



A Council of Gods and a Gathering of Men

Inspire me, Athena, Goddess of Wisdom. Help me tell the story of Odysseus, the clever hero who traveled far and wide after he ransacked the famous city of Troy. He suffered greatly at sea, fighting for his life and the lives of his men, hoping for a safe homecoming. But he could not save his companions, as hard as he tried.

The Greek warriors who escaped sudden death in battle or shipwreck sailed for home. They conquered Troy and were now out of harm's way . . . except Odysseus. He longed to return to his wife and country. But the bewitching goddess Calypso held him back. She kept Odysseus in her cave, hoping to have him as her husband.

All the gods took pity on Odysseus, except Poseidon, god of the earth-circling sea, who seethed with unending anger. Poseidon was determined not to let him get home. But Poseidon had gone to visit the Ethiopians, at the

end of the world. While he was off enjoying himself, the other gods met in the house of Zeus.

Since he was the father of gods and men, Zeus spoke first. He was thinking of one of his favorites, Aegisthus, who had been killed by Agamemnon's son Orestes, "Why do men blame the gods for their own foolishness? Aegisthus could not resist making love to Agamemnon's wife. Then he killed Agamemnon, though he knew it meant his own death. I even sent Hermes, messenger of the gods, to warn Aegisthus. Agamemnon's son, Orestes, was sure to take revenge when he grew up and wanted to return home. But Aegisthus would not listen. Now he has paid the price."

Then Athena, the goddess of wisdom, spoke. "Father, who rules the gods, Aegisthus deserved to die. But my heart bleeds for Odysseus. Think of him, suffering on that lonely island, far away from all his friends. The goddess who lives there keeps trying by every means possible to make him forget his home. Yet he thinks about nothing except seeing the smoke from his own fireplace once more. Don't you remember how Odysseus offered you many sacrifices before Troy? Why, then, do you stay so angry with him?"

"My child," said Zeus, "what are you talking about? How could I forget Odysseus? No man is more capable. No man is more generous in his offerings to the gods. It's furious



Poseidon, earth-shaker, who torments him. Odysseus blinded the only eye of Poseidon's son, Polyphemus, king of the Cyclopes. Now, instead of killing Odysseus outright, Poseidon prevents Odysseus's homecoming. But together we can help him return. Poseidon cannot stand his ground against all of us."

"Father," Athena responded, "if the gods have decided that Odysseus shall return, send Hermes, the messenger of the gods, to Calypso's island. Tell her we have made up our minds. Odysseus will have his homecoming. In the meantime, I will go to Ithaca to encourage Odysseus's son Telemachus. I will inspire him to assemble all the men of Ithaca. With me by his side, he can confront the suitors of his mother Penelope, who persist in eating up Odysseus's sheep and oxen. Then I will lead him safely to Pylos and to Sparta. There he can seek fame and news of his father."

Athena put on the golden sandals that fly her with the wind over land or sea. She grasped her spear: sturdy, strong, and tipped with

bronze. With it, she can crush anyone who displeases her.

Down she sped from Olympus, home of the gods. Instantly, disguised beyond recognition, she was in Ithaca, at the gateway to Odysseus's house. There she found the high and mighty suitors lying on the hides of oxen they had killed and eaten, gambling with dice. Menservants bustled around, mixing wine with water, cleaning tables, and cutting up great quantities of meat.

Among the suitors sat Telemachus, grieving for his brave father. If only Odysseus returned, he would send the suitors packing! So Telemachus was thinking as he caught sight of Athena, disguised beyond recognition. He went straight to the gate, upset that a stranger should be kept waiting for hospitality. "Welcome to our house," he said. "And when you have eaten well, then you shall tell us why you are traveling far from home."

He led the way, and Athena followed. Inside, he took her spear and set it in a rack along with the many spears of his unhappy father. He escorted her to a richly decorated seat. Over it, he threw a fine cloth. Under her feet he placed a footstool. Now she could eat comfortably, far from the noise and disrespect of the suitors. Now he could freely ask her for news of his father.

A maidservant poured water from a golden

pitcher so they could wash their hands. Beside them, she set a clean table. A housekeeper brought bread. Then he offered them their choice from the best of the house. The carver fetched plates of meats and set cups of gold by their side. A manservant filled their glasses with wine.

But then the suitors came in and took their places. Right away, servants poured water over their hands, brought breadbaskets, and filled mixing bowls with wine and water. The suitors feasted on all the good things set before them. As soon as they had enough to eat and drink, they wanted other pleasures. Music and dancing would crown their banquet. They forced Phemios—who often sang for them—to perform.

As soon as the music started, Telemachus began whispering to Athena, with his head close to hers so no man might hear. “I hope you will not be offended by what I am going to say. Singing comes cheaply to those who do not pay for it. These fellows feast at the expense of a man whose bones lie rotting in some wilderness. If my father came back to Ithaca, they would pray to be fast instead of rich. But alas, my father has suffered a cruel fate. Some people say he is coming. But we no longer listen. We shall never see him again.

“Now, sir,” Telemachus went on, “tell me who you are and where you come from. Tell me

of your town and parents, the ship you came in, and the crew that brought you. And tell me—for I must know—have you been here before, in my father's time? In the old days, we had many visitors, because my father went visiting so often.”

And Athena replied, “I will answer truly and in detail. I am Mentès, King of the Taphians, come with my own ship and crew. We sail with a cargo of iron, in hopes of bringing back bronze. Our ship lies far from town. Your father and I are old friends, as Laertes, your grandfather, will tell you. Go and ask him. They say Laertes never comes to town any more. He lives by himself in the country with only an aged serving woman to look after him? Not an easy life for one so old!

“I heard your father was at home again,” Athena continued, “and that is why I came. But the gods must still be keeping him back. I am sure Odysseus is neither dead nor safe on the mainland. More likely he is trapped on some island, or a prisoner among savages held against his will. Though I am no seer, a prediction has come to me from heaven. Your father will not be away much longer. He is a man of such cunning that even if he were bound in chains, he would find some means of getting home. But tell me, are you truly Odysseus's son? Yes, now I see the resemblance . . . the head, the eyes. Your father and I were close friends before he

set sail for Troy. Since that time we have not seen each other.”

“My mother assures me I am Odysseus’s son. But I wish instead I’d been born to someone who had grown old at home. No one on earth is as unfortunate as the man they say is my father.”

Athena replied, “Your family’s luck has not run out yet, not while Penelope has such a fine son as you. But tell me, what is the meaning of all this feasting? Who are these people? Your guests—how rudely they behave. It’s enough to disgust any respectable person.”

“Sir,” said Telemachus, “when my father was here, all was well with us and this house. But the gods decided otherwise, and have hidden him away completely. I could have endured it better if he had fallen with his men at Troy or died with friends around him when his fighting days were done. He would have passed on his fame to me. All of Greece would have built a monument over his ashes. But now the winds have spirited him away, we know not where. He is gone without a trace, and I have inherited nothing but misery.

“But I grieve for more than the loss of my father,” Telemachus added. “The nobles who rule the nearby islands, together with the unmarried men of Ithaca, are ruining my household. They claim to be courting my mother. She does

not send them away. They are squandering my wealth. Before long they will destroy me, too.”

“How terrible!” exclaimed Athena. “How much you need Odysseus home again. Let *him* stand once more at his own doorstep. If Odysseus still has his strength and wits, he will dispose of these rascally suitors with nothing more than his helmet, shield, and some spears. If he is still the man I knew, these suitors will meet a swift doom.

“Alas,” Athena said. “Your father’s return and his revenge rest with heaven. In the meanwhile, I urge you to do what you can to rid yourself of these suitors. Assemble all of the island’s nobles tomorrow. Before them, call heaven to bear witness. Order the suitors to go away, each to his own home. If your mother is set on marrying again, let her go to her father. He will find her a husband. He will provide the wedding gifts.

“As for yourself,” Athena went on, “take the best ship and crew you can get, and go in search of news about your father. Someone may tell you something, or some heaven-sent message may direct you. First go to King Nestor. Then on to Sparta to speak to Menelaus, the last Greek to get home from Troy. If you hear that your father is alive and nearing his homecoming, you can put up with these suitors for another twelve months. If, instead, you hear of his

death, come home at once, celebrate his funeral rites, build a grave marker to his memory, and make your mother marry again. Consider carefully how, by any means, you may kill these suitors. You must have heard the people singing Orestes's praises for killing his father's murderer? Show your courage and make a name for yourself. I must go back to my ship and to my crew, who are surely impatient by now. Think about what I have said."

"Sir," answered Telemachus, "how kind of you to talk to me like a son. I will do as you say. I know you want to get underway, but stay a little longer. Return to your ship refreshed with a valuable and beautiful present from me."

Athena answered, "Do not detain me. I must leave at once. When I come again, I will accept your present and take it home with me. You will give me a fine gift, and receive a great reward in return."

With these words she flew away like a bird into the air. She left Telemachus with newfound courage. He sensed the change in himself and realized the stranger must have been a god. At once, he approached the suitors.

Phemios was still singing. His audience listened silently to the bard's sad tale of the homecoming from Troy and the troubles Athena had brought down on the Greeks. Penelope heard his song and descended the great staircase,

attended by two servants. When she reached the suitors, she paused, standing by a great column. Behind her veil, she was weeping bitterly.

“Phemios,” she cried, “you know many other tales of gods and heroes. Sing the suitors one of these. Let them drink their wine in silence. Cease this sad tale. It breaks my sorrowful heart. I long for my lost husband, whose fame echoes through many lands.”

“Mother,” answered Telemachus, “let the bard choose what he wants. Poets are not responsible for the troubles they sing of. Zeus is to blame. People always want to hear the latest songs. You must bear up to your sorrows. Odysseus is not the only man who never came back from Troy. Go inside. Busy yourself with your duties, your weaving, and overseeing the servants. I am the master here now.”

Amazed at his words, she went back into the house. But she took to heart her son’s advice. Upstairs once again, she mourned her dear husband until she fell asleep.

In the hall, the suitors were raising a clamor, each one praying that he might share Penelope’s bed. Telemachus spoke, “You shameless suitors of my mother, let us feast for now. Let there be no fighting. Only rarely do you get to hear a man with a voice as divine as Phemios’s. But, in the morning, I will formally order you to depart. Feast at one another’s

houses, at your own cost. If you persist in sponging off my estate, I will call on the heavens for help. You will fall in my father's house with no one left to avenge your death."

The suitors bit their lips, unable to speak for a moment, marveling at Telemachus's unexpected boldness. Antinous broke their silence, "What a tirade! The gods must have given you lessons in hollering and bragging. May Zeus never make you king here in Ithaca like your father before you."

Telemachus answered, "Antinous, who are you to scold me? Is that the worst fate you can imagine for me? If Zeus wills it, I will wear my father's crown. Now that Odysseus is dead, there are many great men in Ithaca who could rule. Nevertheless, I will be chief in my own house and rule over everything Odysseus has won for me."

Eurymachus, another suitor, joined in. "Heaven will decide who shall be chief among us, but you shall be master in your own house. No one will do you violence or rob you while there are still men in Ithaca. And now, about that stranger . . . What is his country, his family, his estate? Has he brought you news about the return of your father? He hurried off so suddenly, gone in a moment before we could get to know him."

"My father is dead and gone," answered

Telemachus. "If some rumor to the contrary reaches me I put no faith in it. My mother sometimes sends for a soothsayer, but I pay no attention to his predictions. As for the stranger, he was Mentès, an old friend of my father's." But in his heart he knew that it had been the goddess, Athena.

The suitors returned to their singing and dancing, but when night fell each went home to his own bed. Telemachus sat deep in thought in his room high up in a tower overlooking the outer court. His old nurse, Eurycleia, stood nearby with two blazing torches. Eurycleia loved Telemachus, for she had nursed him when he was a baby.

Telemachus sat down on the bed. He took off his shirt and handed it to the good old woman. She folded it neatly and hung it over a peg by his bedside. Then she went out, fastening the door. But Telemachus lay awake all night, thinking about the advice Athena had given him.