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Death: Beyond The Gods

In Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, there lies an overarching theme of prophesied death in which no one, not even the gods, is able to change what fate has laid out for every mortal: Death. Despite being portrayed as immortal and extremely powerful, the gods of Olympus in *The Odyssey* have no power whatsoever over death, being only able to delay mortals' fates for a short amount of time.

It's still true, of course, that the gods of Olympus have vast amounts of power, which sets them far apart and above the mortals they rule over. Athena states as much to Telemachus when he doubts her willingness to help him and his father, Odysseus. She grows indignant during their meeting with King Nestor: "Pallas Athena broke in sharply, her eyes afire— 'What's this nonsense slipping through your teeth?'" (3.260-262). Athena has always helped Odysseus when he needed her, and she balks at the idea that her favorite mortal's son would ever dare doubt her capability or willingness to protect them. She then continues, "It's light work for a willing god to save a mortal even half a world away" (3.263-264). Here, Athena makes it clear that saving a mortal is nothing to them; the gods do as they please with no one but perhaps another god to stop them. If a god favors a mortal, they can easily give them counsel, blessings, and gifts, even keeping them safe from danger and untimely death. All Telemachus and Odysseus have to do to curry Athena's favor is praise her and give her what she asks, as one would a patron.

Athena proves herself as the goddess of wisdom by giving hints about what she knows about Odysseus's fate. She continues on with her speech: "Myself, I'd rather sail through years of trouble and labor home and see that blessed day" (3.264-266). She is alluding here to Odysseus's journey and struggle to return home. Because she's a goddess, she's been watching over Odysseus the whole time and knows what he is going through. Furthermore, she knows what his fate will be. Athena almost outright states that Odysseus is going to make it back to Ithaca, "[To] see that blessed day" (3.266). To her, it's pure fact, even if Telemachus doubts his father is even still alive. She then contrasts her hint about Odysseus to Agamemnon's fate, saying, "[Rather] than hurry home to die at my own hearth like Agamemnon, killed by Aegisthus' cunning—by his own wife" (3.266-268) By portraying the two men's fates as opposites, Athena is hinting at the fact Odysseus's wife won't betray him for a lover, nor will Odysseus end up being killed once he returns home.

But despite her clever, subtle boasts about her power and her knowledge of Odysseus's fate, she admits that there is one thing she can not control—That is Death. Her speech ends with her admittance of this: "But the great leveler, Death: not even the gods can defend a man, not even one they love, that day when fate takes hold and lays him out at last" (3.269-271). Death is the one thing no being can control. It is final; it lays kings and beggars low, uncaring of their deeds in life as it steals them away from it forever. It ends lovers, families, and empires without cease. This is the fate of every mortal. There is no one and nothing that can push back Death forever. The only beings Death does not come for are the gods of Olympus. But even then the gods can't stop Death from taking a mortal, nor can the gods force Death to take away another god.

There is a specific distinction in the passage here between Death and death. Athena speaks of the first when she says, "But the great leveler, Death..." (3.269). Telemachus refers to the latter: "Long ago the undying gods have sealed his [Odysseus's] death, his black doom" (3.275-276). The 'death' Telemachus is referring to is the event, the time and place he believes his father has already or will die. The 'Death' Athena is referring to is a being. 'Death' here is the one, likely a god or some other power, who holds dominion over lowercase 'death' and the afterlife that the dead reside in.

Why then does Telemachus state that the other gods have determined Odysseus's fate? He addresses Athena: "'Mentor,' wise Telemachus said, 'distracted as we are for him, let's speak of this no more. My father's return?'" (3.272-274). Athena, of course, is disguised here as Mentor, a mortal. Telemachus addresses her as such so Nestor and their companions don't know her true identity. He continues, "It's inconceivable now. Long ago the undying gods have sealed his death, his black doom" (3.275-276). He believes Odysseus is dead, and has been for a while. He holds no hope for his father's return home. This is the only aspect of death that the other gods can control, and that is to speed up when Death takes a mortal away. The ultimate fate of mortals is death, and the only thing the gods can do is speed up that fate or hold it off for a short while. Telemachus, knowing this, thinks the gods chose to speed Odysseus to meet his ultimate fate. Because of this, he has no urge to talk about it. He misses Athena's hints about Odysseus being alive. Telemachus chooses instead to focus on what he can do now, rather than sit around and hope Odysseus might be alive and come home to rescue his home.

For all the power that the gods of Olympus have, the only thing they can't ever control is Death and the ultimate fate of death that all mortals share. The best the gods can do is speed up that process or push it back for a little while. Mortals like Telemachus can't wallow in sorrow

forever about their fates, however. They must plow on, forging their paths in life and spending it by determining what they can do with the time they have left, as well as what they will leave behind when Death takes them away