

“Name-Magic” and the Threat of Lying Strangers in Homer’s *Odyssey**

S. DOUGLAS OLSON

Homer’s Odysseus is a man who has literally become “Nobody” (9. 366 f.) and, as Sheila Murnaghan has shown, the *Odyssey* as a whole can be read as the story of the hero’s gradual recovery of his own identity.¹ In an important and influential article, Norman Austin has traced the significance of the name “Odysseus” in the poem and has argued that Penelope, Telemachos and Eumaios all try to avoid using it. This is a form of “name-magic,” Austin insists, which has little or nothing to do with concrete practical concerns about household security or the like. Instead, Odysseus’ intimates “treat his name as a treasure which must be shielded from vulgar display, protecting the man by repressing the name.” So long as the fateful syllables “Odysseus” are hidden, the possibility that the hero may return remains open. Each time the name is pronounced, on the other hand, Odysseus’ chances for survival diminish.² Names are important and powerful things in the *Odyssey*, and the hero guards his carefully.³ The reluctance of those closest to Odysseus to name him, however, is much less general than Austin suggests. It also seems to reflect not a fear of “name-magic” but a straightforward and very practical awareness of the threat posed by the seductive lies of wandering strangers. What Austin identifies as Homeric “name-magic” is thus only another example of the calculating caution the *Odyssey* recommends in all human affairs.

As Austin has pointed out, the fact that Penelope, Telemachos and Eumaios all frequently use periphrases (such as “my husband,” “my father”

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¹ S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1987).

² N. Austin, “Name Magic in the *Odyssey*,” *CSCA* 5 (1972) 1–19.

³ This is true both on Scheria, where Odysseus does not identify himself by name until 9. 19–21 (see Austin [previous note] 4–5), and on Ithaca, where the hero’s survival depends specifically on his active suppression of his identity until he can take his revenge. On the power of names in the *Odyssey*, see also C. S. Brown, “Odysseus and Polyphemus: The Name and the Curse,” *Comp. Lit.* 18 (1966) 193–202; B. Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey*, *Hermes Einzelschriften* 30 (Wiesbaden 1974) 5–60; J. Peradotto, *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1990), esp. 94–170.

or "my master") for Odysseus is in itself unremarkable and cannot be taken as evidence of a concerted effort to suppress the hero's name.⁴ Austin also insists, however, that on a number of important occasions all three characters deliberately avoid naming Odysseus. Thus Telemachos does not mention him by name to "Mentes" in 1. 158-77, 214-20, 231-44; Penelope seems to try not to name him to her women in 4. 722-41 and in her conversation with the εἰδῶλον of her sister in 4. 810-23, 831-34; Eumaios speaks of him only obliquely to the Stranger in 14. 122-47. In each case, Austin argues, we see an essentially magical attempt to protect and conceal the hero's name and thus make possible his return.⁵

This theory of Homeric "name-magic" stumbles first of all on the fact that neither Penelope, Telemachos nor Eumaios actually shows any consistent reluctance to speak the name "Odysseus." Penelope, for example, names her husband before the Suitors in the incident described at 2. 96, 19, 141, to the herald Medon at 4. 682, 689, to Telemachos and Theoklymenos at 17. 103, to Eumaios at 17. 538-39, and to the Suitors again at 16. 430, 18. 253 and 21. 74.⁶ Indeed, Ὀδυσσεύς is one of the final words in Penelope's long despairing speech in Book 4, which Austin cites as a prime example of her deliberate attempts at "circumambulation around the name" (4. 741).⁷ Telemachos too names his father over and over again: in the presence of the Suitors at 1. 354, 396, 398; 17. 402; to the Assembly of Ithacans at 2. 59, 71; to Eurykleia at 2. 352; to Nestor and his sons at 3. 84; to Helen and Menelaos at 15. 157; to Theoklymenos at 15. 267, 522; to Eumaios at 16. 34; and to Theoklymenos and Penelope at 17. 114, 131, 136. Eumaios as well refers to his master as "Odysseus" in the presence of the Stranger at 14. 144, 364, 515; 15. 337; 17. 314, to Melanthios at 17. 240, and before Penelope and her serving women at 17. 522, 525. Others who are well-disposed to Odysseus and eager that he return to Ithaca also call

⁴ Austin (above, note 2) 5.

⁵ Austin (above, note 2) 5-9.

⁶ As noted above, Austin points to the large number of circumlocutions in Penelope's conversation with the image of Iphthime (4. 810-23, 831-35) as further evidence of her eagerness to conceal Odysseus' name. Given the brevity of these speeches, the phenomenon is not necessarily significant. If it is, the fact that the εἰδῶλον as well fails to name Telemachos and Odysseus (4. 807, 826, 836) means that this is not a characteristic of Penelope's speech in particular and that we are therefore in need of some larger, more comprehensive explanation of what is going on here.

⁷ Austin (above, note 2) 5-6. Austin (7-8) is equally free with the evidence in the case of Kalypso. It is true that neither Hermes nor Kalypso names Odysseus in their brief confrontation in 5. 85-148, and if this has any significance it may well be that "Hermes' obliquity springs from the tact appropriate to his mission and to his person as the divine messenger" (Austin 7). It is simply not the case, however, that Kalypso is so deeply concerned to protect Odysseus and so aware of the power of "name-magic" that she remains "to the end . . . the Concealer," carefully protecting the hero's name even after she has lost control of the man himself (Austin 8). In fact, Kalypso names Odysseus to his face at 5. 203, and then not in the context of giving him up but as part of a final desperate attempt to keep him with her (5. 203-13).

him by name: Athena (1. 48, 57, 60, 83, 87; 5. 11); the men in the Assembly (2. 27, 163, 173, 234, 238); Eurykleia (2. 366; 19. 381); Nestor (3. 121, 126, 163); Menelaos (4. 107, 151); Helen (11. 143; 15. 176); Theoklymenos (17. 152); the old servant-woman grinding grain (20. 117); and Philoitios (20. 205, 209).

Pace Austin, therefore, characters in the *Odyssey* who are favorably disposed to the hero's return do not routinely attempt to "protect" him by resort to name-tabus. The scattered occasions on which Odysseus' intimates do avoid using his name must accordingly be accounted for in some other way. The first of these incidents occurs in Book 1, when Athena appears at the door of the palace on Ithaca (103–05, 113). Athena is disguised as a man and completely anonymous, and is therefore greeted by her host simply as ξείνε (123).⁸ Telemachos treats his visitor with perfect hospitality here (125–35) and opens their conversation by referring to his own personal troubles (159–68). At the same time, however, he holds back a number of crucial details: not only does he fail to name his father, but he also avoids identifying himself and does not mention his mother at all. Instead, he quickly brings the discussion around to the question of his guest's identity (169–70) and possible connections to the house (175–76). Athena responds to the boy's questions by identifying herself as Mentēs (180–81) and explains her visit (182–84), declaring she is Telemachos' paternal guest-friend (187–88). She supports this claim, moreover, by mentioning not only the name of Laertes (188–89) and some incidental details about him (189–93) but the name of Odysseus as well (196). In his reply, Telemachos mentions his mother for the first time (215), and Athena/Mentēs responds by supplying her name as well (223). Only now does Odysseus' son tell his visitor precisely what is going on in the household (esp. 245–51).

Telemachos thus behaves in a courteous but at the same time practical and hard-headed manner here, leavening the bread of hospitality with an obvious suspicion of his unknown visitor. As Austin has pointed out, he does conceal his father's identity. He conceals a great deal more than that, however, and he clearly does so not out of a belief that names have some sort of magical power but because he wants to know more about the

⁸ Homer's audience know this is Athena in disguise, of course, but Telemachos does not (cf. 322–23). Those listening to the poem are also already aware that Athena resembles Mentēs, leader of the Taphians (105), a fact which Telemachos (who has clearly never met the real Mentēs) only learns later (180–81).

Guests and strangers in the *Odyssey* are regularly addressed as ξείνε by those who receive them (1. 123, 214, 231; 3. 43, 71; 13. 237, 248; 14. 56; 15. 80, 145, 260, 402, 536; 16. 113, 181; 17. 163, 478; 19. 104, 124, 215, 253, 309, 509, 560, 589). Once they have been accepted or identified, they sometimes graduate to ξείνε φίλε (1. 158; 19. 350) or even φίλε (3. 103, 211, 375). The guests themselves, however, have a pronounced tendency to address their hosts immediately as φίλε (13. 228; 15. 260, 509; 16. 91; 17. 17, 152). Presumably the latter term indicates a stronger form of attachment, which guests are eager to assert and establish as early on as possible. Cf. the discussion of G. P. Rose, "The Swineherd and the Beggar," *Phoenix* 34 (1980) 288–91.

stranger before he surrenders substantial information about himself and his household to him.⁹ When "Mentes" proves capable of naming Odysseus and other members of the family on his own, Telemachos apparently concludes he can trust him. Similar caution on the part of a host confronted by the arrival of an anonymous ξείνος can be seen in Eumaios' behavior at the beginning of Book 14, in a scene which helps explain precisely what dangers are posed by situations of this sort.

When an impoverished wanderer (really Odysseus in disguise) arrives at Eumaios' hut in the countryside, the swineherd takes the old man in and feeds him (14. 45–51, 72–81) and complains to him at length about his own troubles (esp. 39–42, 68–71, 81–82, 89–108).¹⁰ As Austin has pointed out, Odysseus' servant is initially careful not to name his master and instead speaks only of κείνος (70, 90) and of his ἄναξ (40, 67; cf. 61–62). Attention to the subsequent course of the conversation, however, shows that Eumaios (like Telemachos in Book 1) speaks thus elliptically for a very clear and specific purpose, which has nothing to do with "name-magic." After the Stranger has eaten and drunk his fill (109–13), he asks the name of his host's lost master, repeating a few clues Eumaios dropped inadvertently in the course of their conversation earlier (115–17; cf. 70–71, 96–104) and intimating he may have news for him (118–20). Eumaios responds by telling the old man not to waste his time: he is obviously just another in a long line of wanderers and vagrants who have come to Ithaca and offered false tales about Odysseus in hope of getting a gift in return (122–32; cf. 378–89). Eumaios normally does his best to be a discreet and careful servant, as he shows in Book 16, when he quietly whispers the news of Telemachos' presence in his hut to Penelope and returns straight home (338–41). So too here, therefore, he brushes off his guest's prying questions and continues to refer to his master only obliquely (κείνον 14. 122; τοῦ 133; τόν and αὐτοῦ 135; ὁ μὲν 137; cf. 139). At 144, however, caught up in his sad reminiscences and his grief (esp. 138–43), Eumaios lets the fateful name Ὀδυσσεύς slip. The swineherd hastens to add that αἰδώς normally restrains him from calling his master by name (145–47).¹¹ The damage has been done, however, and Odysseus in the role of the beggar immediately picks up the vital word, uses it repeatedly in the remarks that follow (152, 159, 161) and incorporates it into the extended lies he tells a

⁹ Cf. the care Athena takes to furnish Odysseus with the name of the Phaeacian queen before he enters the palace on Scheria (6. 53–54; cf. 7. 146).

¹⁰ Eumaios is strongly characterized in the *Odyssey* as someone who takes pleasure in mulling over and describing his own troubles and in listening to those of others (esp. 14. 168–75). The autobiographical lie Odysseus manufactures for him is therefore full of troubles and disasters and thus calculated to satisfy his servant's tastes; note Eumaios' satisfied comment in 14. 361–62.

¹¹ Exactly what Eumaios means here has been a matter of considerable dispute; see the discussion of Austin (above, note 2) 11–12, and the bibliography cited there (n. 11); Fenik (above, note 3) 28–30.

little later on (321, 323; cf. 470, 484, 486), all of which are intended to show he actually knew Odysseus (esp. 484–501; cf. 237–42) and has credible news of his homecoming (esp. 321–33; cf. 118–20).¹² In the conversations which follow, Eumaios uses Odysseus' name freely (364, 515; 15. 337; 17. 240, 314).

The impoverished Stranger thus does his best to learn the name of Eumaios' long-lost master, and when he does, incorporates it into a series of elaborate (and apparently very convincing; cf. 17. 522–27) lies. The swineherd, on the other hand, who has seen this sort of thing before (14. 122–30; cf. 378–85), tries to hold his master's name back, not out of any concern for "name-magic" but because he has no intention of allowing this old beggar to tell his beloved mistress and her son (both of whom he also initially declines to name: 14. 123, 127–28; cf. 137) a more convincing lie than might otherwise be possible.¹³ That Eumaios fails in this attempt to protect his household is only consistent with the characterization of the swineherd in particular, and of servile characters generally, throughout the epic. Servants in the *Odyssey* are expected to tell the truth, and the most their masters ever demand of them in the way of deception is therefore silence in the presence of others (2. 337–81, esp. 373–77; 19. 485–90; cf. 21. 228–41). Indeed, Eurykleia immediately confesses even a passive deception of this sort when questioned by her mistress (4. 743–49; cf. 23. 1–24).¹⁴ It is accordingly a basic feature of the plot of the poem that Odysseus' servants, no matter how faithful they might be, are not allowed to participate actively in the planning for their master's revenge. Instead, they are told what they need to know at the last moment and expected to act on their orders without questioning them (e.g., 21. 188–244). Eumaios himself, moreover, is consistently characterized in the *Odyssey* as well-meaning but somewhat bumbling. It is he, after all, who almost fails to deliver the bow to Odysseus at the crucial moment in the great hall (21. 359–67), a task he only carries out when Telemachus threatens him (21. 368–79).¹⁵ That Eumaios fails in his attempt to baffle the prying Stranger in Book 14 thus comes as no real surprise. The basic strategy the swineherd

¹² Austin fails to explain why Eumaios ultimately names Odysseus if he is, in fact, aware of the power of "name-magic" and its implications for his master's return. The fact of the matter is that the swineherd has a much more immediate set of concerns here and simply makes a mistake (see below).

¹³ In the aftermath of his failure to conceal the name of Odysseus, however, Eumaios quickly surrenders those of Penelope, Telemachus and Laertes as well (14. 172–73).

¹⁴ On the one occasion on which a servant does tell an active and independent lie (Eumaios, attempting to convince the suitors he knows nothing about the arrival of the Stranger at Odysseus' palace: 17. 380–91; cf. 275–77), in fact, he is immediately found out and embarrassed (369–79) and subsequently told by his master to be quiet (392–93).

¹⁵ It is accordingly Eumaios, unlike the cowherd Philoitios (who successfully carries out his orders: 21. 388–93; cf. 240–41) but like Telemachus (who also makes a dangerous and potentially fatal mistake: 22. 154–55), who is wounded in the fighting which follows (22. 279–80; cf. 277–78).

adopts here, however, is clear: anonymous guests should be treated graciously, but should also be kept from learning more than they need to know and thus prevented from taking advantage of the master's family.

This pattern can be detected once more, in Book 16, in a passage Austin does not discuss, when Telemachos meets the Stranger for the first time. When Odysseus' son arrives at Eumaios' hut, the swineherd rushes out into the courtyard to greet him, while the old wanderer remains inside (11–16). Telemachos names Odysseus outright when he is speaking to Eumaios alone (34). Once he enters the hut and sees the Stranger sitting there (41–45), however, he becomes more cautious, asking first who this might be (57–59) and then speaking obliquely of "my mother" and "her husband" (73–75).¹⁶ Only after the anonymous ξείνος has proved capable of naming Odysseus and Laertes (100, 104) does Telemachos let down his guard and use the names himself (118–19).¹⁷

What Austin identifies as a concern for "name-magic" in the *Odyssey* can thus be more credibly explained as a concrete anxiety on the part of members of Odysseus' household about the possibility of being taken in by the lies of wandering strangers. There are many such impostors wandering the earth, Alkinoos declares in Book 11, "putting together lies from sources no-one could fathom" (363–66). The desperate desire of Odysseus' family to have any news of him (e.g., 4. 315–31) makes them particularly easy prey for men of this sort (e.g., 14. 126–30, 378–85; 19. 165–260) and they are therefore on their guard against them. The *Odyssey* regularly puts a premium on guile and verbal agility. It is precisely the hero's outstanding cleverness and deceptiveness, after all, which those who know him think of when they recall his exploits (esp. 4. 240–89; cf. 502–03) and which he claims as a central token of his identity when he reveals himself on Scheria (9. 19–20). It is this very ability in δόλοι, in fact, Athena asserts, which both protects Odysseus and makes him her favorite (13. 291–99, 330–36; cf. 8. 519–20). "He made many lies like to the truth with his words," as the poet says later, and one measure of his greatness is that he could do so

¹⁶ A nice counter-example for this sort of caution is the Sidonian slave-woman in Eumaios' story (15. 403–84), who immediately gives her father's name when asked (423–26) and naturally receives an answer calculated to please her (430–33). Her ultimate reward, of course, is death (477–81).

¹⁷ Telemachos lets down his guard so far here, in fact, that he actually names Penelope (130), something he does nowhere else in the epic (cf., e.g., 1. 248, 415; 2. 50, 131, 133, 135, 223, 358, 373, 411; 4. 321; 15. 515, 522; 16. 33, 73, 151; 17. 6, 401; 21. 103, 110, 115; note also 4. 325, where Telemachos avoids naming his grandmother as well). If there is any "name-magic" or any sort of "name-tabu" at work in the *Odyssey*, that is to say, it seems to be associated with the names of women rather than of men; cf. S. D. Olson, "Women's Names and the Reception of Odysseus on Scheria," forthcoming in *EMC/CV* 36 (1992). For similar phenomena in classical Athens, see D. Schaps, "The Woman Least Mentioned: Etiquette and Women's Names," *CQ* 27 (1977) 323–30; A. H. Sommerstein, "The Naming of Women in Greek and Roman Comedy," *Quaderni di storia* 11 (1980) 393–418.

without flinching (19. 203–12). Much of the particular genius of Penelope as well consists in her ability to put off the Suitors convincingly for years (esp. 2. 87–106; cf. 18. 282–83), to test those who bring her stories of her lost husband (19. 213–19) and ultimately to deceive even the great trickster himself (23. 177–206). It is precisely the fear of lying strangers, in fact, which the Ithacan queen gives as the reason for her cautious treatment of Odysseus at the beginning of Book 23: she has always been afraid of being taken in by the words of some plausible speaker, and has therefore tested even her own husband (215–17). Indeed, Penelope now goes so far as to convert the seduction of Helen into a mistake of precisely this sort (218–24).¹⁸

Homer's *Odyssey* puts a high value on hospitality to strangers and guests, but recognizes that this relationship can be perverted and abused by either party (e.g., 2. 55–58; 15. 67–74; 22. 22–41). The poem is also marked by an acute awareness that intelligent and resourceful people tell false stories for their own profit (e.g., 13. 254–55; 14. 378–89, 457–522, esp. 507–11; 19. 395–97) and that the ability to lie effectively is, in fact, one mark of the successful free individual.¹⁹ As Austin has shown, Odysseus' friends and family do on occasion suppress his name in conversation with others. They do so, however, not out of concern for "name-magic," but for the very specific and straightforward purpose of avoiding the deceptions of lying strangers and thus protecting themselves and their household.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

¹⁸ Cf. the observations of K. Morgan, "Odyssey 23. 218–24: Adultery, Shame, and Marriage," *AJP* 112 (1991) 1–3, esp. 2. On Penelope and her connections with Helen, along with extensive further bibliography, see now M. A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1991).

¹⁹ On Odysseus' false stories and their varying purposes, see C. R. Trahman, "Odysseus' Lies (*Odyssey*, Books 13–19)," *Phoenix* 6 (1952) 31–43; P. Walcot, "Odysseus and the Art of Lying," *Anc. Soc.* 8 (1977) 1–19; C. Emlyn-Jones, "True and Lying Tales in the *Odyssey*," *G&R* 33 (1986) 1–10.