

Odysseus and athena: friends

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



The characters in Homer's *The Odyssey* are forever at the mercy of the Gods, those immortals who live in the heights of Mount Olympus, and who, on occasion, walk the lands of earth. Throughout the epic poem the main characters are visited quite often at pivotal times in the storyline. No god visits these characters more than Pallas Athena, the goddess daughter of Zeus, and no character is visited more by the Gods than the protagonist, King Odysseus. In Book XIII, upon Odysseus's long-awaited and unofficial arrival at the shores of Ithaca, Athena presents herself before him as a young shepherd boy. Careful analysis of related scenes throughout the book and this passage will show that Odysseus knew he was in the presence of the goddess before she revealed herself to him, and, in so doing, shed light on an aspect of their relationship that may have been overlooked by the casual reader.

The gods appear before and manipulate the minds of many of the characters in *The Odyssey*, and most of the time the person is not privy to the presence of the god.

Athena's presence, however, on more than one occasion is detected by the characters of the book. The first time the goddess is detected occurs in Book I, when Athena visits Telemachus disguised as an old family friend from Taphos named Mentos. She is there to inspire the prince to go on a journey in search of news of his father. Upon inquiry by the suitors in the house of Odysseus about the visitor, Telemachus responds:

"...The man's an old family friend, from Taphos,

Wise Anchialus' son. He says his name is Mentos,

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Lord of the Taphian men who love their oars.”

So he said

But deep in his mind he knew the immortal goddess.

(I, 476-480)

Although Athena has disguised herself she is still detected by Telemachus. It is unknown whether he is able to detect her in this instance because she wants him to be able to, or whether he just possesses some ability inherited by Odysseus. It doesn't really matter, though, because the point is that Athena can be sensed whether she is in her womanly form or disguised as something else.

Although Athena often appears at first in disguise, she is not shy. She is not usually unwilling to have her presence known, and she often appears at the end of the encounter as herself. While more than one example of this is available, including the one in Book XIII between her and Odysseus, the particular passage below showing Athena presenting herself in front of a group of people seems appropriate:

With that the bright-eyed goddess winged away in an eagle's form and flight. Amazement fell on all the Achaeans there.

The old king, astonished by what he'd seen, grasped Telemachus' hand and cried out to the prince, “ Dear boy-never fear you'll be a coward or defenseless, not if at your young age the gods will guard you so...” (III, 415-421)

Not only does Athena not have a problem with showing herself in front of the person that she is visiting, but neither is she opposed to presenting herself in front of groups. The words of King Nestor are appropriate here too because they demonstrate that to be the target of a visit by the gods is to be blessed. Odysseus similarly knows that he is blessed because he has been told by the gods that he is on his final journey home. He is confident that the gods, particularly Athena, are watching over him to guide him on this last leg of his trip.

When Athena appears before him on the shore, she is disguised as a shepherd boy. Odysseus knows at once that it is her. The pronouns used by the narrator are evidence of this:

But now Athena appeared and came toward him.

...Odysseus, overjoyed at the sight, when up to meet her, joining her now with salutations on the wing: (XIII, 251-259)

Despite the narrator telling us Athena is disguised as a he, we still see the pronoun “ her” in place of “ he” as Odysseus approaches the figure. This is a pretty clear context clue that supports the idea that Odysseus sees that the shepherd is Athena in disguise.

As he approaches the disguised Athena his words give clues to the fact that he knows it is her. He says: “ I’ve come on in this harbor, treat me kindly-no cruelty, please. Save these treasures, save me too. I pray to you like a god, I fall before your knees and ask your mercy!” (XIII, 260-263). He uses the word god. He tells a random shepherd boy that he is going to fall down and pray

to him. It seems pretty odd that an Odysseus the reader has come to know as being normally, quite frankly “ cocky”, would use such flowery speech to a shepherd boy. For these reasons it seems like he is just simply humoring the great Pallas Athena who has come before him in disguise.

In the story preceding *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, Odysseus uses his human ingenuity and resourcefulness, traits that Athena is attributed with inspiring in men, to devise the plot that finishes the sack of Troy. The similarity in the characters of the man and goddess serves to explain a key reason that Odysseus is in Athena’s good favor. Not only does Athena take pity on Odysseus 20 years away from home, but she also sees a little piece of herself in him. She expresses this sense of kin-ship in a passage that occurs when she is unveiling her disguise as the shepherd in Book XIII:

“ Any man – any god who met you – would have to be some champion lying cheat to get past you for all-round craft and guile! You terrible man, foxy, ingenious, never tired of twists and tricks – so, not even here, on native soil, would you give up those wily tales that warm the cockles of your heart!

Come, enough of this now. We’re both old hands at the arts of intrigue. Here among mortal men you’re far the best at tactics, spinning yarns, and I am famous among the gods for wisdom, cunning wiles, too.” (XIII, 329-339)

The idea that Athena likes Odysseus is key in setting up the context for their conversation. Athena appears before him, disguised, but he knows it must be her. He’s at a pivotal point of his journey and it seems obvious that some sort of immortal guidance is in order, and so he concocts a witty story about

himself being some foreign fugitive to humor her. It's a game of sorts, and after its done, Athena " broke into a smile and stroked him with her hand" (XIII, 326-7), as if to say " silly boy", you can't fool me.

More evidence of their playful and laid back relationship is seen in how they speak to one another. Athena says to Odysseus " Ah, but you never recognized me, did you? Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus - who always stands beside you, shields you in every exploit" (XIII, 340-342). The first phrase is the one to focus on here. The " Ah, but you never recognized me", seems to portray again the element of playfulness. She knows he knew who she was. Odysseus's response reciprocates that sentiment and further demonstrates the ironic manner in which they are speaking: " ' Ah goddess,' the cool tactician countered, ' you're so hard for a mortal man to know on sight, however shrewd he is - the shapes you take are endless!' " (XIII, 354-356). They are both joking around with one another, as if they are old friends. The funny thing is that they sort of are. Odysseus is famous for his twenty-year journey, wandering aimlessly, helplessly at the mercy of the gods. She, being a god, has played a key role in his life.

Through textual analysis then, we have showed that Odysseus did know he was in the presence of Athena. Through this exploration, too, we have explored in further detail the relationship of Athena and Odysseus. We've discovered a sort of kinship between them, which is a pretty interesting idea in a book where the gods are posed as these almighty figures to be feared and appeased at all cost. It is an interesting idea to pose then, that perhaps, because of its seemingly ancient abstraction, sometimes the words of the

book are perceived in a way different than what they may have originally intended. This has been proven in the case in the scene of Book XIII. Perhaps an interesting follow-up topic to an essay like this would be to venture forth and find other instances in the book where the ironic language of characters are mistaken for literal speaking.