LYING TO LAERTES, A GORGEOUS TRIUMPH—HOMER AND TWAIN

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AFTER HIS RETURN to Ithaca, Odysseus accounts for his presence on the island by a series of five false stories addressed in turn to Athena (*Od.* 13.256-286), Eumaeus (14.191-359), the suitors (16.419-444), Penelope (19.165-202), and finally Laertes (24.302-314). Odysseus' motivation is readily perceived in the first four instances. Not so in the fifth: by the time he meets Laertes in book 24, there is no urgent reason to dissemble his identity:

> αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ πατρὸς πειρήσομαι ἠμετέροιο,
> αἴ κέ μ' ἐπιγνώῃ καὶ φράσσεται ὀφθαλμοῖσιν,
> ἠέ κεν ἀγνοιῇσι πολὺν χρόνον ἀμφὶς ἐόντα.
> (24.216-218)

This seems a flimsy pretext and, in the event, Odysseus deliberates whether

> κύσσαι καὶ περιφῦναι ἐὸν πατέρ', ἠδὲ ἕκαστα
> εἰπεῖν, ὡς ἔλθοι καὶ ἵκοιτ' ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν,
> ἢπρῶτ' ἐξερέοιτο ἕκαστά τε πειρήσαιτο.
> ὧδε δέ οἱ φρονέοντι δοάσσατο κέρδιον εἶναι,
> πρῶτον κερτομίοις ἐπέεσσιν πειρηθῆναι.
> (24.236-240)

Posing as a certain Eperitus from Alybas, he claims to have seen Odysseus some five years earlier; he says nothing to dispel Laertes' belief that his son is dead:

> Ὣς φάτο, τὸν δ' ἄχεος νεφέλη ἐκάλυψε μέλαινα·
> ἀμφοτέρῃσι δε χερσὶν ἑλὼν κόνιν αἰθαλόεσσαν
> χεύατο κὰκ κεφαλῆς πολιῆς, ἀδινὰ στεναχίζων.
> (24.315-317)

The scene has long troubled critics: the apparently hard-hearted Odysseus "plays upon his father's emotions until the old man is almost insensible from sorrow."[1] Why?

W. B. Stanford allows that "these searching deceptions of his give him an intrinsic pleasure, and he rather selfishly does not spare his father now," adding that "others suggest that Odysseus may have feared the effect of a sudden recognition on his aged father."[2] Along these lines, Agathe Thornton goes so far as to claim a positive therapeutic value for the deception: "[Laertes'] deadly apathy is broken; he is alive again, even if he is stricken with sorrow."[3] This is rather like prescribing blows about the head as cure for catalepsy. Alternatively, Stanford himself suggests that Odysseus and Laertes may not have been on the best of terms before the Trojan War and that some long-suppressed hostility may underlie the events in *Odyssey* 24: "the scene is full of deep psychological undercurrents .... The poet is suggesting a latent father-son antagonism here."[4] But this presupposes a hideously mean-spirited desire for satisfaction on Odysseus' part and an odd lack of offense or exasperation on Laertes'. This will not wash.

A better understanding of the nature of the "intrinsic pleasure" Odysseus gets by lying to Laertes may be gained by comparing the episode with one in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In chapter 13, Tom, "the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main," Huck Finn, "the Red-Handed," and Joe Harper, "the Terror of the Seas," have run off to Jackson's Island, some three miles down the Mississippi from their home town. The next day (ch. 14), the boys are missed and presumed drowned. Men in skiffs search the river, and a cannon is fired from a ferryboat in hopes of raising the bodies. The boys see this but continue to hide on the island, even after they realize that it is they who are thought drowned:

> They felt like heroes in an instant. Here was a gorgeous triumph; they were missed; they were mourned; hearts were breaking on their account; tears were being shed; accusing memories of unkindnesses to these poor lost lads were rising up, and unavailing regrets and remorse were being indulged: and best of all, the departed were the talk of the whole town, and the envy of all the boys, as far as this dazzling notoriety was concerned. This was fine. It was worth while to be a pirate, after all.

[1] D. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1955), 112; cf. D. J. Stewart, *The Disguised Guest: Rank, Role, and Identity in the Odyssey* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell U Pr, 1976), 101.

[2] W. B. Stanford, ed., *The Odyssey of Homer*. 2d ed., 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1958), at 24.216-218.

[3] Agathe Thornton, *People and Themes in Homer's Odyssey* (London: Methuen, 1970), 118.

[4] W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*, 2d ed. (1963; rept. Ann Arbor: U of Mich Pr, 1968), 60.

But their exhilaration is tainted:

> Tom and Joe could not keep back thoughts of certain persons at home who were not enjoying this fine frolic as much as they were. Misgivings came; they grew troubled and unhappy; a sigh or two escaped, unawares. By and by Joe timidly ventured upon a roundabout "feeler" as to how the others might look upon a return to civilization.

Tom derisively quashes the idea, but, unbeknown to his two piratical associates, he returns to town that night (ch. 15) with a note he intends to leave for his Aunt Polly in order to relieve her mind. He steals into the house and hides beneath a bed.[5] He then overhears his aunt and Joe Harper's mother tearfully commiserating over the loss of their children; the effect on Tom's self-esteem is most significant: "he began to have a nobler opinion of himself than ever before." But, again, this gratifying feeling is at another's expense:

> He was sufficiently touched by his aunt's grief to long to rush out from under the bed and overwhelm her with joy—and the theatrical gorgeousness of the thing appealed strongly to his nature, too, but he resisted and lay still.

Later, Tom, still the unobserved observer, learns that, if the bodies continue missing, a funeral ceremony will be held the following Sunday. This intelligence diverts him from his plan to ease his aunt's anguish. Although "his heart was full of pity for her,"[6] he does not leave the note before returning to Jackson's Island. Thus the boys are later able to attend their own funeral and to witness an outpouring of grief the more genuine because unconditioned by an awareness that those praised are actually present:

> The congregation became more and more moved, as the pathetic tale went on, till at last the whole company broke down and joined the weeping mourners in a chorus of anguished sobs, the preacher himself giving way to his feelings, and crying in the pulpit.

When, in the midst of this, the boys reveal themselves (they had hidden in

[5] The suspenseful treatment of the scene would have pleased Homer:

> "What makes the candle blow so?" said Aunt Polly. Tom hurried up. "Why that door's open, I believe. Why of course it is. No end of strange things now. Go 'long and shut it, Sid."
>
> Tom disappeared under the bed just in time. He lay and "breathed" himself for a time, and then crept to where he could almost touch his aunt's foot.

[6] Tom breaks into tears as he hears the stricken woman's prayers for him and watches her fitful sleep. So too, Odysseus is finally unable to keep down his welling emotions (24.318-319).

the unused gallery of the church), the townspeople are so greatly relieved as to overlook their having been taken in.

I believe Odysseus' motives are the same as Tom Sawyer's: both capitalize on an opportunity to verify a parent's love, and both relish the assurance that they have been missed, that their loss is grievously felt. Odysseus wants, like Tom and, indeed, like all mankind, "a nobler opinion of himself," in particular, the certain knowledge that when he dies he will be remembered longingly, lovingly, even admiringly.[7] And who will so remember a man if not those closest to him—friends, a wife, and, most of all, a parent, that first and most generous guarantor of the child's self-worth.[8]

Odysseus, like Tom, is inconsiderate in protracting a parent's pain, but the act bespeaks a universal human need.[9] Odysseus in book 24 is neither malicious, nor psychiatrically astute, nor pathologically devious; he is merely childish, in the primary sense of the word. His behavior is selfish but comprehensible. And too, as for Tom, there is the attraction of the sheer "theatrical gorgeousness of the thing."[10]

Laertes, for his part, might have said with Aunt Polly, "he was such a comfort to me, although he tormented my old heart out of me, 'most."

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[7] Similarly, the disguised Orestes, in Sophocles' *Electra* (1098-1226), may be acquiring a nobler opinion of himself at the expense of his sister. There, too, the victim of the ruse sinks to such black despondency because, like Laertes, she has lost in Orestes both a loved one and a potential avenger of wrongs to herself and her family.

[8] Achilles, to cite another example, clearly derives a certain satisfaction from the thought of the effect his absence has had and his death will have on old Peleus: *Iliad* 19.321-325, 334-337.

[9] Cf. John H. Finley, Jr., *Homer's* Odyssey (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1978), 32: "The theme [of Odysseus' shrewdness] may seem overdone in his final meeting with Laertes; yet, as before with Penelope, he brings the old man to the tears that are the necessary proof of feeling."

[10] Another lover of "theatrical gorgeousness," Trimalchio, has a morbid craving for certification of his own intrinsic worth, perhaps as a result of the psychological scarring of enslavement in his early life. His staging of a mock-funeral (*Satyricon* 78) is maudlin and bathetic both because of his childlike desire for approval and because he, unlike Odysseus or Tom Sawyer, is an *observed* observer, a circumstance that (sadly) invalidates the displays of feeling toward him. No hearts will actually break on his account.