

The Tears of Telemachus in the *Odyssey*

In this presentation I hope to shed some light on the tears of Telemachus in the *Odyssey*, which, unlike the other characters', have received little attention. He weeps three times, and all three, I will argue, reflect his relationship to his father and represent key points in his maturation.

His first tears provide a glimpse of the Odyssean essence of his character on the eve of his own miniature *Odyssey*. At the conclusion of his maiden-speech in the Ithacan assembly, Telemachus hurls the scepter to the ground and, enraged, bursts into tears, reducing all the people to pity and silence (2.80-3). These "sudden, passionate" tears are usually attributed to his immaturity and/or ineffectuality.¹ Given the general absence from Homer of the modern Western stigma against male crying,² however, it cannot be assumed here that "big boys don't cry," and tears at other assemblies tell against this interpretation: Telemachus' tears are, like those of Aegyptius and Eueithes, a rhetorical tool, not the final tantrum of "one so recently a boy."³ The pity of the people does not reflect poorly on his rhetoric or their ethics; it means that he has won over their hearts. Like his father, he knows how to manipulate an audience with a display of emotion.

The parallels between the journeys of Odysseus and Telemachus are widely recognized;⁴ the rest of Telemachus' tears play an important role in establishing this "sympathetic harmony"⁵ between father and son. Their tears in Scheria and Lacedaemon have been connected since antiquity: both react to reminders of their suffering by weeping and retreating into their cloaks. Through these tears, I will argue, they confront their pasts and prepare to move forward—

¹ Stanford 1959 *ad* 2.81; cf. Heath 2001: 140, 150 and Clarke 1967: 33.

² van Wees 1998; Föllinger 2009.

³ Stanford 1959 *ad* 2.81

⁴ See, e.g., Rose 1967; Fenik 1974: 5-60; Austin 1975: 181-200; Powell 1977: 50-6.

⁵ Reece 1993: 76.

Odysseus to his homecoming, Telemachus to adulthood. In other words, they undergo a kind of therapy. In Telemachus' case, this involves seeing the loss of his father in the wider context of the mortal condition and learning, by Peisistratus' example, how to move beyond his grief.

Telemachus weeps for the last time in the epic with Odysseus, as together they cry more intensely than vultures or eagles whose nestlings have been stolen by countrymen (16.213-21). This simile, though greatly admired in antiquity, has suffered at modern hands. A few have equated the nestlings with the lost years of Odysseus and Telemachus in passing,⁶ but as far as I know, no one has explained how Telemachus resembles a parent. Like the birds, Odysseus and Telemachus have lost something that they should have fledged together: a relationship as father and son. The comparison of both to parents reflects the shared nature of this loss, as well as the analogy of their experiences drawn throughout the poem and just underscored.⁷ Now, during the only reunion in which *both* parties weep together, they face their empty nest and begin to fill it by collaborating in the following books.

Works cited

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⁶ de Jong 2001: 397; Rood 2006: 11.

⁷ In the simile of the reunion between Eumaeus and Telemachus, the son's ten years in a faraway land evoke Odysseus' twenty of wandering, while the father's "many pains" evoke those suffered by Telemachus during his father's absence (cf. 4.164, 16.188-9).

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