

Now You See Her, Now You Don't: *Odyssey* 9 and Hide 'n Seek Athena

Unbeknownst to Odysseus, Athena lends decisive support to him in the Cyclops episode. Visual artists and the *Odyssey*-poet himself show this, both the “unbeknownst” and, as the poem indicates in the hero's own words, the “decisive.”

Vases in Boston and Stockholm will show how Attic vase painters understood details and themes of the Polyphemus versus Odysseus duel of *Odyssey* 9 as indicating that, even though the reminiscing captain himself was and is unaware of their presence, two gods are present and helpful whom they make visible to us but not to him: Athena and Hermes. Respectively, resourceful Athena stands behind him as he gives powerful Apollonian wine to the staggered Cyclops, while cattle-rustler Hermes leads his (probably) great grandson—through Odysseus' mother, daughter of Autolycus—out of the monster's cave. This life-saving achievement is escape *and cattle-theft* at once.

Another ceramic piece, a wine jug in Paris, by unusual means of applied color *and* double scene, emphasizes fire that at first hardens the point of the cut-down olive-wood stake with which the man-eating monster is to be blinded, then makes it glowing hot when that deed is done. Hephaestus is thus involved in the action. Intention to show this explains the *second* simile that Odysseus uses to describe the actual blinding, a moment at a smithy when a newly forged iron ax-head, tempered in cool water, hisses.

The *first* simile, recalling a master shipwright drilling a plank, also recalls Odysseus' solo building of the *skhediē* on Calypso's island. Both involves Athena's wood-working *tekhne*, as much a province of hers as metallurgy is that of the Fire-god. (How Hermes and Apollo are further suggested is beyond this paper's scope.)

To posit that such accumulated odd narrative details betray Odysseus' own *unconscious* awareness of these gods' involvement would be anachronistic; however, that it's the *poet's* inflection as he shapes the 1st-person account is easy to maintain. How else explain why the sword that would have been enough to kill the Cyclops does not suffice to blind him, so it instead becomes a *wood-working tool* to fashion Athena's unique olive-wood log? Or why Odysseus casts lots at one point, and re-heats the point of the stake at another.

The paper will now focus upon Athena's representations elsewhere in Attic iconography, visible sometimes as a female figure with one or more of her familiar attributes, other times only in substances (olive tree or branch, Heracles' olive-wood club) or functions (particularly in raising and upholding objects with no visible means of support). Many times *multiple* indications occur simultaneously by coded pleonasm. This non-Odyssean imagery will corroborate a between-the-lines reading of Odysseus' own "gods-less" 1st-person narration that detects signs, easily decoded, of the *Odyssey* poet's-intention to indicate that Athena *inter alios* is with him, that he will be wrong in Book 13 to complain that she abandoned him between Troy and Ithaca. However, as elsewhere (though not in *Iliad*!) she prefers regularly to challenge her mortal darlings by leaving them to believe that they are doing great feats on their own.

The resumed slide-show will show how specific objects and functions can substitute on painted vases for anthropomorphic armored warrior Athena. The same objects and functions are present and active, even decisive in *Odyssey* 9, where that characteristic which *polumētis* Odysseus and his patron goddess share strategizes in far more than in the famous word play among *Outis/ou tis* and *mē tis/mētis*. In Book 20 Odysseus himself remembers how *mētis* saved him from the Cyclops' jaws, though he still doesn't appreciate how the very daughter of Mētis.(according to the *Theogony*) was its immanent embodiment in the monster's cave. For the

blinding of Polyphemus, deserved punishment though it is, has a second aim. Revenge at the cost of one's life may be all right for an Achilles, but not for the *polumētis* Ithacan. Even more than the blinding Athena has power to raise and uphold things as heavy as the sky (when she invisibly assists Heracles in the visualized Apple of the Hesperides Labor on a metope) or the huge boulder that blocks the way out of Polyphemus' cave. That that *olive*-wood stake which the poet introduces and repeatedly identifies as such is also oddly and repeatedly called *mokhlos*, "lever" (for raising weighty things like the hero's *skediē* back in Book 5) shows her participation in the substance, olive-wood, in its skillful shaping, and in its demonstration of *mētis* at its most sublime, that is, when it uses an enemy's strength against him. Athena and Odysseus working together won the Trojan War this way, with deception and a more complicated wooden structure for which, though burly Epeius built it, the goddess' Ithacan darling was "project director."