

A New Song for Odysseus

Simon Brown

The blind man, Homer, and his secretary had been waiting in the olive grove for nearly two days when word got back to them from Mount Olympus. Homer first heard the popping sound that always accompanied a god taking human form, then the sure, even footfalls that told him this time it was Pallas Athene.

He said her name.

"How could you be so sure it was me?" Athene asked, amused and intrigued.

Homer touched his chest near his heart with the fingers of one hand. "In here I know all of you better than I know myself." Next he touched his head. "And in here, Pallas Athene, where I create my stories, I know you best of all, the god of art."

"Perhaps you know me too well," Athene warned, an edge in her voice.

"What threat could a mere human pose to one such as you, especially a *blind* human?"

Athene laughed at the poet's question. "Your own words reveal how dangerous you are. You could talk a leopard out of its spots."

"Perhaps," Homer admitted, showing half a smile. "Have you word from your father about my new story? Does he like it?"

"Oh, yes. Very much. He asked me to bring a contract with me for you to seal. As soon as you've done so production can begin."

Homer nodded and Athene handed a scroll to his secretary, who read it out loud to his master.

"What's this about minor changes?" Homer demanded a moment later, interrupting his secretary.

Athene shrugged, then remembered that Homer could not see. "Nothing important, I'm sure. Father, being the kind of god that he is - "

"Full of thunder," Homer interjected.

" - being the kind of god that he is, would like to spice up the action a bit."

"What does 'spice up' mean, exactly?"

Athene drew in a deep breath. "A little more blood and gore, I suspect."

"This is going to turn into another *Iliad*, isn't it?" The poet was angry.

"Of course not, Homer," she said soothingly. "None of us could afford another adventure on that scale."

"Another debacle on that scale, you mean. How many worshippers did Zeus lose in that one? Over ten thousand, wasn't it?"

"Something like that," Athene admitted.

"If only he'd stuck to the original plot - "

"Yes, alright. Keep your voice down. He might hear you, and no one likes having their mistakes rammed down their throat."

"Well, he'd better stay with the story this time."

"You mean you'll seal the contract?"

Homer nodded glumly. "What choice does a mere mortal have before the will of his gods?"

Athene realised Homer was speaking rhetorically and didn't reply. Anyway, the answer would only have

depressed him further.

Odysseus was the hardest nut to crack.

"Look, it took me *ten* years to get home the last time," he earnestly explained to them, "and that was after *ten* years spent fighting outside Troy's bloody walls."

"The idea's got a lot of popular support," Hermes said.

"Especially among the gods," Iris added.

"I'm just not interested in a rematch - "

"It's not a rematch, Odysseus, it's a *sequel*. *Son Of Helen Of Troy*."

"What's a sequel?"

"Like *Odyssey* was to *Iliad*, like your son Telemachus is to you," Hermes explained.

"So we're talking about a sequel to a sequel - "

"Look, Odysseus, it's got everything going for it," Iris interrupted, impatient with semantics. She started ticking points off on her fingers. "Public interest, a great story, great characters, divine inspiration, meaningful dialogue . . . you name it, *Son Of Helen Of Troy's* got it."

"Everything, huh?" asked the King of Ithaca, his suspicious nature making him sceptical.

Hermes leaned across the slate table around which they'd gathered and said, in a confidential tone:

"Homer's written the story, based on an original concept by Ares himself." Odysseus was impressed, and his expression showed it. "And Phoebus Apollo's agreed to do the music."

Hermes rested back, giving his news more time to sink in. This was a mistake, for it gave Odysseus an opportunity to discover what he thought was their plan's fatal flaw. The two gods were surprised when he slowly shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Hermes asked nervously, wondering what it was they'd overlooked in the sales pitch.

"More than half the original cast is dead and gone, remember? Achilles, Hector, Agamemnon, Paris, Patroclus, Priam, Aias, Cassandra . . ." his face clouded over ". . . not to mention the *entire* contingent from Ithaca, except me . . ."

Iris glanced nervously over her shoulder to make sure no one else was listening in, and said: "Apparently the Great Director's been having chats about that very problem with Persephone . . ." She let the sentence fade without finishing, but winked knowingly at Odysseus.

He was wide-eyed. "You mean Hades is willing to release them?"

"As special guest stars only; but at least they'll be making an appearance, no matter how brief."

Odysseus could not speak. Hermes sensed it was time to move in for the kill.

"We haven't discussed payment yet," he said. "I think you'll be very interested in our proposal."

Odysseus was the hardest nut to crack, but the gods had brought with them a big enough mallet.

"I can't believe you're going off to war again," Penelope said to her husband even as she helped him pack a few things. "Not after the last time."

"It may not come to a war," Odysseus tried to explain for the hundredth time.

She ignored his protest. "Will you be taking your great bow with you?"

Odysseus closed his eyes and prayed desperately for courage for himself and understanding for Penelope. A sudden, horrifying intuition suggested to him that Penelope perhaps understood things better than anyone, and that her misgivings were entirely appropriate.

He opened his eyes, turned to his wife and laid his hands on her shoulders. "The gods have promised me I'll return, and before the year is out."

"Another year Ithaca must be without its rightful king."

"Telemachus will rule with a fairer hand than mine. Our son was born to rule."

"In his own time," Penelope rejoined, shrugging off his hands.

Odysseus didn't reply. He felt he was losing the argument, and he didn't want Penelope to see that he couldn't defend his position. That would mean leaving under an even darker cloud.

Penelope and Telemachus accompanied him down to the beach. This time he wasn't taking a fleet with

him: Just one bireme, its fifty crew and six trusty followers. The ship left soon after dawn, heading southeast towards the Gulf of Corinth, farewelled by a small crowd of well-wishers that had gathered quietly by the edge of the sea.

Menelaus glumly looked out from where he stood on Sparta's great wall. On the distant northern horizon he could see huge clouds of dust. The enemy had arrived. The gods' new epic was about to begin.

He was joined on the wall by his wife, Helen. "They've come," he told her.

"So I see. Don't look so despondent, husband. We will survive this war. It has been promised to us by Aphrodite herself."

"She promised the same thing to Priam and his sons," Menelaus pointed out.

Helen bit back an angry reply. Why must her men always prove to be such fatalists? Even her son, Tydeus, was turning into one. Which reminded her . . .

"Where is he?"

Menelaus glanced at her. "Your son, you mean?"

"*Our* son."

Menelaus nodded towards the advancing enemy. "They don't think so. They attack Sparta because they believe this house protects Paris's whelp."

"He has your eyes," she said lamely.

"God's teeth, woman; nine out of ten Achaeans have brown eyes! But he has Paris's hair, Paris's nose, Paris's bloody adulterous mouth . . ." The sentence was strangled by his bitterness. "They're my friends out there, Helen. I fought by their sides for ten long years so we could free you, and now because of you I must fight against them." He turned his face away from her. "The gods have betrayed me."

The gods have betrayed us all, Helen thought grimly. As they have ever done.

Pallas Athene eventually found Homer sitting on the edge of a cliff overlooking the great harbour of Thera.

"It is quite a view," she said to him.

"I wouldn't know," he replied.

"Why do you come here?"

"The updrafts are refreshing, and the wine they make here is excellent. Better than that Anatolian muck I was raised on."

"The story is about to start," she told him.

Homer sighed. It was a sad sound and sent a shiver down Athene's spine. "I know. Even this far away I can hear your father chortling."

Athene felt she should be angry at the poet's words, but because she understood, even if she didn't yet *know*, what was about to happen in far away Sparta, she found her anger consumed by an unnatural sympathy.

"Tell me, Homer, does your story have a happy ending?"

"Oh, yes. All my stories have happy endings."

"*Iliad* was a tragedy," she pointed out.

"Not originally."

For a while neither of them said anything. The white houses around them, the cobalt sea below, the great arc of the harbour and the gusts of fresh Mediterranean air all worked towards a feeling of peace and general calm. Athene understood then that even without eyes Homer saw things better than most mortals. She wondered briefly if her kind really had created humanity. The species seemed infinitely more complex, emotionally and spiritually, than those who resided on Mt Olympus. This man, this blind poet, scared her; in his own way he was more godlike than she could ever be.

"I have to go back." Homer said nothing. "What will you do now?"

"I'm already working on another story. It's about the end of the world."

"I look forward to hearing it when it's finished," Athene admitted.

"I shouldn't if I were you. Zeus will probably want to produce it like he has all the others."
But Athene didn't hear the warning. She was already gone.

Odysseus found he was camped next to Diomedes, his closest friend from the days of the Trojan war. Their reunion was warm and sincere, eventually made boisterous by too much wine. As night carried on and their followers left them to find places to sleep, the two old warriors sat together around a spluttering campfire.

"Have you been in touch with Menelaus at all?" Odysseus asked.

"I tried soon after the high priests announced the war, but the gods had already sealed Sparta off from all contact with the outside." Diomedes poked the fire with the tip of his sword, watched orange sparks scatter and fall. "I don't like this fighting between old comrades. If I'd known this was what Zeus had in mind I'd never have signed up."

"We all would have come anyway, in the end. This is something the gods willed, and who are we to refuse them?"

"Have you ever met Tydeus?" Diomedes asked, changing the subject. Odysseus shook his head. "He came to Argos last year on an embassy from his father . . . well, from Menelaus . . . and he impressed everyone with his intelligence and courtesy. And to boot, he's as beautiful as his mother to look at. I think the gods have it in for him. If it wasn't this war, they'd have thought of something else to get him."

"You've become cynical with age."

"Perhaps. That doesn't mean I'm wrong."

"No. No, it doesn't mean you're wrong. The gods have always been jealous of us humans. We can dream, where they cannot. We can die, where they cannot."

"And we can love."

"So can the gods, by all accounts."

"Not as truly as we. The gods *lust* after things, Odysseus. Zeus after flesh, Athene after knowledge, Ares after war and strife, Apollo after pride."

Odysseus peered into the gloom, tried to make out the walls of Sparta. "I wonder what daylight will bring." Other than Penelope, Diomedes was the only person in the world to whom Odysseus would have spoken such thoughts aloud.

"What did the gods offer you?"

"They guaranteed I'd return home before the year was out."

"That's all?"

Odysseus glanced down at his feet, obviously embarrassed. "As well, they hinted I might get a potshot at minor godhood when I died."

Diomedes let out a low whistle. "Only Heracles has ever been offered so much before." He smiled at his friend. "They will make you the god of deception, I think. Odysseus the Deceiver." Odysseus looked up, and Diomedes saw a tear trickle down his cheek. "Whatever's the matter?"

"I've just realised that even Odysseus the Deceiver can himself be deceived. I've been a fool."

Diomedes stared at Odysseus with surprise. Suddenly he understood that his friend had somehow seen his own fate. "This is going to be another bloody disaster, isn't it?"

"I've heard rumours that Hera and Zeus have fallen out again. Apparently she caught the old lecher red handed on the casting lounge with two swans, a peahen and a rock python of enormous girth."

Diomedes couldn't help laughing. "Just like last time! Well, we have to fight for something, I suppose."

"Oh, yes. We all have to fight for something."

Above them the sky was lightening, and dawn sent rosy fingers shooting out from the eastern horizon. In the distance a trumpet sounded, welcoming the new day and whatever it would bring.

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