Comparing Odysseus and Telemachus in Homer’s *Odyssey*

Under normal circumstances, anyone who willingly confronts military situations in which they were outnumbered sixty-to-one would be considered foolhardy or at least a horrendous decision maker. The story of Homer’s *Odyssey* tells the tales of Odysseus who confronts such situations with well-deserved confidence and routinely wins. Homer uses the differences in the strength, courage, and mercy of Odysseus and Telemachus in order to show that Odysseus is more of an epic hero than Telemachus. First, Homer shows the differences in their courage when they discuss how to go about getting revenge on the suitors in book sixteen, “Father and Son”. Second, Homer emphasizes their differences in strength when they each try to string a bow with very different results. Finally, Homer highlights their different opinions on giving mercy in chapter twenty-two, “Death in the Great Hall”.

Both Telemachus and Odysseus are very courageous. They have to be courageous to be the heroes that they are. However, Odysseus -- the epic hero -- is the main character of the poem and only earned that status by proving himself through many harrowing encounters. Homer wants the reader to know that Odysseus is greater, and specifically more courageous, than Telemachus when they both react differently to the problem of the suitors. When Odysseus says, “I’d rather have my head cut from my shoulders / by some slashing adversary, if I / brought no hurt upon that crew!” (XVI.121-123), Homer is showing the readers that Odysseus will not avoid any fight that he thinks is a noble fight. No matter how unevenly matched the battle is, if it is a battle that should be fought, Odysseus has the courage to go forward. In fact, he would rather die in a noble fight, than have the guilt of not participating in that noble fight. Odysseus does not
even blanch at the mention of skewed fight. Telemachus, on the other hand, regards his own safety as a valuable asset and is incredulous when Odysseus suggests such a miss-matched encounter. Telemachus shows this when he questions Odysseus’s suggestion to fight; “How can two men / do battle with a household in their prime?”(XVI.289-290). When Telemachus says this he shows that he does not have Odysseus’s immense courage and does not trust his combat ability enough to take on sixty men by himself, as the odds suggest he must. Odysseus proves his courage and confidence to the reader by defiantly suggesting to fight such odds, and confidently suggesting that his victory is quite possible. Thus Odysseus is more of an epic hero than Telemachus because of the obvious differences in their courage.

Another important quality of Odysseus that separates him in heroic status is his epic strength. Although Telemachus is obviously a very strong man, Odysseus is undoubtedly the strongest human being in the poem. Homer contrasts the great strength of Telemachus to the god-like strength of Odysseus when they both attempt to string the great bow of Odysseus, with quite different results. Telemachus is the first one to step up to the challenge and even after mustering all of his strength, he could not get the loop of the bowstring over the bow staff. “Three times he put his back into it and sprang it, / three times he had to slack off ”(XXI.143-144). When Telemachus almost succeeds the reader realizes that he is incredibly strong, but clearly not on Odysseus level. Odysseus obliterates all ideas that anyone could even try to get on his level, and reveals himself as the formidable Odysseus, when he strings the bow easily in front of an awed audience of suitors. “So effortlessly / Odysseus in one motion strung the bow” (XXI.465-466). Although some readers could say that Telemachus would have been able to string the bow on his fourth try if Odysseus had allowed it, but even that possible success would not have been as easy as Odysseus’s. Telemachus had youthful energy on his side and he was
still unable to match Odysseus strength, a strength that Odysseus has possessed since he was Telemachus’ age all the way through his forties. If a forty-year-old can undisputedly triumph over a group of athletic twenty-year-olds, than the forty-year-old is clearly superior. When Telemachus gets very close to stringing the bow it says a lot about him, but when Odysseus, in his forties, shows he still has his defining strength, it says more. Odysseus’s most distinctive quality, which separates him from Telemachus as a hero is his incredible strength.

Lastly, Odysseus is more of an epic hero than Telemachus because Telemachus demonstrates the mercy that Odysseus does not. An epic hero should have a greater desire for revenge than a desire for mercy because the desire for revenge is a key quality of an epic hero. When faced with situations in which they had to choose mercy or death, Odysseus consistently chose death while Telemachus did the opposite. Homer obviously wanted the reader to accept Odysseus’s brutal revenge on the suitors. So, when Odysseus says,

Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold
put up by others, would I hold my hand.

There will be killing till the score is paid (XXII.65-68), it is completely acceptable, and the reader not only acknowledges his decision, but supports it. However, that is not the case when Odysseus denies Leódês mercy directly to his face and the reader. In this part the reader understands that there was no mention that Leódês had ever disrespected Odysseus, but he is still killed without hesitation. When Odysseus says, “No plea like yours could save you / from this hard bed of death. Death it shall be!” (XXII.365-366), to a helpless pleading person who has a compelling argument for their mercy, it shows Odysseus’s lack of mercy. Telemachus does not experience this drawback of being an epic hero and shows
his mercy when he spares Phêmios, the minstrel, and Medôn, their herald by saying, “Wait: that one is innocent: don’t hurt him. / And we should let our herald live - Medôn”(XXII.400-401), to Odysseus. These two extremely different reactions to two people on quite similar situations highlight the fact of their different opinions on whether or not mercy is ever warranted. The final reason that Odysseus is more of an epic hero than Telemachus is Homer’s emphasis on Telemachus’s and Odysseus’s quite different approaches to granting mercy.

It was Homer’s intention to show that Odysseus is the most dominant individual in the poem and therefore he is more of an epic hero than anyone else, including Telemachus. After all the book is called *The Odyssey*, not the Telemachy, suggesting that the most important and heroic character is Odysseus. To prove this, Homer first shows their respective levels of courage and attitudes towards fighting in outnumbered situations. Secondly, Homer makes a statement by illustrating their different degrees of success in their attempts to string the great bow of Odysseus. Finally, Homer provides one last example as Odysseus’s and Telemachus’s treatment of people begging for their life are revealed to the reader. The poem begins with Odysseus as the dominant individual, but some doubt arises when Telemachus shows his nobility. However as the poem ends, Odysseus is clearly dominant once again, specifically after Homer highlights their many telling differences in their characteristics and abilities.