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The Dangers of Deceit: An Analysis of Odysseus' Lie to Laertes in the Odyssey Book 24

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Within the context of the *Odyssey*, lying plays an important role in the establishment of a character's intelligence and social abilities. The exact function of miscommunication and deception within the epic are widely debated within the field of classics, especially because different instances of lying seem to hold very different implications. Throughout most of the epic, the purpose of Odysseus' deceit tends to be very clear, and the reader can easily identify a specific advantage it provides him. In the case of Odysseus' lie to Laertes, however, the reasoning appears much more ambiguous and unclear. Unlike other lies from Odysseus, this one is not intended to aid him in his quest to regain power and fame in Ithaca, as this has already been accomplished, and it appears to inflict gratuitous pain on an already weak Laertes. Why, then, does Odysseus choose to employ a deceitful and manipulative communication style in his conversation with Laertes, rather than being straightforward about his identity and intentions? What purpose does this lie serve within the greater context of the epic? Analysis of Odysseus' lie to Laertes as compared to other instances of his deception throughout the text reveals that although deception and indirect communication may serve as indications of one's intellectual prowess generally in the *Odyssey*, this tool can be misused, pointing to the dangers of using deception in excess. The lie mainly serves as a cautionary measure, used to discourage the usage of deception to hurt one's audience.

Throughout the epic, many different characters, specifically the most successful and powerful ones, utilize deception to their advantage in order to prove their superiority as well as manipulate their given situation. Characters such as Odysseus, Penelope, and Athena can be found employing this tactic at many different points, and ultimately, these characters prove to be the ones who not only survive in the end, but prosper. Many scholars have taken this pattern as evidence that within Homeric society, lying is a tool used to establish a social hierarchy, in which those who exercise this skill most proficiently fall above those who struggle with indirect communication. In "Conversation in the 'Odyssey'", Scott Richardson explores this communication-based social ranking. He explains, "Dialogue in the *Odyssey* is founded on indirection, and the characters' success in life, even their survival, owes a great deal to both using and recognizing speech as a means of disguising thoughts and intent."¹ Richardson argues that the use of deception within the *Odyssey* directly correlates with a character's success, which explains why the act is so common in the epic — the more someone uses this tactic, the longer they survive, and the more success they find. Similarly, in "Odysseus and the Art of Lying", Peter Walcot argues that Odysseus' lies mostly function as an indication of what is necessary for survival within Homeric society. He claims that "what is significant is the skills with which he concocts his lies, and this is a measure of his ability and not of his moral

¹ Scott Richardson, "Conversation in the 'Odyssey.'" *College Literature* 34, no. 2 (2007): 134.

failings.”² Like Richardson, Walcot communicates the idea that deception is a tool used in distinguishing between the powerful and the weak within Homeric society, and by using methods of indirect communication and lying, Odysseus proves that he deserves success and power within this social system.

OTHER LIES

The argument, therefore, is that within the context of the *Odyssey*, the act of lying provides one with a practical advantage, where successful employments of deception result in other successes in life. In order to fully understand this function of lying, it is necessary to analyze a specific example in which it proves accurate that lying is met with praise and favorable positioning in the social hierarchy. A good example of this can be found in Book 13 with the first Cretan Lie. At this point, Odysseus had been dropped off on Ithaca by the Phaeacians with a great deal of treasure, but he is unsure of his whereabouts. When Athena comes to him disguised as a young shepherd and tells him that he is in fact on the island of Ithaca, Odysseus concocts an elaborate lie about his identity and reasoning for being on Ithaca. In his lie, Odysseus explains that he was from Crete, where his family remained, but he was forced to flee because he killed Orsilichos, son of Idomeneus, for attempting to steal his loot from the Trojan War. Phaeacian merchants agreed to bring him to Elis or Pylos, but they were driven off course by wind, so he ended up in Ithaca. Although she knows that Odysseus attempts to deceive her, Athena reacts to this lie with praise. She says:

κερδαλέος κ' εἶη καὶ ἐπίκλοπος ὅς σε παρέλθοι
 ἐν πάντεσσι δόλοισι, καὶ εἰ θεὸς ἀντιάσειε.
 σχέτλιε, ποικιλομῆτα, δόλων ἄτ', οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλες,
 οὐδ' ἐν σῆ περ ἐὼν γαίῃ, λήξειν ἀπατάων
 μύθων τε κλοπίων, οἳ τοι πεδόθεν φίλοι εἰσίν.
 ἀλλ' ἄγε, μηκέτι ταῦτα λεγόμεθα, εἰδότες ἄμφω
 κέρδε', ἐπεὶ σὺ μὲν ἔσσι βροτῶν ὄχ' ἄριστος ἀπάντων
 βουλῆ καὶ μύθοισιν.

To outwit you
 In all your tricks, a person or a god
 Would need to be an expert at deceit.
 You clever rascal! So duplicitous,
 So talented at lying! You love fiction
 And tricks so deeply, you refuse to stop
 Even in your own land. Yes, both of us

² Peter Walcot, "Odysseus and the Art of Lying," in *The Text's Odyssey*, edited by Lillian E. Doherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143.

Are smart. No man can plan and talk like you.³

Here, rather than scolding Odysseus for trying to deceive her, Athena expresses admiration for his intellectual and conversational abilities. She compares herself to him, claiming that they are both of a high level of intelligence, and that no other mortal's capacity for deceit compares to his. C.R. Trahman describes Athena's reaction to Odysseus' lie in a similar way, saying, "there is no reproach here. Athena and Homer are both immensely proud of this hero who will lie even when he knows he is back home."⁴ This praise largely stems from Odysseus' ability to concoct a convincing lie at all, but the specific content also takes part in Athena's favorable impression of Odysseus. Not only did he formulate a story for himself skillfully, proving his prowess as a wordsmith, but he also managed to frame himself as an otherwise praise-worthy man in said story. Odysseus claims to be a man of high status, specifically a Trojan War hero, who successfully defended himself against thieves in the past. Because of this phrasing, Athena sees him as both a clever liar as well as someone capable of presenting themselves in a very powerful light. Overall, this response is framed in a very positive manner, revealing that Athena, and therefore also the text in general, view this deceit as proof of Odysseus' cerebral and social prowess, which results in a high hierarchical placement for Odysseus.

The practical function of lying as a gauge of success is further demonstrated through Athena's actions toward Odysseus after the lie. Rather than stop after solely complimenting Odysseus, Athena actively aids Odysseus in achieving his goal of regaining power in Ithaca. She explains the current situation in Ithaca regarding the suitors in his home and Penelope's fidelity, and Odysseus asks her to help him devise a plot to win back his home and wife. Athena responds by saying:

καὶ λίην τοι ἐγὼ γε παρέσσομαι, οὐδέ με λήσεις,
ὅπποτε κεν δὴ ταῦτα πενώμεθα: καί τιν' οἴω
αἵματί τ' ἐγκεφάλῳ τε παλαξέμεν ἄσπετον οὔδα
ἀνδρῶν μνηστήρων, οἳ τοι βίον καταέδουσιν.
ἀλλ' ἄγε σ' ἄγνωστον τεύξω πάντεσσι βροτοῖσι.

I will be with you, truly. Know I stand beside you
As we begin our work. I do believe
The suitors who devour your livelihood
Will splatter you broad floors with blood and brains.

³ *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020) 13:290-297. All further translations will come from this same work, unless otherwise specified.

⁴ C.R. Trahman, "Odysseus' Lies ("Odyssey", Books 13-19)," *Phoenix* 6, no.2 (1952): 36.

But now I will disguise you, so no human
Can recognize you.⁵

In this, Athena chooses to play an active role in accomplishing Odysseus' mission, devising a plan — one that involves further lying — that ultimately finds success for Odysseus, which is a direct result of her admiration for his capacity to lie. Thus, Odysseus' ability to concoct an impressive lie directly correlates to his ability to survive and prosper within Homeric society. This lie, like many others concocted by Odysseus, serves the ultimate purpose of regaining his power in Ithaca, as this power is the manifestation of his success in society, the very thing that lying determines in the *Odyssey*.

ODYSSEUS' LIE TO LAERTES

Now that a general purpose for deception within the *Odyssey* has been established, Odysseus' lie to Laertes in Book 24 can be analyzed more closely. An important piece of context to note before any detailed analysis of this lie is done is that this lie takes place after Odysseus has killed the suitors and officially regained power in Ithaca. Thus, the lie automatically lacks the purpose of his other lies in the epic, as he no longer needs to work to attain this goal of regaining power. A closer examination of the context surrounding this lie reveals a similar idea, that it went beyond what was necessary and inflicted needless harm on an already suffering Laertes.

Analysis of the language used to describe Laertes before the lie occurs helps illustrate the excessiveness and danger of this specific lie in comparison to the previous ones. In this section, the text describes Laertes in ways that communicate suffering, both through his clothing and his demeanor. The narration conveys a general sentiment of pity for the old man in regards to how he is presented, as it explains:

ῥυπόωντα δὲ ἔστο χιτῶνα
ῥαπτὸν ἀεικέλιον, περὶ δὲ κνήμησι βοείας
κνημίδας ῥαπτὰς δέδετο, γραπτῶς ἀλεινῶν,
χειρῖδας τ' ἐπὶ χερσὶ βάτων ἔνεκ': αὐτὰρ ὕπερθεν
αἰγείην κυνέην κεφαλῇ ἔχε, πένθος ἀέζων.

He wore
A dirty ragged tunic, and his leggings
had leather patches to protect from scratches.
He wore thick gloves because of thorns, and had
A cap of goatskin. He was wallowing

⁵ *The Odyssey*, 13:393-397.

In grief.⁶

The specific imagery used in this section of text in relation to the clothes Laertes wears and how they are described communicates a great deal about his current state of being. The use of the terms ἀεκέλιον and ῥυπόωντα, which Richard John Cunliffe's *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* translates as "wretched"⁷ and "squalid"⁸, respectively, conveys a sense of shame and misfortune that surrounds Laertes' being. Moreover, πένθος, meaning "grief", communicates a similar idea: that Laertes has already been in a poor state prior to the lie. By identifying this, it becomes more clear that Odysseus finds Laertes already struggling deeply, meaning that his emotional state is more vulnerable than normal circumstances. Therefore, Odysseus' imminent lie proves that much more dangerous than others he has already committed, as Laertes already exists in a fragile state.

Similarly to the case of the Cretan lie, the content of this lie should also be taken into consideration, specifically, Odysseus' choice to imply that he had died:

αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσῆϊ τόδε δὴ πέμπτον ἔτος ἐστίν,
ἐξ οὗ κείθεν ἔβη καὶ ἐμῆς ἀπελήλυθε πάτρης,
δύσμορος: ἦ τέ οἱ ἐσθλοὶ ἔσαν ὄρνιθες ἰόντι,
δεξιοί, οἷς χαίρων μὲν ἐγὼν ἀπέπεμπον ἐκεῖνον,
χαῖρε δὲ κείνος ἰών: θυμὸς δ' ἔτι νῶϊν ἐώλπει
μίξεσθαι ξενίῃ ἢ δ' ἀγλαὰ δῶρα διδώσειν.

It is five years

Since poor, unfortunate Odysseus
Came to my home. As he was setting out
We saw good omens — birds towards the right —
So we were hopeful we would meet again
As friends, and share more gifts.⁹

Here, although he does not say it very directly, Odysseus, speaking as Eperitus, implies that Odysseus should have returned home to Ithaca years ago, as he left Eperitus' home five years prior, with seemingly good chances of returning to Ithaca. As he had not returned, Laertes interprets this as Odysseus either being in more trouble or being dead, both very unfavorable situations for his son. The content of this lie, like the set-up, sets it apart from others, as its content is much

⁶ *The Odyssey*, 24:227-231.

⁷ Richard John Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, London: (Blackie and Son Limited, 1924), 7.

⁸ Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, 357.

⁹ *The Odyssey*, 24:309-314.

more inherently hurtful than the previous ones. Thus, there is a sense of excess in this story, as it is not only untrue, but it also has the capability of causing great mental and emotional harm to Laertes. Laertes reacts with grief, as he was still holding onto hope that his son might return:

ὧς φάτο, τὸν δ' ἄχθος νεφέλη ἐκάλυψε μέλαινα:
ἀμφοτέρησι δὲ χερσὶν ἐλὼν κόνιν αἰθαλόεσσαν
χεύατο κακ κεφαλῆς πολιῆς, ἀδινὰ στεναχίζων.

Thus he spoke, and a black cloud of pain buried him,
With both hands, he picked up sooty ashes
And poured them down his gray head, groaning vehemently.¹⁰

The specific terminology here mirrors that used in the description of Laertes prior to the interaction, in that it communicates a sense of excess in terms of hostility and pain. The phrases τὸν δ' ἄχθος νεφέλη ἐκάλυψε μέλαινα and ἀδινὰ στεναχίζων are of particular interest here, as they demonstrate the incredible degree of pain that the content of Odysseus' lie causes Laertes. τὸν δ' ἄχθος νεφέλη ἐκάλυψε μέλαινα translates to “a black cloud of pain buried him”, referring to the intense grief that overtook Laertes upon hearing that Odysseus died. Rather than simply stating that Laertes felt upset, the text chose to frame his grief in an all-encompassing way, emphasizing the large emotional toll that Odysseus' lie took on the old man. Similarly, the phrase ἀδινὰ στεναχίζων translates to “groaning vehemently”, which also paints a picture of very intense grief. Both of these phrases show the reader the terrible emotional effects that lying can potentially have, furthering the argument that the text includes this story in order to communicate scorn for certain forms of deception, specifically lies in which the content is used to cause harm in some way, as this one does to Laertes. Previous lies lacked this aspect, and they also lacked the corresponding reaction of intense pain, which points to the idea that lies formed with destructive or painful content can be dangerous, even in the Homeric society where it is widely used to prove one's intelligence and skill. Thus, the text includes Odysseus' lie to Laertes as a warning of sorts. The context, content, and result of this lie serve to deter the usage of deception unless absolutely necessary, and they specifically discourage deception that causes harm to the audience, like this lie does to Laertes. Lying may be useful and accepted in a general sense within Homeric society, but it also holds the potential for great damage, so liars like Odysseus should be careful to consider the consequences and context of their situation when exercising this strategy.

¹⁰ My own translation, 24:315-317.

EARLIER SCHOLARLY INTERPRETATIONS

Existing scholarship on this section of the *Odyssey* tends to interpret it differently than what I have proposed here. Rather than viewing this as a way in which the text can suggest a dislike for needless deception, many scholars believe that this section in particular helps solidify the idea that deceit and indirect communication serve as ways to establish social superiority. In “Conversation in the *Odyssey*”, Scott Richardson explains that “Forthright speaking implies either naïveté or trust. A winner, a survivor, in this world does not walk straight toward the destination but approaches it obliquely.”¹¹ Here, Scott argues that the use of Odysseus’ lie tells us more about the world in which the *Odyssey* is based, one where this lie can gain recognition for Odysseus, rather than the potentially negative effects the lie could have on Laertes. Many scholars share this interpretation, that lying holds more practical use than moral weight, including Peter Walcot, who in “Odysseus and the Art of Lying” argues that lying teaches members of a society to be wary of the deception that happens in the real world in order to “avoid the shame of ridicule.”¹² Walcot asserts that deception exists as a constant “threat” in the real world, so in order to prepare others for this fact, it is necessary to direct lies to them to help them learn how to detect and face them later in life. This interpretation suggests that Odysseus’ lie to Laertes was an attempt to prepare Laertes for how the outside world would treat him, rather than a way to illustrate his hurt.

While both of these arguments make sense when examining the *Odyssey* from afar, they do fail to consider some details, specifically the importance of the connotation and context of the lie as well as the content of the lie itself. The bitterness and misery surrounding this encounter should not be disregarded, as they are emphasized multiple times throughout the situation. Likewise, the context of the lie, where Odysseus has already achieved his objective of reclaiming power in his home, cannot be ignored. Unlike other lies in the epic, Odysseus’ lie to Laertes serves no greater purpose in achieving this goal, and thus has no effect on his placement within the social hierarchy. Both of these arguments are predicated on the idea that this lie has the potential either to boost or simply to maintain his social and intellectual status, but since he has already achieved the goal that solidified his social status, it does neither. Instead, it only serves to cause greater pain to Laertes. The specific content of the lie is also very important, as its story is inherently harmful to Laertes, since it implies the death of his son. Consequently, Laertes reacts with distress, as the story causes him a great deal of pain. Therefore, the main purpose of this lie is as a cautionary measure. It aims to communicate that although deceit can have its benefits — as demonstrated through other lies, such as the first Cretan lie — it can also prove to

¹¹ Richardson, “Conversation in the ‘*Odyssey*,” 143.

¹² Walcot, “Odysseus and the Art of Lying,” 153.

be dangerous when not exercised with caution. When used in certain contexts, such as a situation where the audience of the lie already exists in a vulnerable state or when the content is particularly upsetting, lying in Homeric society can have negative effects, so individuals should be wary of the dangers of using this strategy.

Despite the tactical advantages that lying can provide in Homeric society, utilizing this strategy in excess proves dangerous, as is demonstrated through Odysseus' lie to Laertes in Book 24. In a general sense, deception and indirect communication in the *Odyssey* merely serve as a method of achieving some specific goal, such as establishing oneself in the social hierarchy or reclaiming power like in Odysseus' case. The majority of Odysseus' lies aid in his journey to retaking Ithaca, and many of these lies establish him as a clever wordsmith and superior character in terms of intellect. However, his deception of Laertes in Book 24 occurs after he has accomplished his main goal, and it results in additional pain for an already dejected Laertes. Thus, this lie demonstrates the potential dangers that the tactic of lying can pose in the *Odyssey*, specifically when a character uses it in precarious situations or with particularly harmful content, like in the context of Odysseus' lying to Laertes. Because of this deviation from the more common usage of lying in the *Odyssey*, a general function of deceit does not easily reveal itself. Therefore, without more research into each specific instance of lying in the epic and the context and repercussions of each, no exact role can be assigned to the act within the *Odyssey* overall. Likewise, no completely accurate claims can be made about the intentions of the text in communicating positive or negative sentiments about the act of lying. What can be said, however, is that regardless of the tactical advantages lying may have, it does still possess the danger of causing hurt to the recipient.

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