



THE ORIGIN OF 'MENTOR'

The Honourable Associate Justice Mary-Jane Ierodionou

Remarks of the Honourable Associate Justice Mary-Jane Ierodionou
at the Victorian Women Lawyers' Professional Mentoring Program, Melbourne.

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Introduction

Good evening. I would like to begin by acknowledging and paying respect to the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which I stand, and pay my respect to ancestors of this country – the Wurundjeri Elders, knowledge-holders and leaders – past and present.

I would also like to acknowledge and pay respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the Lands from which you all join me today, and likewise, pay my respects to those Elders, knowledge-holders and leaders – past and present.

The word 'mentor' has an interesting origin in Homer's *Odyssey* written 3,500 years ago.

In Ancient Greece, King Odysseus rules the island of Ithaca. He sails off to fight in the Trojan War. His loyal and clever wife Penelope, and his young son Telemachus have been waiting for his return for more than a decade.

Unfortunately, Queen Penelope was not left in charge. A friend of the king is given that responsibility - his name was Mentor. Despite his name, he fails to nurture or guide Telemachus. In fact, he fails to take proper charge of the royal estate and it descends into chaos.

The goddess Athena decides to intervene. She is the goddess of wisdom – and war. The goddess Athena is a long-time adviser to King Odysseus. She campaigns for him to return to Ithaca and reunite with his family.

So, Athena disguises herself to visit Telemachus. She counsels him to take a ship and go find his father. But he is unable to further his quest. More help is needed.



Athena decides to assist Telemachus by inhabiting the body of Mentor. She infuses him with courage and decisiveness, saying: “Telemachus, if you are made of the same stuff as your father, you will be neither fool nor coward henceforth, for Odysseus never broke his word nor left his work half done...”¹

With Athena’s assistance, Telemachus raises a ship and crew. Athena, still in the form of Mentor, leads him onto the ship, where they sit side by side. And then “the sail bellied out with the wind, [and] the ship flew through the deep blue water”.²

Mentor was ineffectual, unpersuasive and uninspiring. The wise and trusted counsel given to Telemachus was from the goddess Athena. Despite this, history credits Mentor. Language is important. Without inclusion of Athena, we are wrongly led to believe that mentoring evolved from an older man advising a younger man. Recognising Athena as the true mentor reminds us that any person with sufficient expertise and experience may guide and nurture another person.

As lawyers, you may be interested to know that the goddess Athena is a symbol of law and justice. History recognises her role in convening the first jury trial of 12 citizens.³ The tied jury results in acquittal, setting an historical precedent.

Well, all this is good Greek drama!

Now it is my great privilege, as the patron of the VWL mentoring scheme, to officially launch this program!

I thank all those involved in establishing it. In particular, the Work Practices Committee, who have worked tirelessly over the difficult period of the last two years. Thank you to the mentors who have volunteered their time. Thank you to the mentees for participating.

¹ Homer, *The Iliad & The Odyssey* (Printers Row Publishing Group, 2011) 389.

² Ibid, 393.

³ Aeschylus, ‘The Eumenides’ [Kind Goddesses], which is the third play in the trilogy ‘The Oresteia’, first performed in 458 BC.



This professional mentoring program complements VWL's long-running student mentoring program. The patron of that program is Justice Rita Incerti. Her Honour is my mentor. Her steadfast encouragement inspires me to look towards the horizon and identify new lands to explore, always keeping an open mind about who I may meet and what I may find.

May the VWL mentoring program sail ever forward on smooth seas. May the mentors sit alongside the mentees, facing forward, and navigating together.