

Compare the treatment of the Gods in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*

The Gods in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are important figures. This essay will concentrate on Zeus, Poseidon and Athene who feature in both texts. Reasons of space prevent full exploration of the whole divine machinery.

The role of Zeus in the *Iliad* is of the all-powerful figure, the king of all the gods. The other Gods give him the uttermost respect and fear making him angry. So when he returns to his house “all the gods rose up from their chairs”(I.533-534).

Zeus has the power to drive the action forward. It is his agreement with Thetis that creates that catalyst for the climactic battles. His plan to bring about the redemption of Achilles creates the plot structure. He sends the false dream to Agamemnon in which a figure in the form of Nestor persuades him that he can take Troy. Although he is neutral in the mortals conflict he is often brought into mediate matters, as he has the final say.

Zeus in the *Odyssey* plays less of a role in the actual direction of the events. He resumes his role as a mediator of disputes between the gods on Mount Olympus. The notion of Zeus's supreme will is also a feature of the *Odyssey*. This is displayed emphatically when Zeus sends Hermes, the messenger of the gods, to Calypso's island to tell her that she must release Odysseus to leave so that he can be allowed to return home. Initially, Calypso is adamantly disputes and indicts Zeus's decision. “You are hard-hearted, you gods”(V.118). She complains and condemns the double standards that Zeus applies unfairly to the female gods. Whereas male gods are allowed promiscuous behaviour and affairs, female counterparts are expected to act faithfully at all times. She disagrees with this idea and is not afraid to let Hermes know. However she does not disobey the edict of Zeus, “since there is not way for another god to elude the purpose of aegis-bearing Zeus”(V.136-137). This can be seen to demonstrate Zeus's authority over all mortal and immortal. He also reminded by Hermes about the “anger of Zeus”(V.146-147) and his capability to “hold a grudge”(V.147). This is seen more in the *Iliad*, but is illustrated in the *Odyssey*.

Zeus's anger in the *Odyssey* though not as frequent as in *Iliad*, shown when he destroys Odysseus's ships and sends his entire crew to their deaths beneath the waves. This is after Odysseus's men disobey the orders of their leader and give in to their instincts and desires to slaughter the Sun's flock for food. This Sun god asks Zeus to punish Odysseus and his men. This highlights the important role that Zeus plays in the

Odyssey as an overseer of human moral behaviour. He is not personally involved with the events happening in the current story, as opposed to the *Iliad*, for example his vested interest with Sarpedon, his son and also his promise to Thetis. This allows him to maintain distance and a sense of aloofness from the proceedings and carry out his job, to punish Odysseus men for doing something they were explicitly forbidden to do.

Poseidon is the brother of Zeus and the god of the sea. In the *Iliad*, he takes the side of the Greeks, because the Trojans never paid him his dues for assisting in building their city, Troy. The desire for the fall of Troy is therefore more personal reason than anything morally profound.

He takes full advantage of Zeus's lapse in interest in the battle in book thirteen. He is able to fight and boost the spirit of the Greeks who are lacking in confidence. He restores this confidence to the troops who are able to then face the Trojan onslaught. Hera's seduction of Zeus in book fourteen, takes Zeus completely out of the picture. Poseidon does not fail to exploit the situation and he starts taking charge of the Greek army, hence restoring the Greek fortunes, "Poseidon the shaker of the earth led them" (XIV.384).

In book twenty-one, when Achilles is fighting Xanthos, the river-god, Poseidon is the first god who comes to the aid of Achilles, "[Poseidon] caught him hand by hand and spoke to him assurance"(XXI.286). However in the *Odyssey* it is Poseidon who creates the tempest that almost kills Odysseus, "good full portion of trouble"(V.290). Poseidon in both passages has a personal vested interest in the outcome of the action. This shows that gods align themselves with the humans and act as protectors. However if their wrath is incurred, then even the mightiest of mortals may find that they are in grave danger.

The *Odyssey* is sometimes referred to as the 'Wrath of Poseidon'. Poseidon, the God of the Sea, plays a big part in the narrative of the Epic. He is angry with Odysseus for blinding his son, Polyphemos the Cyclops. He takes therefore a vested interest in the journey of Odysseus and where ever possible he, "drives him back from the land of his fathers"(I.75). He is called the "earth-shaker"(V.283) and "Earth-encircler"(I.68). These epithets connote the sheer strength and colossal power of Poseidon. His command is second only to Zeus, who also honours him by calling him "the eldest and best among"(XIII.142) the gods.

In book five the opportunity that Poseidon has been waiting for presents itself. Zeus in book two reassures Athene that Poseidon without the consent of other gods, “he can accomplish nothing”(I.79). The planning of Odysseus’s release and journey back to Ithaca is done on Mount Olympus, in the council of the gods. Poseidon’s absence allows the plan to progress, otherwise there be a deep objection from him. Consequently when he finds out they have decided Odysseus’s fate, without consulting him, he becomes enraged because it is an even greater insult to him, he is described as “more angered” (V.286). He stirs up a violent storm, “night sprang from heaven”(V.294). Being in command of the Sea, the setting is ideal for Poseidon to avenge his son’s suffering and unfortunate for Odysseus. A “terrible gust of stormwinds whirling together”(V.316-317) smashes his raft. He nearly gets dragged under sea. Although the Goddess Ino saves him and Athene appears to rescue him, Poseidon demonstrates that he poses a threat equal to that of the suitors. Poseidon is a divine antagonist, whereas the Suitors are mere mortal enemies. Poseidon here is presented as determined to torment Odysseus and do all in his power to hamper his homeward bound journey.

Poseidon in book thirteen, becomes furious, when he sees that Odysseus has reached Ithaca with the help of the Phaiakians. His anger directed at Odysseus is taken out on the Phaiakians. However, this time before creating havoc, he asks the permission of Zeus. This serves as a reminder to the audience that even though Poseidon is very powerful, he is still subordinate to the will of Zeus. Referring to his brother as “Father Zeus”(XIII.128), he formally addresses the king of the gods. He feels that his honour has been slighted and he will not be honoured among the gods if mere mortals are irreverent towards him. He decides to turn the Phaiakians’ ship to stone and punish them. This episode gives the impression of Poseidon as paranoid and irrational. The Phaiakians are of his lineage and his is their patron. They, by obeying and even exceeding the code of hospitality or Xenia have to feel the wrath of Poseidon. They are condemned because it is convenient for the gods. It is not so much Poseidon’s honour, which has been affronted, as his oversized ego been bruised. Zeus by sanctioning Poseidon’s actions is compromising his own character.

The role of Athene is limited in the Iliad. She is the goddess of wisdom and sense. Athena passionately hates the Trojans and often gives the Achaeans valuable aid. Using her powers, she manipulates the characters’ actions. This is either for a noble and legitimate reason or it can be to forward the cause of her favoured party.

When Achilles is on the verge of killing Agamemnon, she prevents him and persuades him to use words to fight and abuse him. Therefore she averts bloodshed within the Greek camp. This parallels Athene's action on the battlefield in book four. She disguises herself as a Trojan soldier and persuades "godlike Pandaros"(IV.88) to take a shot at Menelaos. She manipulates Pandaros by appealing to his quest for kleos or fame. She says, "it will win you glory and gratitude in sight of all the Trojans" (IV.95). However the act she describing and instructing him to do is not heroic but sly and conceit. Athene acts in a very contrived manner and when Pandaros releases the shot she immediately deflects it so it only wounds Menelaos. The only purpose behind this is to restart the war. This shows her self-interest in the results of a conflict, in which she seems to take pleasure in.

She uses her wisdom and knowledge of War to encourage Diomedes in book five. She also acts as a provider of extra potency and nourishment. This is seen in book seventeen with Menelaos and in book nineteen where she fills Achilles with nectar and ambrosia to reduce his hunger pains and keeps it at bay. Unlike the Odyssey, Athene concentrates on the physical development and maintain the physical body. Although this is also a feature of the Odyssey such as when Athene gives revitalisation to Odysseus in book twenty-three when he is reunited with Penelope. The Odyssey is much more concerned with the development of the character.

In the Odyssey it is Athene who has the most divine influence over the events that occur in the epic. She is primarily a spiritual guide. She acts as the guide to Odysseus on his journey ensuring he is able to overcome any obstacles that come before him. This coincides with her position as the goddess of wisdom because Odysseus is renowned for his cunning and bravery on the battlefield. She also makes it her role to frequently help Telemachos in his quest to rid his palace of the suitors.

Right in the beginning of the Odyssey in book one it is Athene sets the plan of Odysseus's return into motion. Her plan includes getting Hermes to deliver the order of Zeus to release Odysseus and secondly to prepare Telemachos for the battles that he faces in the form of the suitors. With the consent of Zeus, she travels to Ithaca to speak with Odysseus's son, Telemachos. Disguised as Mentos, Odysseus's old friend, Athene predicts that Odysseus is still alive and that he will return soon to Ithaca. In doing this she not only acts as a bearer of good news, but as a friend and support to a despairing young man.

Assuming forms and disguising as someone or something else is one of Athene's trademarks. This is displayed frequently throughout the Odyssey. In Book two she takes on the form of Mentor to encourage Telemachos to embark on the journey to Pylos and Sparta in order to search for information on his father. In the same book she also transforms into Telemachos himself to gather men for a loyal crew. When she reveals her divine identity by shedding the form of Mentor, the revelation is an occasion for shock, but a pleasant surprise, "amazement seized on all the Achaians"(III.372). She then uses her celestial powers to change into a form, which resembles the "likeness of a vulture"(III.372) before the entire court of Pylos and she flies off to look after Telemachos' ships and his crew. Book thirteen displays why the ability to master disguise is so relevant to the story of Odysseus. It shows the full extent of her skill in disguising and inventing personalities. When Odysseus wakes up in Ithaca but does not realise that it is Ithaca he feels he has been tricked by the Phaiakians "shame on the leaders of the Phaiakians and their men of counsel"(XIII.209). Athene takes on the form of a "herdsman"(XIII.222) lets him know that he is actually in Ithaca. She is delighted by his characteristic cunning as he acts to conceal his identity from her until she reveals hers. The physical disguise necessary for narrative purposes in the literary sense and survival in the actual sense is Athene's initiative but Odysseus's use of the disguise and assuming a different identity proves himself worthy of the Goddesses attention.

Athene's role in the Odyssey is also to protect Odysseus from any bodily harm, which may arise on his journey. This role also extends to the protection of Odysseus's son Telemachos. The measures that Athene takes to protect Odysseus is most prominently shown in Book five. When he is caught in the storm created by Poseidon, Athene orders the winds "to go to sleep and give over"(V.384). This enables Odysseus to find land and be saved from drowning. When the battle is being fought against the suitors in the twenty-second book, Athene also intervenes. Although in the beginning disguised as Mentor, she is only able to dispense encouragement and advice; she does protect Odysseus and his allies, so they are subjected to superficial wounds, "Athene made vain all their [suitors] casts"(XXII.256). This indicates that Athene has a personal interest in Odysseus finding glory largely on his own. This allows the victory at the end to be portrayed as the effort of Odysseus and "his glorious son"(238) Telemachos, rather than the work

of a divine being. In relation to Telemachos, Athene warns the young hero about the Suitors' plan to kill him upon his return to Ithaca.