

Homer's Mentor

*Duties Fulfilled or
Misconstrued*

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Abstract

Mentoring has and is receiving much attention within the education arena. This paper offers an historical account of the origins of the term mentor, examining the role of the character Mentor in Homer's *The Odyssey* and Fenelon's *Les Aventures de Telemaque*. Many authors refer the reader to *The Odyssey* when discussing the supposed original mentoring dyad: these authors tend to extrapolate from the premise that Homer's Mentor was a protective, guiding and supportive figure who acted as a wise and trusted counsellor to Telemachus, son of King Ulysses.

Taking an oft suggested return to Homer's *The Odyssey* shows that this is not the case. This paper argues that Mentor, in this work, was simply an old friend of King Ulysses who largely failed in his duties of keeping the King's household intact. Focus is put onto the French writer and educationalist Fenelon, and his novel of instruction *Les Aventures de Telemaque*. It is argued that within this work one finds the Mentor whose attributes, functions and behaviours have become synonymous with the modern day usage of the term mentor and the action of mentoring. Recognition of Fenelon's Mentor, as opposed to Homer's minor character, is called for.

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The word mentor is of Greek origin. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives mentor as:

“allusively, one who fulfils the office which the supposed Mentor fulfilled towards Telemachus. b. Hence, as common noun: An experienced and trusted advisor.”

According to Klein (1967:964), Men is ‘one who thinks’, ‘tor’ is the masculine suffix, ‘trix’ the feminine. Therefore, he gives mentor meaning a man who thinks, and Mentrix, a woman who thinks. This, however, is not a description that sufficiently verbalises the current uses of mentoring. Debates on the concept appear to have their root within the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition. Such debates have forwarded mentors as role models, as counsellors, as advisors, as teachers, as nurturers, as friends and as sponsors: Smith and Alred (1992:109) have put forward mentoring as a ‘civilising’ process. Interest in the action of mentoring seems to have been initiated by Levinson's et al (1978) *The Season's of a Man's Life*. Although Wynch (1986:3) reported a paucity of information on the theory of the mentoring role some eleven years ago, writings on mentors and the action of mentoring have since proliferated. Such proliferation caused Little (1990:297) to caution us that:

“...relative to the amount of pragmatic activity, the volume of empirical enquiry is small [and]... that rhetoric and action have outpaced both conceptual development and empirical warrant.”

For an example of attenuated conceptual development, return to the word mentor. The first recorded usage - and the first time that it was anthropomorphised - was in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. Many writings (Anderson and Shannon, 1995; Bushardt et al. 1991; Carruthers, 1993; Donovan, 1990; Daloz, 1983; Field, 1993; Jarvis, 1995; Kalbfleisch & Keyton, 1995; Little, 1990; Meginnson & Clutterbuck, 1995; Monaghan, 1995; Murray, 1991; Parsloe, 1995; Shea, 1992; Smith and Alred, 1993; Stammers, 1992; Tickle, 1993) on the terms mentor and mentoring will invariably involve the reader being taken back to Homer's epic poem about the adventures of

Odysseus, King of Ithaca, during his return from the Trojan war and the 'drama of his homecoming' (Rieu.1946:11. It is this translation of *The Odyssey* quoted throughout this paper). The above mentioned authors tend to extrapolate from the premise that Homer's Mentor was a wise and trusted figure who displayed, towards Odysseus's son Telemachus, the admirable qualities of counsellor, teacher, nurturer, protector, advisor and role model. Anderson and Shannon (1995:25) state that:

".....Odysseus, a great royal warrior, has been away fighting the Trojan war, and has entrusted his son, Telemachus, to his friend and adviser, Mentor. Mentor has been charged with advising and serving as guardian to the entire royal household."

Carruthers (1993:9) gives a further dimension, that:

"This meant that Mentor had to be a father figure, a teacher, a role model, an approachable counsellor, a trusted adviser, a challenger, an encourager."

Little (1990: 298) expands this theme stating that:

".....the relationship required of Mentor was a full measure of wisdom, integrity and personal investment."

Smith and Alred (1993:103) claim that Mentor is essentially a stand-in for Odysseus, and assert that he must 'personify the kingly quality of wisdom'. Anderson and Shannon (1995: 25-26) take the classical reference further. They give that mentoring is an 'intentional' process, as Mentor deliberately and carefully carried out his duties towards Telemachus; and that mentoring is a 'nurturing' process as it was Mentor's duty to 'draw forth the full potential in Telemachus'. They quote Clawson (1980) who claims that it was Mentor's task to help Telemachus 'grow in wisdom without rebellion', and finally, they state (ibid) that mentoring is a 'supportive, nurturing process' - as Telemachus was to respond to the advice of Mentor, in order to develop into self-sufficiency during the drama which was played out in *The Odyssey*.

The cliched classical image is a friendly one. But, was the original Mentor wisdom incarnate? Did he guide, counsel, advise, and enable the young Telemachus? Was a supportive, nurturing and intentional process evident within Homer's writings? Did Mentor 'keep everything intact' as instructed by Odysseus? (Rieu.1946:43). The above mentioned authors talk along these lines. But an oft suggested return to *The Odyssey* reveals a somewhat different picture of the character Mentor than the one so often portrayed in the mentoring literature.

Although many writers take the reader back to *The Odyssey*, not all of these mention that it was the goddess Pallas Athene, goddess of the strange dyad, war and wisdom, who took Mentor's form so as to guide, counsel and enable both Odysseus and his son Telemachus through their journey and return home. In fact (or myth?) Mentor was only one of several forms which Pallas Athene took in the quest to help her 'favourite' Telemachus (Rieu.1946:17). Her first appearance was that: ".....of a Taphian chieftain named Mentos." (ibid:28).

She also assumed the form of a seagull (:60), the daughter of a ship's captain named Dymas (:102), a young shepherd (:208), a tall, beautiful and accomplished woman (:248), a swallow (:334), Iphthime a daughter of King Icarius (:85), a young girl carrying a pitcher (:112), a woman (:304) and Telemachus (:47), as well as the form of Mentor, on two occasions, for her purposes.

Mentor: who was he? Mentor, son of Alcimus, was by no means a major figure within *The Odyssey*. It is not stated, or even inferred, that he is an adviser or counsellor to Telemachus, wise, prudent or otherwise. The first mention of Mentor (:43) gives:

“.....Mentor rose to speak. Mentor was an old friend of Odysseus, to whom the King had entrusted his whole household when he sailed, with orders to defer to the aged Laertes [Odysseus's father] and keep everything intact.”

More of a caretaker's role? The only reference to Mentor (:333) that Odysseus himself gives is:

“Remember your old friend and the good turns I've done you in the past. Why, you and I were boys together.”

No mention of his advising or counselling or nurturing the young Telemachus is ever given. On Mentor's role of having been entrusted with the whole household and of keeping 'everything intact', it begets the question: why was Odysseus's household overrun and why did his wife Penelope, a 'model of fidelity, chastity and patience' (Groliers.1995) have to resort to deception to keep her unwanted 'suitors' at bay? As one of her old servants (:341) exclaims:

“Odysseus has come home, and high time too! And he's killed the rogues who turned his whole house inside out, ate up his wealth, and bullied his son”.

Consider Telemachus (:38):

“Turning first to old Aegyptius, he began.....in the first place I have lost my good father, who was King among you here and as gentle as a father to you all. But there was a far greater calamity to follow, one which may well bring my home to utter ruin and rob me of any livelihood I have. A mob of hangers-on are pestering my mother with their unwanted attentions...they spend their whole time in and out of our place. They slaughter our oxen, our sheep, our fatted goats; they feast themselves and drink our sparkling wine with never a thought for all the wealth that is being wasted. The truth is that there is no one like Odysseus in charge to purge the house of this disease.”

Where was Mentor, the wise and able old man of the modern interpretation? How effective was he in carrying out his duties that had been given to him by his old friend King Odysseus? Did he keep everything intact? As Nestor admits to Telemachus (:56):

“.....I have been told that a whole crowd of young gallants are courting your mother and running riot in your house as uninvited guests.”

Regarding the role of Mentor as advising, counselling and protecting the King's son, consider Telemachus's statement to Antinous (:45) that:

“Isn't it enough that all this time, under pretext of your suit, you have been robbing me of my best, while I was still too young to understand? I tell you, now that I'm old enough to learn from others what has happened and to feel my own strength at last, I will not last until I have let hell loose upon you.”

Where was Mentor? Where was he when Telemachus was too young to understand? Does the modern interpretation not claim that he was supposed to act as a father figure? An advisor? A wise counsellor?

It is the 'goddess of the flashing eyes' Pallas Athene who commands the attention during *The Odyssey*: it is she who plays the leading, if not the heroines part in the plot, not Mentor. It was the goddess who guided, protected and enabled her favourite Telemachus, not Mentor. She tells him (:210):

“And yet you did not know me, Pallas Athene, Daughter of Zeus, who [will] always stand by your side and guard you through all your adventures.”

She assumed Mentor's form on two occasions: but Mentor, without her, was by no means successful in the duties given to and expected of him.

Consider the household overrun, the King's wealth dissipating and the young Telemachus left too young to understand. As Telemachus explains, he is now old enough to learn from others: was Mentor, in the modern interpretation, not supposed to fulfil that role? He failed in his duty to keep everything intact, in his supposed duty of developing Telemachus's self-sufficiency. An argument is forwarded here for Mentor being an old friend of King Odysseus and nothing more. To consolidate this view, consider the statement (:68) of Nestor's son, Peisistratus:

“So Nestor of Gerenia sent me with him [Telemachus] for escort, as Telemachus was anxious to see you, in case you might help him with advice or suggest some kind of action. For a son, when his father has gone, has many difficulties to cope with at home, especially if there is no one else to help him, as is the case with Telemachus, whose father is abroad and who has no other friends in the place to protect him from injustice.”

According to the modern interpretation, was Mentor not supposed to do just that? Why, then, has the word mentor become synonymous with wisdom, guidance, counselling and advising?

In 1699, '*Les Aventures de Telemaque*' was first published. Francois de Salignac de La Mothe-Fenelon (1651-1715) was a French mystic, religious writer and educator. Much of his life was devoted to the cause of education. He wrote the widely popular '*Traite de l'Education de Filles*' (1687) which was (Kunitz & Colby, 1967:274):

“...a treatise on education that anticipates Rousseau's *Emile* in its liberal views and its emphasis on training...”

In 1689 he was appointed tutor to Louis XIV's grandson, the Duke of Burgundy, and heir apparent to the throne. The pupil-teacher relationship was apparently a happy and successful one. In 1699, Fenelon wrote '*Les Aventures de Telemaque*'. This was his most popular book; in fact the most reprinted book in the 18th century and 'pedagogues of every sort found the book a god-send' (Clarke, 1984:202). '*Telemaque*' was an imitation of Homer's classic *The Odyssey*: the story is a 'continuation' of the epic poem and was written as a thinly-veiled allegorical attack upon the absolutism of Louis XIV - le Roi Soleil - and as a method of instructing the young heir in the duties of royalty.

Fenelon takes his hero Telemaque through a series of adventures which 'uniformly illustrate his thesis that an ideal monarch should be a man of peace, wisdom and simple ways of life' (Kunitz & Colby, 1967:274).

Any comparative reading of *The Odyssey* and *Les Aventures de Telemaque* will almost immediately give rise to substantial differences between Homer's Mentor and Fenelon's Mentor (whose

form the goddess Minerva assumed exclusively throughout the book). Consider the following quotes (translation by Riley, 1994) from *Les Aventures de Telemaque*:

“...I have been seeking my father all over the sea, in the company of this man [Mentor] who was to me another father.” (:54)

“Oh happy Telemachus! you will never be bewildered as I have been bewildered, while you have such a guide and instructor! Mentor, you are the master!” (:136)

“Forget not, my son, the pains I took when you were a child, to make you as wise and as valiant as your father.” (:160)

“[Mentor] regulated the whole course of the life of Telemachus in order to raise him to the highest pitch of glory.” (:215)

Many examples of the wisdom, the support, the nurturing and the guidance of Fenelon's Mentor may be quoted: few such examples may be found regarding Homer's Mentor. Clarke (:201) tells that:

“In *The Odyssey* Mentor plays a secondary role. Homer focuses upon the trials of the Father, not of the education of the son. But the figure of Mentor was there...ready to be exploited by someone who was primarily concerned with education...that someone was Fenelon.”

The popularity of the book *Telemaque* may well account, as Anderson and Shannon (1995:26) point out, for the fact that the word mentor did not seem to appear in the English language before 1750. (*The Oxford English Dictionary* states that the word was first used in 1750 by Chestere in *Letters to Son*, 8th March). Clarke (1984:202) asserts that:

“...by the early eighteenth century and unlike Telemaque, who remained his strictly fictive status, Mentor had entered both French and English as a common noun.”

It is thanks to Fenelon, and the ‘age of enlightenment’, that the modern day allusions of the word mentor were brought into the language at all. It is thanks to Fenelon that the term mentor was resurrected from circa 1000 b.c. and brought into the language circa 1750 a.d., thus filling a gap of some three millennia. It is argued here that it is Fenelon's Mentor, not Homer's, that should be referred to when considering the popular environmental connotations that the word mentor now implies. Any reading of *The Odyssey* will not find such rich references to the character Mentor that counsels, guides, nurtures, advises and enables.

It is not the aim here to simply add to the difficulties inherent in allowing definitional clarity of the term mentor and the action mentoring. Writers often strive for such clarity. These writings are mainly valid, well constructed and fluent discussions which call upon empiricism and reasoned discourse in their attempts to delineate and express the perspectives, the systems, the processes and the actions that constitute mentoring. They attempt to put mentoring into relevant context.

This discourse does, however, aim to distinguish the Homeric Mentor and the Fenelonian Mentor. Fenelon was considered a great educator: his book was the most popular of the 18th century. This discourse does aim to credit him with endowing his character Mentor with qualities that are analogous with the current use of the term. As Clarke's eloquent essay shows, *The Odyssey* is more concerned with the trials of Odysseus than with the education of Telemachus (1984:201).

The true Mentor was created by Fenelon, not Homer, and exists in *Les Aventures de Telemaque*, not in *The Odyssey*.

Homer's *The Odyssey* is rightly termed a 'classic': it is the first appearance of the word mentor. However, this should not result in the qualities of Homer's Mentor being continually misconstrued, however well the intention. It is argued here that the extrapolation of the attributes of Homer's Mentor into modern day mentoring is illusory. Fenelon's *Les Aventures de Telemaque* is a masterly piece; a continuation of *The Odyssey* written from an educational vista. It is Fenelon, not Homer, who endows his Mentor with the qualities, abilities and attributes that have come to be incorporated into the action of modern day mentoring. With only thought and consideration, Fenelon's work may well regain its rightful place within the future writings on the concepts of mentor and mentoring.

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