

Odysseus Laertiades: Wood, Gardening, and the Namings of Odysseus

This paper examines Odysseus' treatment of Laertes by setting it in the contexts of the Odysseus' shifting relationship to wood as he moves from Troy to Ithaca and the epic's backstory of the contested paternity of Odysseus: figural son of Autolycus or biological and true son of Laertes. Autolycus' naming of Odysseus initiates a paternal tension in Odysseus' nature that is only resolved when he recounts to his true father the childhood episode of the naming of the trees in their garden. While many scholars have explored the father-son relationship in Telemachus and Odysseus, that of Odysseus and Laertes only surfaces in attempts to explain Odysseus' bizarre, if not cruel, testing of Laertes (Falkner 1995, Goldhill 1990, Pucci 1996, Scodel 1998). I shall thus argue that Homeric epic implies a broader narrative biography in which the usurpation of paternity by Autolycus when Odysseus comes of age changes Odysseus and wounds his relationship with Laertes in a way that is only resolved when Odysseus returns to the garden of his childhood.

Two components of his identity, his name and his scar, come from his maternal grandfather Autolycus. As Odysseus prepares to spend his first night in his house in two decades, Homer flashes back to his birth and coming of age (19.392-466). When his maternal grandfather Autolycus—and not Laertes—had named the infant Odysseus, Autolycus had instructed Odysseus' parents to return him when he came of age (403-10). During a boar hunt that strongly resembles an initiation ritual, Odysseus received his scar while battling single-handedly the boar. From Autolycus, the adult Odysseus received his trickster nature, his roguishness (Stanford 1963). One manifestation of this nature in the adult Odysseus is to dominate any situation whenever possible, usurping, even if temporarily, the authority of others, and thus, when he departs for Troy, Odysseus, not Laertes, rules Ithaca. Upon returning to Ithaca, the scar proves his identity

to people who are subordinate or whose relationship is purely social (Eurycleia, Eumaeus), while the proof of his identity to those closest to him, Telemachus and Penelope, occurs through more intimately emotional means.

The reunion with Laertes awkwardly and almost disastrously combines those two forms of recognition, as his testing of Laertes almost kills the old man. Once Odysseus realizes the disastrous consequences of this approach, he quickly attempts to prove that he is both Odysseus and the son of Laertes by returning the relationship to the apex of its happy innocence, when the dependent little boy (*paidnos eôn*, 338) helped his father in the garden and father in turn bestowed his child with an abundance of fruit trees and rows of grape vines. As Odysseus restores his relationship with his father, naming is central (Henderson 1997). Of the trees in the garden, Odysseus reminds his father, with emphatic personal pronouns (337), “I kept begging you (*egô êiteon se*) for them,” re-establishing his boyhood dependency on Laertes. When Laertes then gave the trees to Odysseus, he catalogued them precisely to him (349): “You named and spoke of each of them” (*su d’ ônomasas kai eeipes hekasta*). This act of naming is the secret sign between Odysseus and Laertes. Just as Odysseus could not again become the husband of Penelope without the memory of the tree in the bedroom (Huebeck 1988), he cannot become again (and for the first time as a man) the son of Laertes without the memory of the trees in the orchard. The scar, the sign of the Autolycean Odysseus, cannot be the means by which Laertes recognizes *his son*. To repair the breach in their relationship, Odysseus must momentarily become that little boy in the garden again, relaunching his inheritance of the orchard, finally becoming the true son of Laertes. Manhood, the *Odyssey* suggests subtly, must have changed the blissful past dynamic that this brief reverie projects into the narrative present.

Trees demarcate this filial evolution. The Autolycean Odysseus of the Trojan War and the wanderings had been a carpenter, a transformer of dead wood. The Laertian Odysseus of Ithaca first makes a structure out of living wood and then returns to his childhood role as a tender of living trees.

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