

Grieving His Way to Maturity: Telemachus and the Psychosomatic Processing of Ambiguous Loss

Losing a father whom one has never met can cause serious psychosomatic side effects and crises of identity. Homer's *Odyssey* dramatizes this experience in the character of Telemachus, who, after losing his father Odysseus to war and to wandering at sea, manifests symptoms of what modern psychologists have termed "ambiguous loss" (Boss 1999). Without a body, Odysseus's demise cannot be determined, ritually mourned, or integrated within the social structures or the psychological experience of those he left behind, particularly Telemachus (Carrusesco 2019). For Telemachus, this loss is compounded by the fact that he had never met his father to begin with and therefore had suffered a delay in the development of his identity (Wöhrle 2009, Petropoulos 2011). Without certain knowledge of Odysseus or his fate, Telemachus does not know how to move forward in his life as heir to the throne. Without the psychosomatic strength that comes from this certainty, he cannot confidently reestablish order within his household. Thus, at the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*, Telemachus wallows in a dissociated and depressed state, unable to experience emotion or move ahead, a helpless man-child at home with his mother.

This paper re-evaluates Telemachus's story in the *Odyssey* as one of growth toward psychological resilience in the face of ambiguous childhood loss. This growth, I argue, particularly takes place through an embodied process of grieving. Throughout *Odyssey* 1-4 and into 15-16, Telemachus moves from a frozen state toward an increased ability to experience and process the emotions of grief. Homer presents this gradual development through a series of discrete and nonlinear psychosomatic shifts which equip Telemachus to psychosomatically integrate his experience of loss even through his reunion with his father in *Odyssey* 16.

For example, I re-contextualize *Odyssey* 1 in terms of the changes which occur in Telemachus's body as he moves from a state of disembodied dissociation and depression (*Od.* 1.115-17, 242-43, 158-68) from his ambiguous losses to an embodied strengthening of his *thumōs* (τῷ δ' ἐνὶ θυμῷ / θῆκε μένος καὶ θάρσος, 1.320). This psychosomatic shift lays the foundation for his increased agency in his dealings with his mother and the suitors and in his decision to face up to embark on a journey in search of his father. This journey, I suggest, in many ways mirrors a grief process. The rest of my paper thus analyzes other moments of physical activity and subtle shifts in sensation within Telemachus's experience and expression of the myriads of emotions involved with grief such as confusion and rage (*Od.* 2.80-83), sadness and embarrassment (*Od.* 4.183-295), anxiety and frustration (*Od.* 15.7-8, 267-68).

My paper builds on earlier analyses on the emotional expression in Homer in general (Chaniotis 2012, Cairns 2014, Purves 2019) and the role of emotions in Telemachus's *Bildungsroman* in particular (e.g., Hostetler 1998, Föllinger 2009, and especially Christensen 2020). I also utilize theoretical approaches of embodiment and enaction (Colombetti 2014, Duchs et al. 2017) to elucidate the significance of Telemachus's psychosomatic experiences as presented in Homer's text. Through the lens of these studies, I show that Telemachus actions and at times seemingly erratic reactions do not merely token his immaturity but reflect certain psychological imperatives within the processing of ambiguous loss. Telemachus, in other words, must grieve his way into maturity.

Works Cited

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