Homer opens *The Odyssey* with an invocation to the Muse of epic poetry and asks for her guidance in telling the story of a man who has experienced many twists and turns of fate and has suffered many hardships. Odysseus, the reader is told, is the only Greek survivor of the Trojan War who has not yet returned home or died trying. He is being held captive on the island Ogygia by the "bewitching nymph" (1.17) Calypso who wants him for her husband. Odysseus has incurred the wrath of Poseidon, god of the sea, by blinding his son Polyphemus the Cyclops. Meanwhile, Odysseus' wife, Penelope, is besieged by suitors at his home in Ithaca.

At a divine council on Mount Olympus, Athena pleads with her father, Zeus, to take pity on Odysseus and allow him to return home. She suggests that Zeus dispatch Hermes to liberate Odysseus from Calypso while Athena visits Ithaca to advise King Odysseus' son, Telemachus.

Disguised as Mentes, an old friend of Odysseus, Athena counsels Telemachus. She predicts that his father will return and insists that the prince must stand up to the suitors and seek more information about Odysseus.

Analysis

Homer uses the epic's opening to introduce the plot, the theme, and the characters of the work. Almost immediately, he delineates two plots that eventually will merge. One is the story of Odysseus who is held captive on Ogygia by Calypso. The other is centered in Ithaca where Odysseus' wife, Penelope, struggles to ward off a number of suitors and hopes for reliable word from or about her husband.

Homer also introduces several themes that will recur throughout the epic. These include hospitality, reputation, revenge, and power. Throughout, people are responsible for their choices but always susceptible to intervention by the gods.

In the world of Odysseus, one's most treasured possession is his good reputation. One's reputation is determined by how others view him, assessing his character, values, and behavior according to the prevailing social standards and mores. Zeus himself affirms Odysseus' character (1.78-80). Apparently all the gods, except for vengeful Poseidon, hold Odysseus in high regard. Athena, whose curse initially caused Odysseus' wanderings, now wants to forgive and bring him home. When Athena (in disguise) visits Ithaca, she first receives a hospitable welcome from Telemachus (1.144-46) and then gets the usual barrage of questions that strangers face throughout the epic (1.197-204), which are designed to elicit indications of reputation.

The social concept of hospitality is essential to both major plots in *The Odyssey*. (In fact, this concept was also the reason for the Trojan War in *The Iliad*. Paris breaches the hospitality of King Menalaus when he runs off with — or steals — Menelaus' wife, Helen, and takes her back to Troy with him.) In *The Odyssey*, the reader first sees hospitality exploited by Penelope's suitors. They have turned Odysseus' home into their own private party hall and spend most of their time feasting and drinking at the host's expense.

Underlying the theme of revenge is the situation at Odysseus' household. The suitors would not dare such offensive behavior if Odysseus were around or if they anticipated his return. They think he is dead. Only a few (Antinous and Eurymachus chief among them) have any real hope of marrying Penelope and, through that union, have a better chance of becoming the new king. The rest are simply taking advantage of the situation. If Telemachus is initially hesitant about taking action, Athena is not. She incites action in the youthful prince and wishes a "blood wedding" (1.308) on the would-be grooms. It is time for Telemachus to stand up.

Antinous broaches the topic of power when he challenges Telemachus' capacity to reign (1.441-44). He sardonically acknowledges the prince's right to rule but hopes that Zeus will never make Telemachus king of Ithaca. In fact, as Fagles and Knox point out (p. 504), Telemachus probably would not inherit the crown; he would have to earn it. If the showdown were immediate, it seems unlikely that Telemachus could defeat Antinous either personally or with his few supporters. He would accept the crown if it were the will of Zeus, but his modesty is justified at this point when he says he would simply hope to rule his own household. However, Telemachus senses that Mentes is really Athena and is emboldened by her support. He calls for a full assembly the next morning.