

Life after Death: Odysseus' Meetings with Anticleia and Laertes

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It seems puzzling, and perhaps even cruel, that Odysseus should insist on testing his father in the final book of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus has spent ten years fighting in the Trojan War, and another decade struggling to return home. During all this time, Laertes has been mourning his absence. Laertes' misery is intense and unmistakable, so why does Odysseus prolong it? One way of appreciating Odysseus' motivation is to compare this scene to the meeting with his other parent, Anticleia, in Book 11. This encounter takes place in Hades as Anticleia has died of grief at the long absence of her son. Odysseus' meeting with Anticleia represents his acceptance of mortality: he comes to terms with the finitude of existence in a way that does not necessarily preclude a continued zest for life. It is this very understanding that prompts Odysseus to treat his father in the way he does, for the grief-stricken old man must be rescued from his unnecessary refusal of life. The paradox of the human condition is that an acceptance of mortality is essential to a full appreciation of life. The pathos of Odysseus' brief meeting with Anticleia emphasizes, by contrast, the eventual joy of Odysseus' reunion with Laertes.

Despite its brevity, the scene with Anticleia in Hades remains one of the most memorable in the poem. While Odysseus may have grappled with death before, the loss of his comrades does not compare to his anguish over the loss of his mother. He initially attempts to suppress the painful shock of glimpsing his mother, of whose death he had not been aware, recounting that "[he] would not let her ghost / approach the blood till [he] had questioned Tiresias [him]self" (*Odyssey* 11.98-99). This statement is a fitting touch of characterization, as Odysseus places the duty of consulting the prophet over his personal needs. However, the

distress caused by this decision is palpable: he “broke into tears to see [Anticleia] ... filled with pity, / even throbbing with grief” (*Odyssey* 11.97-98). Tiresias proceeds to narrate the obstacles that lie ahead of Odysseus, describing the “world of pain” (*Odyssey* 11.132) that awaits him back home, even “[Odysseus’] own death [that] will steal upon [him]” (*Odyssey* 11.153). However, Odysseus’ immediate response pertains to none of these disquieting revelations. He first states tersely, “surely the gods / have spun this out as fate” (*Odyssey* 11.158-59). We then see where his greatest concern truly lies as he beseeches Tiresias, “How, / lord, can I make her know me for the man I am?” (*Odyssey* 11.164-65).

After Odysseus finally communicates with his mother’s spirit, he is struck by an even more intense sense of misery, born from his realisation of the utter impossibility of physical embrace. His “mind in turmoil,” he “longed to embrace [his] mother’s spirit, dead as she was” (*Odyssey* 11.233-34). The last four words of this statement hint at some latent understanding that death erases all physicality, yet Odysseus, overcome by longing, still “rushed toward her, desperate to hold her” (*Odyssey* 11.235). Anticleia’s spirit slips from his grasp not once but “three times,” causing “the grief [to] cut to the heart,” “sharper” each time (*Odyssey* 11.236-37). Homer’s diction underscores Odysseus’ unsuccessful embrace: the spirit “fluttered through [his] fingers, sifting away / like a shadow, dissolving like a dream” (*Odyssey* 11.236-37). Each verb connotes the insubstantiality of Anticleia’s spirit, imbuing Odysseus’ plea with greater pathos: “How I long to hold you!” (*Odyssey* 11.240). The finality of death has robbed this meeting of the gratifications we see in other reunions in *The Odyssey*. While “Telemachus threw his arms / around his great father,” (*Odyssey* 16.243-44) and Penelope “flung her arms / around his neck” (*Odyssey* 23.233-34), Odysseus cannot as much as touch his mother.

Odysseus thus seems to display an emotional resistance to the full significance of death and the disembodied spirit. He asks if what he sees is “just / some wraith” (*Odyssey* 11.243-44), unable to accept that all that is left of his mother is a ghostly image. She paints a bleak picture of what death truly means for the body: “Sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones” and the body is reduced to “ashes” (*Odyssey* 11.250-51). She concludes, however, by bidding him to “long for the daylight” nonetheless and leave the underworld “quickly” (*Odyssey* 11.254). Indeed, throughout the exchange, Anticleia has attempted to turn his thoughts back towards life even as she presents an unflinching account of death. Her immediate reaction upon seeing him is to “wail out in grief,” lamenting his presence in “the world of death and darkness” when he is “still alive” (*Odyssey* 11.175-78). She answers his questions in the reverse order, telling him about Penelope, then Telemachus and Laertes, before finally explaining her own death. Anticleia puts information about the living before that of the dead, yet refuses to minimise the latter by using wrenching terms like “devastates,” “drains,” “tore,” apt for the subject (*Odyssey* 11.229-32).

It is crucial for Odysseus to recognise the full meaning of death and to allow this understanding to add to, rather than detract from, his appreciation of life. Anticleia thus begins and ends on the same note, first asking him if he has “seen [his] wife inside [his] halls” (*Odyssey* 11.185), then parting with the counsel for him to tell all that he has learned to her. After all, if there is one figure that represents joy in Odysseus’ life, it is Penelope. Meeting Anticleia’s spirit has helped him understand, cathartically, the thorough sorrow that awaits all mortals. This realisation puts him in a better position to appreciate the world of the living.

One piece of evidence that shows how Odysseus makes the leap from his mother's situation to all of humanity can be found in the contrast between the events directly before and after his encounter with Anticleia. In Book 10, Odysseus and his men "recall[ed] / the gruesome work of the Laestrygonian king Antiphates...They burst into cries, wailing, streaming live tears / that gained us nothing—what good can come of grief?" (*Odyssey* 10.217-21). Prior to Odysseus' revelation in Hades, he and his men respond to the deaths of their comrades (or the prospect of it) by indulging in grief that seems to border on excess. There are numerous references to tears, the clearest manifestation of such unrestrained sorrow, when the men grapple with Circe's malicious spells: "tears welled in Eurylochus' eyes, his heart possessed by grief" (*Odyssey* 10.272), "a painful longing for tears overcame us all, / a terrible sobbing" (*Odyssey* 10.439-40), "live warm tears...streaming tears...through their tears their words went winging home" (*Odyssey* 10.451-62), "we all broke down and wept" (*Odyssey* 10.500), and "I knelt in her bed and wept...my fill of tears" (*Odyssey* 10.547-49). At the very end of Book 10, Odysseus repeats that their mourning "gained us nothing—what good can come of grief?" (*Odyssey* 10.625). This dismissal is made from his enlightened perspective as he retells the story.

After the journey to Hades, Odysseus deals with death in a rather more restrained manner. Despite acknowledging that "Of all the pitiful things [he has] had to witness... [the Scylla devouring his men] wrenched [his] heart the most" (*Odyssey* 12.280-82), he quickly proceeds to devote his energies to protecting the men who are still alive, by trying to talk them out of docking at Thrinacia. Unfortunately, they do not listen. Nonetheless, the newfound restraint is noticeable as the only reference to tears is found in how they "wept for the men / that Scylla plucked from the hollow ship and ate alive, / and a welcome sleep came on them in

their tears" (*Odyssey* 334-36). Although the men grapple with death amidst similarly horrifying circumstances in Books 10 and 12, there is a marked contrast in the severity of their sadness, an emotion that, as Odysseus tells us, is ultimately useless when carried too far. This increased ability to acknowledge the dead while focusing on the living can perhaps be attributed to the intervening events in Book 11.

Anticleia's portrait of Laertes is particularly despondent. He appears to be in a state of apathy, "keep[ing] to his own farm" (*Odyssey* 11.215) instead of engaging with the outside world. Indifferent to luxury, he "sleeps in the lodge with servants" in the winter and "makes his bed" on "fallen leaves" outside in summer, his "anguish" being the sole constant throughout the year (*Odyssey* 11.217-22). There is the suggestion that this sorrow will similarly prove to be his end, as "his grief [that] grows as he longs for [Odysseus'] return" is "the same grief" from which Anticleia "died and met [her] fate" (*Odyssey* 11.224-25). Perhaps then the natural reaction to the old man's despair ought to be one of sympathy, not the callousness that Odysseus' deceit in Book 24 appears to demonstrate. At the juncture when he sees Laertes, there would seem to be little to worry about, as the suitors have been killed and Odysseus has revealed his identity to Penelope. However, his decision to trick Laertes is clearly a premeditated one, for he announces his intention to "put [his] father to the test" (*Odyssey* 24.238) before even entering the vineyard. Upon catching sight of Laertes, Odysseus finds himself "debating, head and heart," if he should "probe him first and test him every way" (*Odyssey* 24.260-63). This test was clearly not a choice made frivolously on the spur of the moment, so what, then, was Odysseus' motivation?

Laertes' sorry appearance (*Odyssey* 24.248-55) in itself may be the stimulus for Odysseus' testing. Laertes' clothes are "filthy rags," with a "patched" shirt and leggings and a "goatskin skullcap" in place of a helmet (*Odyssey* 24.250-55). His choice of attire seems to represent a self-inflicted torment as it serves "to cultivate his misery that much more" (*Odyssey* 24.256). Laertes cares only for his farm. He tends the sapling on the "well-worked plot" (*Odyssey* 24.375) almost as if he sees his own son in the young tree. The garden has become an outlet for his grief, receiving the "tender, loving care" (*Odyssey* 24.273) that he is unable to shower on his own son. However, we see that Laertes' devotion to his garden is clearly excessive for, as Odysseus points out, his "plants are doing better than [him]self" (*Odyssey* 24.275).

Indeed, Laertes seems to have lost all concept of selfhood as he displays no trace of the pride as a king and former warrior that is so integral to Odysseus and Telemachus, even allowing Odysseus' pointed insults to his honor to pass unnoticed. Odysseus explicitly sets out to provoke his father, determined to "reproach him with words that cut him to the core" (*Odyssey* 24.266). He pretends to mistake him for a slave, commenting on his "squalid" appearance and "shabby rags" in a scornful tone that is hardly proper in any conversation with a king (*Odyssey* 24.277). At the same time, he slips in reminders of Laertes' past glory. He remarks on Laertes' resemblance to a king, reminds him that in this respect his rightful life ought to be one of "bath[ing], sup[ping] well, [and] sleep[ing] in a soft bed" (*Odyssey* 24.281) and adds that the fictional Odysseus "claimed he came of good Ithacan stock" (*Odyssey* 24.298). Combined with the cutting provocations, these hints ought to call forth some form of

defence on Laertes' part. The old man, however, responds simply by "weeping softly" (*Odyssey* 24.310) and lamenting the loss of his son.

Another mark of Laertes' degraded condition is his infraction of the host-guest code. Throughout the poem, there has been established a pattern of proper hospitality in which hosts are expected to serve strangers food and drink before asking any questions about their identity or journey. Laertes seems not to remember any of this code, putting forth one question after another without regard for his guest's immediate needs. In this lack of observance of social conventions and effacement of identity, Laertes lies in a suspended state, neither dead nor truly alive. This idea presents itself most strongly in the line, "my son ... there was a son, or was he all a dream?" (*Odyssey* 24.322). His sorrow has a delirious tinge to it. It is almost as if Laertes is trying to protect himself from the immensity of acknowledging Odysseus' possible death by convincing himself that there was no son to have lost at all.

This denial of death is arguably what stands between Laertes and a more flourishing life. Tending his garden in feeble hopes of recreating the "tender, loving" (*Odyssey* 24.273) father-son relationship, sleeping his days away to stave off the painful reminders of loss, Laertes must be awakened from his state of apathy. As the scene with Anticleia has shown, to come to terms with one's own losses is one of the most difficult pains one may ever experience, yet it is also essential if one is to appreciate fully the aspects of life which remain accessible. Just as Odysseus grappled with, then came to accept the permanence of his separation from Anticleia, so too must Laertes overcome his resistance to the idea of mortality. He must come to terms with his separation from Odysseus and Anticleia, whom he is also mourning according to Eumaeus, and with the prospect of his own eventual demise. To recognise that death is an

inevitable part of life may render him more sensitive to the shortness of his time left on earth and encourage him to immerse himself more fully in the richness of life, or at the very least to extract himself from this resigned self-destruction.

We have reason to believe that Odysseus' testing results in Laertes' successive stages of accepting mortality and embracing life. Odysseus tells Laertes that he last saw his son five years ago, implying that he had died in the intervening time. At this very moment, Laertes is overcome by emotion and his whole body convulses in anguish, "sobbing, in spasms" (*Odyssey* 24.355). Worthy of note is Homer's adaptation of the formulaic terms usually used to describe an individual's death: "a black cloud of grief came shrouding over Laertes" (*Odyssey* 24.353), bringing to mind the blinding mist of darkness that often depicts one's passage to Hades, the kingdom of the dead. The image is reinforced by Laertes' act of "clawing the ground for dirt and grime, / [pouring] it over his grizzled head" (*Odyssey* 24.354-55). Symbolically, Laertes is steeping every inch of his mind in the idea of death. Believing Odysseus to have died, Laertes finally can deny mortality no longer, heartbroken by the wrenching notion that death will always eventually make its presence felt in everyone's lives. It is significant that only now, when Laertes feels most profoundly the enormity of his loss, does Odysseus reveal his identity.

The narrative subsequently illustrates the magnificence of Laertes' restoration. Athena makes him "taller, stronger, shining"; his new appearance as one of a "deathless god" is worlds removed from his previous rags (*Odyssey* 24.412-15). He immediately recognises the danger posed by the dead men's families, reconnecting himself to the world in a spirited regard for what is taking place around him. In battle, he kills Eupheides, father of Antinous, the brashest and most unpleasant suitor who was himself killed by Odysseus. Laertes also recalls the place of

kleos as he revels in seeing Odysseus and Telemachus “vying over courage” (*Odyssey* 24.568).

Reinstated to his past interest in life, Laertes’ re-entry into the civilised world is complete.

To read the scene with Laertes in light of that with Anticleia allows us to re-evaluate what may have appeared to be an insensitive act on Odysseus’ part. In this light, Odysseus’ treatment of his father proves to be an act of kindness. Both Odysseus and Laertes grapple with the notion of mortality, in different contexts but with comparable magnitudes of emotional pain, and are prompted to direct their efforts back towards life. Just as Anticleia helps Odysseus accept the finality of the state of her disembodied spirit and reminds him of the world to which he must return, so too does Odysseus impel Laertes to stop denying death and reinvigorate himself. Perhaps then the latter scene is most appropriately placed in Book 24 as it represents the culmination of Odysseus’ growth. He not only arrives at an important personal epiphany but also transmits this understanding to his own father. In a curious inversion of the father-son relationship, it is almost as if Odysseus has imbued his father with life.

Work Cited

Homer. *Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1997. Print.