

# Manlike: the odyssean ideal

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



The name “Odysseus” resonates in the creak of opening doors in the city of Troy, the murmur of waves, and the song of the Sirens. Over the course of the epic tale, Odysseus’ heroism proves far more nuanced than the simple feats of his success at Troy and his triumphant arrival home. In Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Odysseus’ relationship with the dominant feminine presence, Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus, largely defines his uniquely heroic nature. The relationship casts Odysseus as Athena’s heroic counterpart in the mortal realm, and ultimately suggests that Athena derives vicarious thrills from their interactions.

Athena empowers Odysseus, left pining away on Ogygia, to re-assume his true role as a hero. She petitions her father to release Odysseus from Calypso’s embrace and helps the Ithacan to endure Poseidon’s fury:

But Zeus’ daughter Athena had other ideas

She barricaded all the winds but one

And ordered them to rest and fall asleep. (5. 385-387)

The daughter of Zeus confers no small favor on Odysseus by calming the winds, for in doing so she disobeys the powerful will of Poseidon. To take such a risk, Athena must truly believe that Odysseus is a mortal hero worthy of her sanction and support.

Odysseus reveals a unique, resourceful heroism, accented by the mental strength he shares with Athena. Rejecting the “Achilles ideal”, Odysseus marginalizes the role of sheer physical strength. This is seen in his anguish when the Phaeacians challenge him to an athletic contest:

<https://assignbuster.com/manlike-the-odyssean-ideal/>

Laodamas, why do you provoke me like this?

I have more serious things on my mind

Than track and field. I've had my share of suffering,

And paid my dues. (8. 167-170)

Achilles would have jumped at the opportunity to compete in a footrace, but Achilles died during the Bronze Age. Odysseus takes center stage by highlighting the strength of his mind. Like Athena, he uses intelligence to avoid frivolous or violent encounters, instead pursuing “serious things”, such as guaranteeing the security of his beloved Ithaca. Such a goal requires a bitter “share of suffering”, but bears the sweet fruits of home, justice, and peace that befit an aging hero.

In their encounter, Athena praises Odysseus for his skilled use ofmetis, though, of course, under her aegis. Appearing first as a shepherd and then in her true form, she states:

Here we are,

The two shrewdest minds in the universe,

You far and away the best man on earth

In plotting strategies, and I famed among gods

For my clever schemes. Not even you

Recognized Pallas Athena, Zeus' daughter. (13. 306-311)

On the surface, Athena acknowledges Odysseus' ability to think intelligently and weave his own plans. However, another sentiment exists underneath. The goddess takes note of the fact that Odysseus cannot recognize her, thereby implying that he cannot quite match her level of cunning and deception. That Athena feels the need to tout her superiority over Odysseus indicates her pride, desire for recognition, and lack of self-confidence.

Athena's comment about Odysseus' failure to recognize her is significant in a second, complementary way. Not only does she suggest that Odysseus fails to recognize her physical form, but goes on to state that he does not fully acknowledge her contributions to the successful achievement of his goals. Athena invokes her full name and the name of father, conveying her interest in having her name associated with Odysseus' exploits. These subtle, repeated petitions for admiration prompt a re-evaluation of the relationship between man and goddess.

One promising interpretation of the partnership between Athena and Odysseus is that it highlights the relationship between divine powers and human meaning. Athena can perform great physical and mental feats, but not meaningful acts. This crucial distinction surfaces when waves repeatedly slam Odysseus against the jagged Phaeacian coast:

He would have been cut to ribbons and his bones crushed

But grey-eyed Athena inspired him.

Slammed onto a rock he grabbed it with both hands

And held on groaning until the breaker rolled by. (5. 429-432)

Athena could levitate Odysseus over the ocean and place him down on Phaeacia, but she chooses not to. Instead, her will manifests as inspiration. Odysseus clutches the rock and groans in pain, deciding to live and strive onward. The human spirit that imparts meaning to life emerges from the crucible of suffering, from the constant prospect of death. Human virtues are responses to the tenuous nature of mortal existence. Athena, daughter of Zeus, goddess of reason and wisdom, never a victim of unrequited love or prolonged suffering, does not have the capacity for a spirit of heroic proportions. Odysseus attracts her because he is her counterpart: she offers him her powers, and he offers her his spirit. It is Odysseus who makes his way to rocky Ithaca, but without Athena, he would have drowned. The metaphorical tailwind (5. 389) demonstrates that Athena has the power to create potential, while Odysseus has the spirit to realize these dreams. Their partnership allows for the creation of deep meaning through superhuman, spiritual acts.

A close reading of Athena's exchange with Odysseus supports his spiritual and heroic primacy. Athena realizes that she must speak up to win her fair share of the glory. After comparing herself to Odysseus and claiming her superiority, Athena lets slip:

I who stand by you in all your troubles

And who made you dear to all the Phaeacians.

And now I've come here, ready to weave

A plan with you, and to hide the goods

The Phaeacians gave you—which was my idea- (13. 306-316)

She appears overeager to solicit his gratitude, garner credit for herself, and declare an equal partnership in the plan. Her hasty addition, “ which was my idea”, betrays her determination to win acclaim. Athena’s decision to reveal herself to Odysseus in her full glory is the equivalent of Odysseus shouting his true name to Polyphemus. Athena does not want anonymous philanthropy and clinical observation, but rather to have her part in human history acknowledged for posterity. She craves a share of the action and, more importantly, recognition for her endeavors.

Perhaps this divine desire manifests itself because too few limitations make for a sterile existence. Odysseus, crippled by his mortality and haunted by the constant prospect of death, has the urgent desire for survival that makes the expression of his mtis meaningful and alluring to Athena. Certainly Odysseus never takes success for granted, as shown by his constant worrying about the suitors:

And Odysseus, his mind teeming:

“ Yes Goddess, all that you say is true,

But my heart is brooding over this-

...And Athena, eyes flashing in the dark:

“ Let is go, Odysseus. Some people trust

Their puny friends more than you trust me. (20. 40-42; 20. 48-50)

Odysseus, subject to the whims of divine favor, must trust his mind, heart, and spirit. Athena takes almost a cavalier attitude; she does not understand the human condition, because she has never experienced it first-hand. A comparison of Odysseus and Athena emphasizes not the similarity of their methods, but rather the difference between their essences. Athena is intrinsically unable to take real risks as a consequence of her powerful, immortal nature. Odysseus, however, can take these remarkable risks and win the title of a true hero because he has the blessing and the curse of all humans: mortality.

In one sense, heroism is a universal in *The Odyssey*, not only restricted to shimmering warriors and godlike adventurers, but rather a defining characteristic of the human condition. Heroism is man's answer to the immortality of the gods. When Athena transforms Odysseus into a beggar, his skin shriveled, hair withered, eyes made bleary and dim (13. 412-416), Odysseus fades to the likeness of a common man, but his heroism endures. Athena does not transform Odysseus' mind, his heroic core. In contrast, Achilles would be nothing without his physical strength, unerring arrows, and half-deity status. Odysseus's heroism lies in something that every man possesses as a precondition of their humanity, and if each man exercises his abilities judiciously and nobly, he too may achieve the Odyssean ideal.