

Ancient Companions

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Abstract

Athena appears to Odysseus in seven episodes in *The Odyssey*. She is his goddess companion, very much like an imaginary companion of childhood, and she appears to him because the consistency requirements of his world are unusually relaxed, his circumstances are optimally conducive to her appearance, and his gain in behavior potential from their relationship is maximal. She is an extraordinary companion because Odysseus excels as a teller of tales and has a place for an exceptionally competent woman.

The Odyssey is an epic poem that tells the story of how Odysseus made his way home from the Trojan War. Along the way he formed personal relationships with three beautiful young women: the lustrous goddess Circe, the seductive nymph Calypso, and the feisty Princess Nausicaa. In spite of the powerful enticements each of these women offered him to stay, he struggled onward to rejoin his wife Penelope, who believed in him and waited for him for twenty years.

The poem has long been recognized for its extraordinary portrayal of man-woman relationships, and much has been written about the relationship between Penelope and Odysseus. But there is another woman in *The Odyssey* who was also Odysseus' partner for twenty years. This paper focuses on understanding the nature of that relationship and the behavior potential it offered Odysseus.

To set the stage for the analysis, we begin with an introduction to the powers of the gods and goddesses in the ancient Greek world.

Divine Statuses

In the Homeric world, gods, goddesses and daemons were eligible to intervene in the affairs of men and women. When people were in problematic situations, the gods could give them solutions or inspire them with the courage to act.

The Odyssey abounds with instances of divine intervention. When Penelope tells Odysseus how she fooled the suitors for three years by weaving and unweaving a shroud for his father, she confides that “a god from the blue it was inspired me” (19:153). When Helen recognizes the meaning of an omen, she tells her husband that “the gods have flashed it in my mind” (15:192).

People not only explained their own thoughts and behavior by reference to the gods. They also explained the behavior of others in this way, especially when their behavior seemed out of character or hard to understand. The suitors respond to a change in Telemachus by noting, “Only the gods could teach you to sound so high and mighty!” (1:441). They account for Penelope’s stubborn refusal of their marriage offers by claiming, “She holds to that course the gods have charted deep inside her heart” (2:137-138).

Gods and goddesses were not limited to interventions that were good or positive. A god could just as easily plant a bad idea in a person’s head or rouse a person to foolish action. At the extreme the gods could make people crazy. Penelope cautions her old nurse, “They have that power, putting lunacy into the clearest head around or setting a half-wit on the path to sense” (23:12-14).

Dodds (1966) writes that in the original Greek, if the outcome of a divine intervention were positive, the divine agent was usually called θεοῦζ, but if the outcome were negative, the agent was called δαιμόν. In both cases, however, he describes the agents as “vaguely conceived beings” (p. 11). When these agents were at work, people recognized that “one of them” was active, but they did not know *which* one.

Not all gods and daemons were undifferentiated in the Homeric

world. The world also had places for gods and goddesses as particular individuals with unique parts to play in the human drama. Zeus, for example, was the Protector of Strangers and Guardian of Guests. His job was to enforce a code of hospitality under which wanderers, beggars, and suppliants had to be welcomed and assisted. Having a particular god in this status helped to make travel possible in a seafaring world, where a person's survival depended on the kindness of strangers.

In addition to having unique job assignments in the human world, the more differentiated gods and daemons also had the ability to appear to people and talk with them face to face. They could take on any shape they desired, animal or human, to interact with mortals. Pallas Athena, the Giver of Good Counsel and Driver of Armies, frequently impersonated Mentor (Odysseus' friend since boyhood) and appeared "for all the world with Mentor's build and voice" (2:301). The individuation of the gods opened up new possibilities for relationship between immortals and mortals. If Zeus protected a particular stranger and let himself be known to that person, then Zeus might become a personal protector rather than merely "one of them". If Athena advised a particular mortal and the person recognized the goddess, then an I-Thou relationship might develop between them.

Odysseus was one mortal who had an I-Thou relationship with Athena. In order to portray what their relationship was like, we now introduce synopses of seven episodes from *The Odyssey*.

Two of a Kind

In the opening books of *The Odyssey*, we are told of Athena's love for Odysseus. Through the nine long years of the Trojan War, Athena stood by his side during the worst fighting, breathing courage into him and shielding him from harm. Nestor, who fought beside Odysseus in the war, declared, "I've never seen the immortals show so much affection as Pallas openly showed him" (3:251-252). But then she simply disappeared from Odysseus' life for ten years. Even though he prayed to her, she did not reappear to him until he was almost home from Troy.

Should I go to the queen?

Athena's reappearance occurred on the remote island of Phaeacia, where Nausicaa, the daughter of the king, found Odysseus naked and crusted with brine. He had managed to reach the island after two days and two nights clinging to a piece of wreckage in rough seas, his ship destroyed by Poseidon.

Nausicaa, mindful that "every stranger and beggar comes from Zeus" (6:227-228), gave Odysseus a chance to bathe, clothing, food, drink, and the advice to go past the king and directly to the queen to ask for passage home. The princess also promised to see him into the palace but then abruptly reneged, giving a teenager's reasons for changing her mind.

After Nausicaa left Odysseus, Athena appeared to him in a little girl disguise. He did not let on that he recognized her but instead made the move called for by her disguise: "Little girl, now wouldn't you be my guide to the palace?" (7:24-25). The goddess replied in kind: "Oh yes, sir, good old stranger" (7:30-31).

Once they reached the palace, Odysseus had to decide how to handle his appeal. Starved for home, he wanted with all his heart for the king to grant his request for quick passage home. He had been advised by the king's own daughter *not* to go directly to her father, but then she had given Odysseus reason to doubt her judgment. Should he go to the queen?

In this situation Athena in her little girl disguise offered him a full briefing on the queen, tracing her ancestry back through four generations and describing her place in relation to her husband, her children, and the people of Phaeacia. She concluded by telling him, "If only our queen will take you to her heart, then there's hope that you will see your loved ones" (7:87-88).

Did I really do it?

Things went well for Odysseus in the palace. Alcinous, the Phaeacian king, was so impressed by Odysseus that he even raised the possibility

that Odysseus might stay in Phaeacia and wed his daughter. He also promised that his crews would sail him home at the end of the next day if that were what he chose.

The next day Alcinous went out of his way to show Odysseus the best of the Phaeacian world – feasting, sailing, the lyre, the dance, and athletic competitions. At the end of the athletic contests, Alcinous' son suddenly taunted Odysseus to show *his* prowess. When Odysseus made it clear that he wanted no part of this – that all he wanted was passage home – the other young men joined the prince in mocking and ridiculing the aging hero.

Odysseus was so infuriated by their ridicule that he seized a discus and hurled it farther than any of the young men had thrown theirs. The Phaeacians had all dropped to the ground under the onrush of his throw so he was the only man standing. Seeing what he had done, he must have had a moment of disbelief. He wanted so much to beat them all, but given his age and the hardships he had endured, he doubted that he could have.

In that moment Athena appeared on the field as a Phaeacian man and staked out the discus. She called out that even a blind man could *feel* that Odysseus had won because his discus was so far ahead of the others. No one else seemed to see or hear the extra man on the field except Odysseus. But he, energized by Athena's presence, challenged the young men who had mocked him.

Have I really reached Ithaca?

Alcinous kept his promise to Odysseus, and a Phaeacian crew sailed him home to Ithaca that night. Odysseus was asleep when they landed so the crew simply hoisted his bed onto the shore and left him asleep on the beach. When he woke up, a mist covered the land and he did not recognize Ithaca. He was afraid that he had been tricked.

As he walked along the shore weeping, Athena appeared “as a shepherd boy yet elegant too” and Odysseus was “overjoyed” to see her (13:253-254). He immediately joined her in one of their impromptu dialogues.

Tongue in cheek he declared to her, “I pray to you like a god, I fall before your knees and ask your mercy! And tell me this for a fact – I need to know – where on earth am I?” (13:262-265). Athena the shepherd boy described Ithaca to him just as he remembered it and called it by name.

He choked back the joy he felt in order to keep his guard up and made up a mendacious tale about his history and wanderings. After he was through, Athena dropped her shepherd boy disguise and affectionately told Odysseus, “Any man – any god who met you – would have to be some champion lying cheat to get past you for all around craft and guile” (13:329-331). She went on to advise him: “To no one – no man, no woman, not a soul – reveal that you are the wanderer home at last” (13:350-351).

Odysseus was not sure that she was being genuine, however. He wanted so desperately to be home that he knew he could easily be deceived. Before he would accept her status assignment of “home at last”, he confronted her about why she had not been in his world for ten years and insisted that she tell him the truth about where he was: “Have I really reached the land I love?” (13:373). This time Athena did not describe the land to him. The mist had cleared, and she pointed out landmarks that he recognized – a haven, an olive tree, a cave, forested slopes – and he rejoiced at last.

Once he had resolved his doubts about where he was, he was ready to act. Athena suggested the next step, to go to his loyal swineherd Eumaeus and find out how things were in Ithaca. She then transformed his appearance and made him look like a beggar.

Is now the time?

Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus went to the lodge of Eumaeus and stayed with him for a while, enjoying his company and learning about the situation in Ithaca. Then Odysseus’ son Telemachus returned from overseas and sent Eumaeus off to the palace to tell Penelope that he, Telemachus, was home. Suddenly Odysseus found himself alone with his son whom he had not seen for twenty years. With all his being he wanted

to reveal himself to him, but he had resolved not to reveal his identity to anyone.

Athena appeared at the door at that moment, out of Telemachus' sight but visible to Odysseus. She signaled him to come outside and he immediately went to her. She simply urged him on: "Now is the time, now tell your son the truth. Hold nothing back, so the two of you can plot the suitors' doom" (16:189-191). She restored his appearance so that he no longer looked like a beggar, and he returned to the lodge and told his son who he was.

Show me the way.

On the night before the day on which Odysseus and Telemachus had to kill the suitors, Odysseus tossed and turned in his bed, unable to sleep because of his rage. How could he kill the suitors? How could he escape the suitors' avengers? Athena swept down to see him and hovered at his bedside, and he asked her to show him the way. She reassured him that with her beside him, he could fight off fifty bands of fighters, and he was finally able to sleep.

Rescue us!

In the middle of the fight against the suitors, Odysseus saw that someone with the voice and build of Mentor had entered the hall. Odysseus "knew in his bones it was Athena, Driver of Armies" (20:220) and was thrilled to see her. The suitors also saw Mentor but did not know who he really was. Both sides made appeals to him to join their side, with Odysseus calling out, "Rescue us, Mentor!" (22:217)

Athena in her Mentor disguise only responded to Odysseus. Like an angry football coach she raged at him: "Are you asking for help in a fight with *suitors*?" She ranted at him about his strength and valor in the Trojan War, and about the grueling fights that he had won against real soldiers. Her presence and her words roused him on in the fight.

Hold back now!

After Odysseus had taken revenge on the suitors and been reunited

with his wife Penelope and his father Laertes, some of the men of Ithaca came after him to avenge their sons' deaths. As the men closed in on Odysseus, Athena "marched right in" in her Mentor disguise, and "the good soldier Odysseus thrilled to see her" (24:555-556).

As Odysseus charged the front line of the avengers, Athena cried out for the fight to stop. Her voice terrified the avengers who ran for their lives with Odysseus in hot pursuit. Athena then commanded Odysseus personally, "Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, master of exploits, hold back now!" (24:595-596). He obeyed her, and peace was established in Ithaca.

A Descriptive Formulation

We could dismiss the relationship of Athena and Odysseus as merely an ancient oddity, reflective of the primitive beliefs of the ancient Greeks and the genius of Homer, with little relevance to the behavior of persons today. But there are some remarkable similarities between this relationship, described in the late eighth or early seventh century BC, and the relationships that people create today with imaginary companions.

Just as Odysseus rejoiced in the company of Athena, children sometimes delight in the company of imaginary companions. Just as Odysseus looked to Athena for advice ("Is now the time?"), widows and widowers sometimes consult a ghostly spouse ("Should I buy the stock?"). Just as Odysseus treated Athena as a guide on the island of Phaeacia, dying persons sometimes accept a take-away apparition as a guide through the unknown territory of death.

In a previous paper, "Companions of Uncertain Status", I describe such companions as world + x constructive and reconstructive phenomena, and present a parametric analysis for systematizing the range of facts relevant to whether or not a person constructs a world with an imaginary someone (Roberts, 1991). The parameters are:

1. Extent to which real world requirements for the systematic connectedness of everything press upon a person

2. Degree to which circumstances facilitate the creation and maintenance of a companion
3. Gain in behavior potential that comes from having a relationship to a companion

I will use this interrelated set of considerations to understand Athena's appearances in Odysseus' world and to show that it makes sense to think of Athena as his goddess companion. Seen in this light, the relationship is not an oddity at all, but rather one of the oldest imaginary companion relationships on record.

Real World Requirements

To what extent did real world requirements for the systematic connectedness of everything press upon Odysseus? First, notice that Odysseus was free of the last 2700 years of social pressure about how things are. For example, he was not fettered by the view that the real world is nothing more than the physical world. He was not shackled with the idea that what we see when we look around us has nothing to do with us. Ideas such as these, which are part of our scientific and intellectual tradition, had no hold on him.

Not only was Odysseus free of pressure from our ideological traditions. He was also living in a world where there was cultural support for certain world + x constructions. The societal acceptance of gods and goddesses with special powers and abilities made Odysseus' world very different from a standard materialistic real world, and it made the appearance of an imaginary companion less of a violation than it would have been in a homebound, tables-chairs-and-apples world.

This is not to say that something like "The Face in the Wall" would simply have been taken matter-of-factly. ("The Face in the Wall" is the image of a face materializing out of a wall and then receding back in (cf. Ossorio, 1976, pp. 6-8).) But such an event would not have been totally disconnected from everything else in the Homeric world in the way that it would be in ours. The Homeric world had places for things like that – for example, as warnings flashed by a god – and there were social prac-

tices like prayer and sacrifice to deal with such happenings.

Finally, Odysseus had been “warfaring and wayfaring” for twenty years and hence was not subject to the same pressures as someone living a life at home as a full member of the community. As a wanderer and stranger he was freer to invent whatever he wanted and to treat things however he wanted than someone who was embedded in the life and structure of the community.

Circumstances

To what degree did Odysseus’ circumstances facilitate the creation and maintenance of a companion? Notice that four of the seven synopses presented in the “Two of a Kind” section are introduced by questions. Should I go to the queen? Did I really do it? Have I really reached Ithaca? Is now the time? If we drop the details of the questions, a pattern is obvious: Odysseus was operating under conditions of indecision and uncertainty.

These were not conditions of garden-variety indecision or routine uncertainty, however. A great deal hinged on how Odysseus handled the situations in which Athena appeared, and he had no room for error. If he failed to win the favor and respect of the Phaeacians, then he would have no way to leave their island and no way to support himself there; he would be nowhere. If he made a mistake after he reached Ithaca, then both he and his son would be killed.

The difficulty of his position was intensified by the fact that in the world of Homeric Greece, a god or daemon could easily trick a person or take away a person’s understanding. Odysseus had already been fooled once on the island of Helios, where the gods “poured a sweet, sound sleep” upon him at a time when his men needed him (12:364). He could not afford to let himself be tricked again.

Think of how much it would help in these circumstances to have someone who could see the situation from a different point of view, who could give him objective advice, who could help him with reality checks, who would not make the same mistakes that he was likely to make. But

Odysseus had no one.

What he did have available to him was a readymade vehicle for an imaginary companion. A companion is more commonly custom-made, created out of whole cloth to fit the needs and wants of a particular individual. But Odysseus did not need to create a companion from whole cloth. All he needed to do was a little tailoring to make the goddess Athena a perfect fit for who he was and the circumstances he was in.

Behavior Potential

Did Odysseus achieve a gain in behavior potential from having a relationship to his goddess companion? First, Athena enabled Odysseus to enact actual behaviors appropriate to the situation he was in that he could not have enacted without her. For example, to use the analogy of playing a game, he could not have engaged in “get the umpire’s ruling on the play”, “call a timeout and check with the coach”, or “get a pre-game pep talk from the coach” if she had not materialized on the scene. He simply did not have anyone available to cast for the parts of “umpire” or “coach”.

Once Athena appeared in his world, however, they engaged in these social practices together. They enacted “get the umpire’s ruling on the play” after he threw the discus in Phaeacia. They did “call a timeout and check with the coach” before he revealed himself to Telemachus. And they did “get a pre-game pep talk from the coach” on his sleepless night before the battle with the suitors. Engaging in these actual behaviors in the immediacy of the situation with Athena was far more powerful and real than anything Odysseus could have done in his head.

The first four episodes presented in “Two of a Kind” illustrate the doubt-dispelling power of interacting with his goddess companion. When Odysseus was undecided about whether to go directly to the queen, Athena in her little girl disguise gave him a full briefing on the queen’s background and relationships. This was Odysseus’ way of bringing back to mind as much of the local politics and genealogy as he could remember. Then she concluded, “If the queen takes you to her heart,

then there's hope." Having her reach that matter-of-fact conclusion was his way of making his decision.

Likewise, when he was uncertain if he had succeeded with his discussion, Athena as a Phaeacian man pronounced, "Even a blind man can see that you did it." This was Odysseus' way of concluding he had really done it. When he hesitated before revealing himself to his son, Athena advised, "Now is the time." This was his way of deciding to do it.

Notice that Athena's answer to every one of Odysseus' questions was not merely "Yes", but "Yes, as *anybody* can plainly see." In effect he reassured himself that he was not just acting on what he deeply wished for or desperately wanted to be the case. He was acting on what (any) one of us – even a child, even a blind man – could see *was* the case (cf. Ossorio, 1990, on objectivity).

In most cases it took just one round with his goddess companion to convince himself of what was the case. But after he reached Ithaca and he was afraid that he had been tricked, they went three rounds. First, Athena as an elegant shepherd boy gave Odysseus a briefing about Ithaca and called Ithaca by name. This was his way of remembering the land he had not seen for twenty years. For round two, Odysseus told a mendacious tale about his misfortunes, and Athena affirmed that even a god would have trouble tricking him. This was his way of making the self-status-assignment "almost impossible to trick". For round three, Odysseus insisted she tell him the truth about where he was, and she pointed out actual landmarks that he recognized. In these amazing interactions, she was his way to decide beyond any reasonable doubt that he had not been tricked and that he was really home at last.

The fifth and sixth episodes presented in "Two of a Kind" illustrate the faith-enhancing power of interacting with his goddess companion. These were situations in which Odysseus was questioning basic feasibility ("Can I beat the suitors?"). On his sleepless night before the fight with the suitors, she assured him that with her by his side, he could fight fifty bands of fighters and win. This was his way of reassuring himself and it enabled him to get to sleep. In the middle of the battle with the suitors,

she raged at him that a fight with suitors was nothing compared to the battles he had won in Troy. This was his way of affirming that he had it in him to win, and it enabled him to fight with renewed intensity.

The final episode, where Odysseus was about to do the wrong thing, illustrates the power of a companion for mustering self-control. Even though he wanted to go after the avengers, Athena's appearance on the scene made his second thoughts and reservations about it real. It did not make sense to do this. There had already been enough bloodshed in Ithaca and the community needed all its remaining men. By having her "blow the whistle on the play", Odysseus stopped himself from killing the avengers and increased his future possibilities as the King of Ithaca.

Most of the encounters we have just looked at were short and to the point. At a strategic moment Athena arrived out of nowhere, gave her advice, judgment, or command, and then was gone. For these encounters she was more often than not in disguise – as a little girl, as a Phaeacian man, or as Mentor. If Odysseus spoke at all, it was only to greet her in the way called for by her disguise. She knew what he needed in the situation and she did it.

In the two situations where there was greater ambiguity, they interacted much more personally and affectionately. For example, on the night when he could not sleep, she asked him, "Why still awake?" He answered her, "This worry haunts me, heart and soul... There's another worry that haunts me even more" (20:40-43). After listening to his fears and reassuring him, she added with empathy, "What a misery, keeping watch through the night" (20:56-57).

The I-Thou quality of their relationship was also apparent in their encounter when he was not sure that he was really in Ithaca. This was the only time he tried to dissemble before Athena, telling her an elaborate tale about his misfortunes. In response she "broke into a smile and stroked him with her hand" and in effect commended him as a "champion lying cheat" (13:325-330). But then she appealed to him to drop his disguise ("Come, enough of this now" (13:335)), and they negotiated their relationship and talked about the upcoming fight against the suitors.

Odysseus appreciated the very unique, I-Thou relationship that he had with Athena. Of course he valued the times when she “popped in” to crystallize things for him without him having to say a word, but he also valued having a more personal relationship with her. She was there for him in situations where he needed someone to talk things over with.

Thus, the gain in behavior potential that Odysseus achieved was significant. He enjoyed the intrinsic satisfactions of the practices he engaged in with Athena. By engaging in them, he dispelled his doubts, reassured himself, or exerted self-control. By putting doubt aside, keeping faith, or controlling himself, he was able to act more effectively and wisely in the life-and-death situations he faced. (This is just the familiar significance/implementation structure of behavior.) He also enjoyed the intrinsic satisfactions of the affectionate relationship he had with Athena.

I Never Glimpsed You

We have been using a parametric analysis to understand why Athena appeared in Odysseus’ world. We have seen that the real world requirements for the systematic connectedness of everything were unusually relaxed for Odysseus, his circumstances were optimally conducive to companion appearance, and his gain in behavior potential from having a relationship to Athena was maximal.

The parametric analysis can also be used to understand why Athena did *not* appear in particular situations. If she did not appear, it was because there was too much pressure for consistency, his circumstances were not conducive enough, or there was not enough gain in behavior potential.

After Odysseus reached Ithaca and finally spoke to Athena face to face, he groused to her about the years in which she had not been with him: “Daughter of Zeus, I never saw you, never glimpsed you striding along my decks to ward off some disaster.” (13:361-363). His complaint is especially intriguing given the incidence in more modern times of imaginary companions appearing to sailors in potentially disastrous situations (e.g. Slocum, 1905; Lindemann, 1958).

How can we explain Athena’s failure to appear to Odysseus during the

ten years that he was making his way home from Troy? For one of the ten years, Odysseus shared a bed with the lustrous goddess Circe, whom he left only after his crew insisted it was time to go. For an additional seven years he was with the seductive nymph Calypso. The behavior potential that the virgin goddess offered Odysseus may not have been sufficiently attractive for her to appear in those years.

But what about the remaining two years while Odysseus was at sea? The explanation that Athena gave is, “I could not bring myself to fight my Father’s brother, Poseidon, quaking with anger at you, still enraged because you blinded the Cyclops, his dear son” (13:388-390). In short she tells him, “*Our* circumstances were not conducive.”

An Extraordinary Companion

It is easy to imagine an ordinary person in the Homeric world feeling that Odysseus had an unfair advantage in life by virtue of his relationship with Athena. That person might want to have his *own* relationship to Athena in order to gain the benefits that Odysseus enjoyed – decision support, faith enhancement, damage control, and more.

If the envious person did find himself in a world with a goddess companion, she would be very different from Odysseus’ Athena. Because his companion would be one that a person like him would have and *not* one that a person like Odysseus would have, he might find himself in a world with a more bread-and-butter companion.

In the previous section we used a parametric analysis to account for why Odysseus had an imaginary companion. In this section we look at why he had such an extraordinary companion.

The Great Teller of Tales

When a companion appears in a person’s world, even a readymade one like a Greek goddess, that companion does not arrive with a script in hand with lines and stage directions already written. Rather, the world constructive achievement of a person who has a companion involves creating a scenario to enact with the companion and lines for the companion

to deliver. Even if the person recognizes that this is the “Giver of Good Counsel” and hence has some general guidelines about *what* part the new arrival might play, the person still has to instantiate the part.

It follows that people who are not very good at writing scripts for a companion probably will not achieve a significant gain in behavior potential from a relationship to a companion. If the companion endures at all, it may be an “Awkward Range” companion, where the relationship is not bad enough for the companion to disappear but not good enough for the person to be satisfied. In contrast, people who are good at creating scenarios and dialogue for a companion probably will gain in behavior potential and will find the relationship a satisfying one.

(The relationship between literary creativity and imaginary companions has received some empirical support. Schaefer (1969) found that for both sexes, students creative in the literary field reported imaginary companions significantly more often than their matched controls.)

Odysseus excelled in his ability to create plots and characters. Whenever anyone in Ithaca questioned him about his background, he made up an elaborate story to hide his real identity. These stories are “brilliant fictions, tales of war, piracy, murder, blood-feuds and peril on the high seas, with a cast of rogue Phoenician captains, Cretan adventurers and Egyptian Pharaohs” (Knox, 1996, p. 38). Because he was a “great teller of tales”, he was able to create an extremely good script for an imaginary companion.

The Weaver of Schemes

Even the best of writers has times when he cannot see his way clear to the denouement. He knows what he wants the outcome to be, but he cannot conceive of the means to bring it about. This was true for Odysseus. He did not know how he was going to kill more than a hundred suitors.

Because he did not have a plan, he could not construct a script for Athena such that she could direct him, “As anyone can plainly see, the way to do the job is....” After they had dropped their disguises and

were talking together on Ithaca, she admonished him, “Think how to lay your hands on all those brazen suitors” (13:430), and he appealed to her, “Come, weave us a scheme so I can pay them back!” (13:442). But they did not create a tactical plan.

While imaginary companions cannot give us ideas that we do not already have, other people can. So Athena wisely advised Odysseus to reveal himself to his son “so the two of you can plot the suitors’ doom” (16:190-191). Odysseus instructed his son to precede him to the royal manor and at his signal to place the weapons in the banquet hall out of reach of the suitors. But as Fitzgerald (1963) observes, “this is as far as Odysseus ever goes, by himself, in planning the final combat” (p. 498).

After Odysseus in the disguise of a beggar arrived at the royal manor, Penelope requested that he be brought before her. She had heard from her son Telemachus and a diviner that Odysseus was alive and would be home soon, and she wanted to question the beggar about her husband.

Modern Homeric scholars disagree about whether Penelope actually recognized Odysseus in the course of their interview (e.g. Harsh (1950), Fitzgerald (1963), Knox (1996)). But there is no question that Penelope concluded her interview with the beggar by announcing that the next day she would put the suitors to the test of the bow, the bow that only Odysseus could draw. As Fitzgerald (1963) writes,

Consider what she bestows on Odysseus. Up to now his plan of action, as I have noticed, has been fairly desperate. Now it is she, not he, who remembers the big hunting bow that has hung in an inner room since he left Ithaca. Archery against men who have no missiles is in fact the only practical way of beating the numerical odds. Penélopé supplies the weapon for the suitors’ downfall, and she does so for that purpose and no other. (p. 503)

In short, when Odysseus could not think how to lay his hands on the suitors, Penelope wove a viable scheme for him. On hearing her plan, Odysseus simply urged her on and promised her that her husband would be home before any suitor could draw the bow.

The interview in its entirety shows that Odysseus had a place in his world for an exceptionally competent woman, and was prepared to listen to what she had to say, to take her seriously, to accept her lead, and to follow her advice and act on her decisions.

Someone Just Right for Me

Why did Odysseus have an extraordinary imaginary companion? Because he was prepared to encounter and be inspired by an exceptional woman, and because he was able to write an extremely good script for her. When he found himself in a world with the goddess Athena, he gave her a place as his personal goddess companion and wrote a script for her such that she was an excellent fit for him.

Recall our ordinary fellow in the introduction who was envious of Odysseus' relationship to Athena. He was not someone who was prepared to encounter a godlike woman, and he was not someone who could "write like Homer" to provide her with a sublime script. But if he found himself in a world with a more bread-and-butter companion and gave her a place, a personal relationship might develop between them. With time he might find that she was just right for him – and in that way extraordinary.

Conclusion

In the Homeric world there was no uncertainty about Pallas Athena's status. She was a goddess, the daughter of Zeus, his virgin child, the Giver of Good Counsel and Driver of Armies. A person was fortunate to have an I-Thou relationship with her. Now, 2700 years later, her status is uncertain. The whole pantheon of Greek gods has been discredited, and in most circles, only an unfortunate would claim to have a relationship with a Greek goddess who pops out of thin air.

In this paper we demonstrate that it makes sense to think of Athena as a goddess companion, very much like an imaginary companion of childhood or a ghostly companion of a bereaved person. We show the tremendous gain in behavior potential and in personal satisfaction that Odysseus achieved in relationship to her.

Perhaps the paper will help to restore an appreciation for the value that such a companion can bring to a person's life.

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Notes

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