Telemachus in Jeans: Adam Bahdaj’s Reception of the Myth about Odysseus’s Son

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In her book on the reception of the *Odyssey*, Edith Hall claims that the reason why Homer’s masterpiece is so often rewritten and reinterpreted in many cultures, is the wide range of characters appearing in the poem: gods and humans, men and women, young and old, freemen and slaves. With such a spectrum the *Odyssey* provides contemporary authors with numerous points of reference. As Hall claims in her book:

[... ] the strength of the entire cast means that it has been possible to rewrite the *Odyssey* from the perspective of old men, of teenage girls, of Elpenor, of Circe’s swine, and even of Polyphemus.¹

The chapter discusses two young adult novels which retell the *Odyssey*, setting it in 1970s Poland; they retell it from the point of view of Telemachus—the Homeric character that fits perfectly the purposes of literature for children and young adults.²

First, let us consider some facts about the author. Adam Bahdaj (1918–1985)³ was one of the most popular writers of young adult novels in Poland in the

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² See Maria Nikolajeva, “Children’s Literature,” in Paula S. Fass, ed., *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World* (London–New York: Routledge, 2013), 321: “An actual or symbolically abandoned child is the most prominent protagonist in children’s literature. [...] the function of parental figures is to be absent, physically or emotionally, allowing the protagonists to test their independence in a safe mode and the readers to have a vicarious experience of freedom.”

1960s and 1970s. Many of his books, having become bestsellers, were translated into different languages and had dozens of reprints in Poland, as well as film adaptations, which are still sometimes aired on Polish television. The plots of the most important of Bahdaj’s works have many common motifs—the main character is usually a perceptive, smart adolescent (in most cases a boy), who with an ironic sense of humour and using witty language tells of an amazing adventure in which he and his friends were involved during their vacation. *Wakacje z duchami* [Holidays with ghosts],\(^4\) for example, is a “Scooby Doo”-style novel about a group of friends who, as a club of “young detectives,” solve the mystery of a haunted castle, finding out that it is not ghosts but a gang of thieves who are staying there. *Podróż za jeden uśmiech* [A journey for a smile]\(^5\) tells of the adventures of two boys who, while travelling to the seaside, lose their way and have to hitchhike across Poland to find their parents. *Kapelusz za 100 tysiące* [A hat worth a hundred thousand]\(^6\) is a novel about a girl who, during her holiday at the seaside, meets a friendly pensioner and helps him find a missing hat in which he had hidden a winning lottery ticket; in the course of the novel she also foils a dangerous gang.

Thus, at first glance, one can see that for Bahdaj a typical formula for a story that could be entertaining for young readers as well as didactic included travelling, experiencing the unknown, solving mysteries, and meeting different people. The same atmosphere of adventure can be found in the two volumes that are discussed in this chapter: *Telemach w dżinsach* [Telemachus in jeans] from 1979 and its sequel, *Gdzie twój dom, Telemachu?* [Where is your home, Telemachus?], published in 1982.\(^7\) These novels also include a new aspect, not present in the books mentioned before, namely, reference to a myth, consisting in the identification of the main character with Telemachus.

Before analysing this reference, it is important to consider the plot.

Maciek Łańko is fifteen years old and lives in a boarding school near Warsaw. He is an orphan: his father abandoned the family years ago, and his mother died. One day Maciek is watching TV with a couple of workers from the nearby factory—and two of them recognise in a man interviewed on a news programme Maciek’s father, Waldemar. The man says that he works in the city of Elk. Maciek decides to set out on a journey and find him there. Unfortunately,

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7 For the first editions of both novels, see Adam Bahdaj, *Telemach w dżinsach* (Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1979); idem, *Gdzie twój dom, Telemachu?* (Warszawa: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1982).