarios, if willingly I dismiss my mother.

Telemachus is clearly animated by the thought of his father's death, but given the *Odyssey's* own commitment to Odysseus's continued life and Telemachus's destined role as his father's restorer, he also has to be kept from fully accepting it. And we can see this process by which he is simultaneously led to and deflected from the notion of his father's death dramatized in his conversations in Book 3 with Nestor, in the watchful company of Athena.

When Telemachus arrives in Pylos, Athena encourages him by reminding him of his mission, which she defines as, "to find news / of your father, what soil covers him, what fate he has met with" (*Od.* 3.15–16). He

follows her cue, earnestly requesting Nestor to tell him of his father's death and insisting that, painful as it is, he can take it (*Od.* 3.92–96):

τοὔνεκα νῦν τὰ σὰ γούναθ' ἰκάνομαι, αἴ κ' ἐθέλησθα
 κείνου λυγρὸν ὄλεθρον ἐνισπεῖν, εἴ που ὄπωπας
 ὀφθαλμοῖσι τεοῖσιν, ἢ ἄλλου μῦθον ἄκουσας
 πλαζομένου· πέρι γάρ μιν οἴζυρὸν τέκε μήτηρ.
 μηδέ τί μ' αἰδόμενος μειλίσσεο μηδ' ἐλεαίρων,

That is why I come to your knees now, in case you
 might wish
 to tell me of his dismal destruction, whether you saw it
 perhaps with your own eyes, or heard the tale from
 another
 who wandered too. His mother bore this man to be
 wretched.
 Do not soften it because you pity me and are sorry
 for me.

Telemachus has assimilated and benefited from Athena's encouragement to see himself as Odysseus's survivor; he presents himself as Odysseus's mourner but also as able to bear the grief of his father's death. In effect, he solicits from Nestor a less formalized version of the song he envisions Phemius singing. But Athena cannot let him actually settle into this role. A little later, Nestor proposes to Telemachus that he might still entertain the scenario that occupied him when we first met him, the scenario of Odysseus's return. Telemachus now rejects it as impossible, adopting a posture that, on the surface, reflects resigned grief, but is, beyond that, also a step towards independence (*Od.* 3.225–28):

Τὸν δ' αὖ Τηλέμαχος πεπνυμένος ἀντίον ἠΰδα·
 “ὦ γέρον, οὐ πω τοῦτο ἔπος τελέεσθαι οἶω·
 λίην γὰρ μέγα εἶπες· ἄγη μ' ἔχει. οὐκ ἂν ἐμοί γε
 ἐλπομένῳ τὰ γένοιτ', οὐδ' εἰ θεοὶ ὥς ἐθέλοιεν.”

Then the thoughtful Telemachus said to him in answer:
 “Old sir, I think what you have said will not be
 accomplished.

What you mean is too big. It bewilders me. That which I
hope for
could never happen to me, not even if the gods so
willed it.”

At this point, Athena shifts course and intervenes to correct Telemachus’s point of view and to redefine the scenario in which he finds himself (*Od.* 3.230–34):

Τηλέμαχε, ποῖόν σε ἔπος φύγεν ἕρκος ὀδόντων.
ῥεῖα θεός γ’ ἐθέλων καὶ τηλόθεν ἄνδρα σαώσαι.
βουλοίμην δ’ ἂν ἐγὼ γε καὶ ἄλγεα πολλὰ μογήσας
οἴκαδέ τ’ ἐλθέμεναι καὶ νόστιμον ἡμᾶρ ιδέσθαι . . .

Telemachos, what sort of word escaped your teeth’s
barrier?
Lightly a god, if he wishes, can save a man, even from
far off.
I myself would rather first have gone through many
hardships
and then come home, and look upon my day of
returning . . .

Athena is certainly sending Telemachus mixed messages here: all of a sudden, the thought that Odysseus will not return is characterized not as the information he hopes to discover but as an unbecoming lack of faith in the gods. This refinement is furthered by the implicit evocation of the Agamemnon story, which is used to recast Odysseus’s long absence as part of a preferable scenario, a scenario not of death but of a late return whose very lateness makes possible the evasion of death. This preferable scenario corresponds to the *Odyssey*, the poem whose plot Athena controls and that her words effectively summarize. Telemachus and Athena are thus at cross purposes here. He is learning to think beyond Odysseus to the role he will play as Odysseus’s successor, a role far greater than that he is given in the *Odyssey*, while she, with her unwavering commitment to Odysseus’s return, needs to short-circuit that line of thought even though she herself initiated it.

Athena’s success can be measured in the rather surprising way in which Telemachus follows up on her reference to the Agamemnon story.

That story would seem to provide a script for the *Odyssey* in which Telemachus would play the role of Orestes. And that is how it is used in Book 1, when Athena urges Telemachus to take action by asking (*Od.* 1.298–99):

ἦ οὐκ αἴεις οἶον κλέος ἔλλαβε δῖος Ὀρέστης
 πάντας ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους, ἐπεὶ ἔκτανε πατροφονῆα,
 Αἴγισθον δολόμητιν, ὃ οἱ πατέρα κλυτὸν ἔκτα;

Or have you not heard what glory was won by great
 Orestes
 among all mankind, when he killed the murderer of his
 father,
 the treacherous Aigisthos, who had slain his famous
 father?

But Orestes's role as avenger of a dead father cannot be a satisfactory role for Telemachus. For Orestes is the son who realizes his proper role when both his parents are dead. The *Odyssey* makes no evident reference to the death of Clytemnestra, although that story is early enough to be mentioned in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fragment 23(a).29–30), but there lurks in the *Odyssey*'s presentation of Telemachus a sense that Telemachus's full independence would present a threat to his mother as well as his father. This is reflected in the tension between them at various points, including the scene where he cuts off her protest at Phemius's song. That threat is generally formulated simply as the danger that he would prevent her from waiting for Odysseus, expressed, for example, in Athena's suggestion that if he discovers his father is dead, he should send his mother back to her father. But a sense that thwarting her in that way might be tantamount to killing her is perhaps registered in his striking statement to Antinoos in Book 2 that he cannot send his mother home because "my mother will call down her furies (στρυγερὰς . . . ἐρινῶς) upon me / as she goes out of the house" (*Od.* 2.135–36).

The story of Orestes, which has inspired Telemachus, must be abandoned as a model since it represents an account of generational succession in which mother and father both die. And so we see Telemachus, when he picks up Athena's cue, asking Nestor about the role, not of Orestes, but of Menelaus (*Od.* 3.247–49):

ὦ Νέστορ Νηληιάδη, σὺ δ' ἀληθὲς ἐνίσπες·
πῶς ἔθαν' Ἀτρείδης εὐρυκρείων Ἀγαμέμνων;
ποῦ Μενελάος ἔην;

O Nestor, son of Neleus, tell me the true story.
How did Atreus's son, widely ruling Agamemnon,
die? And where was Menelaos?

A new model emerges for Telemachus in the role of Menelaus—not as it actually unfolded but as it might have. Menelaus, of course, did not return in time to help Agamemnon. He only got there just as Orestes had finished burying him. And why not? Because he was off having adventures of his own (*Od.* 3.301–03):

ὡς ὁ μὲν ἔνθα πολὺν βίον καὶ χρυσὸν ἀγείρων
ἤλατο ξὺν νηυσὶ κατ' ἀλλοθρόους ἀνθρώπους·
τόφρα δὲ ταῦτ' Αἴγισθος ἐμήσατο οἴκοθι λυγρά·

So Menelaos, gathering much gold and livelihood in
those
parts, sailed with his ships to men of alien language,
and all the while at home Aigisthos worked out his
grim plans.

A few lines later, Nestor draws the lesson specifically: καὶ σύ, φίλος, μὴ
δηθὰ δόμων ἄπο τῆλ' ἀλάλησο, “So, dear friend, do not you stay long and
far wandering / away from home” (*Od.* 3.313). At which point, he affirms
the importance of Menelaus by telling Telemachus he should go visit him.

Telemachus's visit to Menelaus is constructed on the same contradictory principle. On the one hand, it is Menelaus's function to tell Telemachus that his father may still be alive; in an elaborate narrative, he reports how he learned from Proteus, some years back, that Odysseus was, at that time, being held captive by Calypso. But that narrative is preceded by an evening of recognition and storytelling in which the survivor's experience of mastered grief is extensively dramatized. Menelaus presents himself as living in a state of recurrent mourning for his lost companions, especially for Odysseus, and he imagines that Odysseus's family must be in a comparable condition (*Od.* 4.100–12). But Helen's famous drug creates an effect of indifference to loss that has been widely recognized as analogous to the effects of poetry,

especially as described in the opening lines of Hesiod's *Theogony* (*Od.* 4.220–27, cf. *Theogony* 98–103). The administration of the drug is a prelude to two stories of Odysseus's exploits at Troy that place Odysseus firmly in the category of figures from the past. It is no surprise then that Telemachus responds to these stories by declaring Odysseus dead and projecting a stance of resigned equanimity as he goes off for a good night's sleep (*Od.* 4.291–95):

Ἄτρείδῃ Μενέλαε διοτρεφές, ὄρχαμε λαῶν,
 ἄλγιον· οὐ γάρ οἱ τι τάδ' ἤρεσκε λυγρὸν ὄλεθρον,
 οὐδ' εἴ οἱ κραδίη γε σιδηρὴ ἐνδοθεν ἦεν.
 ἀλλ' ἄγετ' εἰς ἐνὴν τράπεθ' ἡμέας, ὄφρα καὶ ἤδη
 ὑπνω ὑπο γλυκερῶ ταρπώμεθα κοιμηθέντες.

Great Menelaos, son of Atreus, leader of the people:
 so much the worse; for none of all this kept dismal
 destruction
 from him, not even if he had a heart of iron within him.
 But come, take us away to our beds, so that at last now
 we can go to bed and enjoy the pleasure of sweet sleep.

On the other hand, his next night's sleep is not so good. At the beginning of Book 15, it is time for him to return to Ithaca as his father's helper, so he has an anxious, sleepless night of μελεδήματα πατρός, “anxious thoughts of his father” (*Od.* 15.8), in which he is encouraged, of course, by Athena.

Spurred by his anxious thoughts, Telemachus says farewell to Menelaus and Helen and returns to Ithaca. In this context, it is worth returning to the role of Menelaus as a possible model for Telemachus, which emerged in the course of Telemachus's conversation with Nestor in Book 3. There Menelaus seems to be a negative model because he was prevented by adventures—adventures not unlike those of Odysseus himself—from returning in time to help his brother. In order to fulfill his appointed role, Telemachus needs to be like Menelaus but without full-scale adventures of his own and with better timing. He needs to participate in the *Odyssey*'s brilliantly orchestrated plot in which son and father return at the same moment. And he acts in accord with this necessity when he refuses Menelaus's offer to take him on a gift-gathering tour of the Peloponnesus (*Od.* 15.79–91).

But Menelaus's part in the Agamemnon drama is relevant to Telemachus's situation in a positive as well as a negative sense, more relevant finally than the part of Orestes, because the role of brother is a better model for simultaneous, concerted action than that of son, with its inevitable associations of succession and replacement. Telemachus is initiated into a scenario in which he will fulfill his role as the son Odysseus needs and wants by acting as his brother. This role is, in fact, obliquely proposed to him by Odysseus in Book 16, at the point at which Odysseus, still disguised as the beggar, is hearing from Telemachus about his problems with the suitors and asks him (*Od.* 16.95–98):

εἰπέ μοι ἠὲ ἐκὼν ὑποδάμνασαι, ἦ σέ γε λαοὶ
 ἐχθαίρουσ' ἀνὰ δῆμον, ἐπισπόμενοι θεοῦ ὄμφῃ
 ἦ τι κασιγνήτοις ἐπιμέμφεαι, οἷσί περ ἀνὴρ
 μαρναμένοισι πέποιθε, καὶ εἰ μέγα νεῖκος ὄρηται.

Tell me, are you willingly oppressed by them? Do the
 people
 hate you throughout this place, swayed by some impulse
 given
 from the gods? Do you find your brothers wanting? A
 man trusts
 help from these in the fighting when a great quarrel
 arises.

Telemachus responds by explaining that he has no brothers, that “the son of Kronos has made ours a single / line,” in which individual father is succeeded by individual son (*Od.* 16.117–18). This singleness of line is presumably a source of strength, allowing freedom from fraternal conflict and the possibility of singular, glorious achievements. But it also creates a lack that Telemachus can metaphorically fill. It is by constructing a kind of brotherhood that Odysseus and Telemachus defeat the suitors, and brother is a better model than son for the role of equal-but-not-successor that Telemachus is required by the demands of the *Odyssey's* plot to carry out. The relationship of brothers can provide a basis and model for the relationship of comrades-in-arms more generally, as the example of Agamemnon and Menelaus reveals. Thus Odysseus and Telemachus seem very much like brothers in that final moment, quoted above, in which Laertes takes delight

in their sparring. As William Thalmann has recently pointed out, the term Laertes uses for that sparring, $\delta\eta\rho\iota\varsigma$, is used elsewhere in Homer for rivalry between comrades (1998.222).

From that moment of comradely competition at the end of the *Odyssey*, we can return to the final scene of Pastan's poem in which she perhaps resolves her confusion about the role of Telemachus.

Or was it simply family feeling
long evenings to come in Ithaca, Penelope
weaving both men tunics, with only
hearth fires burning now.

The image of Penelope weaving tunics for both men evokes the same sense of brotherly comradeship that the *Odyssey* itself tries to construct for Odysseus and Telemachus. Pastan's final suggestion as to what the *Odyssey*'s lesson might be is then very much in the spirit of the *Odyssey* itself, confirming once again what an acute reader of the poem she is. Her scene resonates, for example, with the postwar fantasy of Menelaus, who regrets not only his lost brother Agamemnon but also the chance to create a quasi-brotherhood with Odysseus, whom he would have liked to settle close by in Argos so that "we would have seen much of each other; nothing / would have separated us two in our friendship and pleasure" (*Od.* 4.178–79). It is also, of course, a scene that Pastan has made up in her role as rewriter as well as rereader of the *Odyssey*. It is her own projection into the future beyond the boundaries of the *Odyssey*'s plot, as the phrase "long evenings to come" acknowledges. The *Odyssey* does, of course, also contain such a projection in the prophecy of Teiresias (*Od.* 11.134–37, 23.281–84), but it involves a less fully imagined vision of the future, its fulfillment left open to question (Peradotto 1990.59–75), and, as William Thalmann notes, it concerns only Odysseus: Telemachus is left out of the picture (Thalmann 1998.209).

For a further understanding of why the *Odyssey* itself cannot supply what Pastan fills in, we can go back to Martin's point that the poem sees the world it narrates as coming to an end. Pastan's scene is a domestic one in which the time of heroic action is past, in which only hearth fires burn and action has been replaced by storytelling. It represents in the history of Odysseus and his family an end to heroic action that parallels the broader end of the heroic age reflected in such episodes as Telemachus's visits to Pylos and Sparta, Odysseus's underworld encounters with his former com-

rades, and the consequences for the Phaeacians of transporting Odysseus to Ithaca.¹⁰ But, just as the *Odyssey* complicates its depiction of Telemachus as a belated auditor of past glory by making him an actor in his own heroic story, so the *Odyssey* also complicates its account of the end of the heroic age by having Odysseus recreate that age on Ithaca. In a characteristic play with time, the poem places Telemachus's consignment to the role of spectator before his participation in the action, reconceiving it as preparation or education with the somewhat baffling effect registered by Pastan. Similarly, the *Odyssey* follows its many valedictions to heroic action with its depiction of Odysseus's noblest exploit, the recapture of his home. Here Martin's terminology is revealing, for when he writes that it is "by preposing the Telemachy" that "the poet of the *Odyssey* made a conscious attempt to perform a poem about the end of a tradition" (1993.240), Martin points to the way in which the *Odyssey*'s plot is structured so as to make the seeming dead end of generational and historical decline the prelude to its real story.

Pastan's alternate ending may, as she suggests, be implicit in the *Odyssey*, but it cannot be included there, because the *Odyssey* is sending us a double message, retaining its allegiance to the heroic world and to heroic subject matter even if it recognizes that they are reaching their limits. And so it ends without the strong closure that Pastan supplies for it. Instead it comes to an abrupt halt with its characters on the brink of yet another adventure, which is forestalled only by Athena's intervention, a charge "into the forefront of battle," ἐν . . . προμάχοις, undertaken jointly by Odysseus and Telemachus, the "glorious son," φαιδίμος υἱός, who, we are asked to believe, is, for all the ordinariness of his experience, nonetheless his father's equal (*Od.* 24.526).

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10 On this aspect of the poem, see Clay 1983.184–85.