

The untold death of Laertes. Revaluating Odysseus's meeting with his father

Abstract

This article discusses the narrative function and symbolism of the Laertes scene in the twenty-fourth book of the *Odyssey*. By pointing out the scene's connections to other passages (the story of Penelope's web, the first and second *nekuia*, the farewell to the Phaeaceans, the Argus scene, but also the twenty-fourth book of the *Iliad*) and by tackling some of the textual problems that it poses (the apparent cruelty of Odysseus's lies to his father, the double layers of meaning in his fictions, the significance of the *sèma* of the trees), this article aims to point out how the Laertes scene is tightly woven into the larger thematic and symbolical tissue of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus's reunion with his father is conclusive to the treatment of some important themes such as death and burial, reciprocal sense of love and duty and the succession of generations. It will be argued that the untold death of Laertes becomes paradigmatic for the fate Odysseus himself chooses, and for the way in which the epic as a whole deals with the problem of mortality.

Keywords

Odyssey, Laertes, symbolism, mortality, burial, reciprocity

Laertes, the old father of Odysseus, is a somewhat forgotten character. He is mostly considered to be of minor importance to the plot of the *Odyssey*, and his reunion with his son in the twenty-fourth book is often seen as a more or less dispensable addendum to the real climax, the recognition scene with Penelope. In this article, I aim to readjust this view by exploring the context and significance of this final meeting. Though this article does not recapitulate the whole debate on whether the twenty-fourth book should be considered integral to the *Odyssey*, it will certainly aim to show how the Laertes scene smoothly fits into the overall structure and is indeed crucial to it.¹ It has often been noted that the Laertes scene is anticipated throughout the *Odyssey* and therefore cannot simply be elided (e.g. De Jong 2001, 574; Heubeck 1992, 381-382). My argument, however, is that the meeting with Laertes is also essential to the *Odyssey's* thematic coherence. By examining the symbolism and context of this scene, and by pointing out its connections to other passages (a.o. the first and second *nekuia*, the farewell to the Phaeaceans, the Argus-scene, but also the twenty-fourth book of the *Iliad*), I intend to demonstrate how it is tightly woven into the *Odyssey's* larger thematic and symbolical tissue; it connects some important themes such as old age, death, burial, the succession of generations and reciprocal sense of love and duty. In the Laertes scene, the treatment of these entangled issues is brought to its conclusion; they are integrated in what may be called the existential world view of the *Odyssey* – the epic's attempt to construct a meaningful pattern by which to make sense of life and death.

It is indeed a fact widely acknowledged that the *Odyssey* stages a gradual victory of pattern over chaos, on many levels simultaneously. Heatherington for example puts it well when he claims that “[t]he whole thrust of the *Odyssey* is toward a restoration of order [...]. [The *Odyssey*] describes a complex, serpentine, slow-convulsive creeping through different kinds of confusion toward some kind of stability” (Heatherington 1976, 225-6). What I will try to demonstrate in this article is that Odysseus's reunion with Laertes takes a pivotal place in exactly this restoration of order. The particular element of disruption that has to be harmonized here is the

inescapable fact of senescence and death – a subject that is raised in the *Odyssey* from the moment Odysseus refuses Calypso's offer of immortality, and that is subtly or explicitly thematized throughout the epic.² In the figure of Odysseus's old father these issues are explored; I argue that the untold death of Laertes will become emblematic for the fate Odysseus himself chooses, and for the way in which the epic as a whole deals with the problem of death.

I will address this very broad issue, however, by charging some very concrete textual problems of the Laertes scene: the apparent cruelty of Odysseus's lies to Laertes, the double layers of meaning in his fictions and, finally, the significance of the *sèma* of the trees. First, I will point out how the specific thematics of the Laertes scene are set up in advance, by reevaluating an underappreciated fact: that the shroud Penelope pretends to be weaving – an element so crucial to the plot – is meant for Laertes, and thus from the beginning on thematizes the old man's approaching death.

1. The thematic build-up

1.1 Whose shroud is it anyway?

The story of Penelope's ruse is told three times in the *Odyssey*: once by Antinous (2.93-110), once by Penelope herself (19.137-56), and once by the ghost of Amphimedon, after the slaughter of the suitors (24.129-48). The story itself has of course not lacked scholarly attention.³ What is remarkable, however, is that the shroud's connection to Laertes is usually downplayed rather than examined (e.g. Lowenstam 2000, 337-40; Yamagata 2005, 543). Lowenstam offers a delightfully sophisticated reading of the symbolic function of the shroud that connects it to almost everyone but Laertes: for him, Penelope's restless weaving and unravelling reflects her wavering about whether to remarry or not. From this perspective the shroud symbolically is Penelope's own: the completion of the *φᾶρος* signifies the end of her former life, as she has promised to remarry as soon as this last duty to the family of her husband would be fulfilled.⁴ In this way, the shroud is Odysseus's as well, since by remarrying Penelope would definitely acknowledge him as dead.⁵ But a new symbolical meaning emerges when Odysseus turns up alive and kills off the suitors. In the second *nekuia*, we hear the story of Laertes' shroud narrated for the last time by the ghost of Amphimedon, who explains to Agamemnon this sudden rush of Ithaca's best and finest to the underworld. In his account of the facts, the very completion of the shroud coincides with Odysseus's reappearance. (24.147-150) Thus, the shroud paradoxically comes to symbolize the death of the men who forced Penelope to finish it. The irony is intensified still by the fact that Penelope's thrice refrained concern that Laertes would not 'lie without a shroud' (2.102; 19.147; 24.137) turns out to apply to the suitors instead: Amphimedon remarks that as he speaks, their bodies lie uncared for in the halls of Odysseus (24.186-7) (Lowenstam 2000, 340).

But what about the literal message? Does this impressive symbolic overdetermination allow us to forget Penelope's claim that the shroud is meant 'for the hero Laertes, against the time when the fell fate of pitiless death shall strike him down'⁶ (2.99-100; 19.144-5; 24.134-5)? This repeated foreshadowing of Laertes' death is all but random. In fact, the references to Laertes before his appearance in book 24 systematically allude to the possibility that the old man might not live long enough to see his son return. When in the first *nekuia* Odysseus's mother Anticleia informs the hero about his family, she tells him his father is in a worrisome state: he has

withdrawn from society, neglects his clothing and tortures himself by sleeping outside, between the fallen leaves in summer or in the ashes of the hearth in winter.⁷ He mourns for his son incessantly and ‘heavy old age’ has come upon him (11.174-97). Poignantly, Anticleia immediately adds that she herself died because of this kind of excessive grieving (οὕτω γὰρ καὶ ἐγὼν ὀλόμην καὶ πότμον ἐπέσπον). Further bulletins on Laertes give ever more cause for worry: when Odysseus asks Eumaeus about the father he left ‘on the threshold of old age’ (ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ)⁸, the swineherd tells him that Laertes lives but constantly wishes for death and that sorrow has aged him beyond his years (15.353-7). In book 16, we learn from Eumaeus that the old man now even refuses to eat or drink and that ‘the flesh wastes from off his bones’ (16.140-5). We do not hear more about Laertes until book 24, when Odysseus goes to visit him after his triumph over the suitors.

My point is not only that the story of the shroud functions within a larger narrative strategy to build up tension towards this meeting, but moreover that Odysseus’s reunion with his father is thematically from early on connected to the issues of death and burial. This becomes even more clear when we look at the immediate context of the Laertes scene: the second *nekuia* with its dialogue between the ghosts of Agamemnon and Achilles (24.19-97). Achilles commiserates with Agamemnon over the fact that the great king did not get a tomb before Troy, but was brutally murdered by Clytaemnestra at his homecoming. As we remember from the first *nekuia*, Agamemnon was deprived of even the most basic care that is due to the dead, since Clytaemnestra did not even deign to close his eyes and mouth (11.425-6). Agamemnon in answer praises the heroic end of Achilles, and in detail commemorates the splendid funeral his mother Thetis gave him.⁹ At that point Amphimedon arrives and takes his turn in telling his own gruesome fate. Agamemnon concludes by celebrating Odysseus’s happiness and Penelope’s prudence – in contrast, of course, to his own miserable fate.

1.2. Heroic happiness and the significance of funeral rites

As has often been remarked, the characters of these dead heroes serve as a reference point for the evaluation of Odysseus’s fate according to a new set of values (see e.g. De Jong 2001, 565 ff. and especially Dova 2000). An alternative heroic ideal is constructed here: Odysseus always comes out best, even compared to Achilles, who died heroically but *post mortem* passionately states that it is better to live an inglorious life than to reign over the dead (11.488-91). A very important criterion for happiness seems to be whether one gets a proper funeral - that is also why Odysseus’s assumed death at sea is deemed such a dreadful fate. Telemachus, Odysseus, Eumaeus and Laertes all comment on this (1.161-2 & 1.236-43; 5.308-12; 14.133-6,367-71; 24.289-96). Caught in a terrible storm, Odysseus wishes he had died while fighting over the body of Achilles, for then at least the other Achaeans would have given him a tomb and would have spread his fame. Telemachus for the same reasons states that he would not grieve his father’s death so much if he had been slain among his comrades and had died in the arms of his friends (1.239-43). This preoccupation of the Greek with proper funeral rites is usually explained by the abhorrence of the decaying and mutilated body¹⁰, and the belief that the ghosts of the unburied were doomed to wander restlessly.

But as these passages make clear, the social aspect is at least as important. It is significant that Odysseus refers to his part in the battle over Achilles’ corpse: his care for the body of his

comrade defines him as a member of a social group who is reciprocally entitled to the same care. Throughout the *Odyssey*, this motive of care for the dead constantly reappears to illustrate the abiding loyalty between friends and relatives.¹¹ Funeral rites and the erected tomb are meant to testify to this loyalty and to acknowledge the deceased's lasting place in the memory of society. Being remembered, of course, was the only appealing form of afterlife the Greek imagination conceived of. An analogy exists, therefore, between the fear of bodily disintegration and social disintegration: a corpse that is left uncared for signifies a rent in the social texture. In a world without funeral rites, death dissolves all ties, corporal or psychological, and individual man is abandoned to the decomposition of every kind of identity and significance. Thus, the motive of lack of funeral care fits into the general subject matter of this epic. The victory of pattern over chaos that is staged in the *Odyssey* also includes the victory of memory over oblivion.

The criterion of the funeral is therefore closely connected to another important point of comparison: the question whether the hero was able to reunite with his family. The comparison of Agamemnon and Odysseus mostly revolves around the (dis)loyalty of their respective wives, but besides from that, the father-son relations get all the attention. Agamemnon and Achilles eagerly ask Odysseus for news on their sons, who they did not get to see grow up (11.457-64 & 11.492-540). Achilles' greatest sorrow, however, is for the old father he left behind. He imagines the weakened Peleus surrounded by enemies, and bitterly regrets not being able to protect him (11.494-503). With Odysseus, this lament must have touched a nerve: Peleus's wretched fate is in everything reminiscent of Laertes' situation.

1.3 Fathers and sons

The insertion of this pathetic picture of the ageing Peleus has three major effects. First of all, it builds up tension towards the reunion with Laertes as a significant part of the fulfilment of Odysseus's destiny. Secondly, in the long run it makes Odysseus all the more enviable, as he will be able to fulfil his duty to his father.¹² And last but not least: this passage strongly refers us back to the *Iliad* and in particular to book 24, in which the theme of the bereaved father takes a very important place. Already in the *Iliad*, worries for Peleus constantly trouble Achilles (Il. 16.15-6, 18.330-1; 19.334-7.421-22; 23.144-9; 24.486-92), and this motive plays a crucial, even conclusive role in the final meeting between him and Priam, when the old king comes to ransom the body of Hector. If in book 24 the unthinkable happens and both enemies develop mutual compassion and respect, it is only because Priam is able to appeal to Achilles' love and pity for his father, with whom the old king has so much in common:¹³

“μνηῆσαι πατρὸς σοῖο θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ' Ἀχιλλεῦ,
τηλίκου ὡς περ ἐγών, ὄλοῦν ἐπὶ γήραος οὐδῶ:
καὶ μὲν που κείνον περιναίεται ἀμφὶς ἐόντες
τείρουσ', οὐδέ τις ἐστὶν ἀρῆν καὶ λοιγὸν ἀμῦναι.” (24.486-9)

At end of the *Iliad*, these former enemies are able to connect through their love for a third person¹⁴ – a love, moreover, the extent of which is only fully revealed in the light of death. Achilles has buried Patroclus, for whom he has sorrowed ‘as a father [...] for his son’ (23.222-5), Priam is going to his utter limits to be able to do the same for Hector, and both are familiar with

the sorrow of a father whose son will not be there to tend to him in old age and bury him. Thus, the care for the ageing and the dead becomes paradigmatic for the limits of human love: ultimately, it is both the least and the most we can do for our loved ones. At the end of the Iliad, what ultimately binds all mankind is not mortality as such, but rather the sorrow for the mortality of those we deeply care for.¹⁵

I argue that the 24th book of the Odyssey should be read in relation to the 24th book of the Iliad, in particularly with regards to the themes of fatherhood and funerary obligations. But before I turn to the passage in question, one more word has to be said about the criteria for happiness. Obviously, the interrelated motives of the funeral and the reunion with loved relatives come down to the same thing: the best thing a man can hope for is to be embedded in a larger social, symbolical and even cosmological structure that allows him to transcend his limited individual existence. What Odysseus yearns for on Calypso's island when he longs to see 'were it but the smoke leaping from his own land' (1.58-9) is not simply Penelope or his relatives as such, but his entire existence as a meaningful part of human order. The father-son relation is crucial to this: in a world where every significant person is called by a patronymic, the identity and social status of parent and (male) child are interdependent.¹⁶ But even more importantly: the bond between father and son comforts man for his transitoriness. As I will try to illustrate with my reading of the Laertes scene, this comfort consists not so much in the fact that death is overcome by this bond, but rather in that it integrates death into a meaningful pattern of alternation and reciprocity.

Norman Austin stresses the importance for the Odyssey of this implicit principle of harmony, that he sees expressed in the Homeric concept of ὥρη: the idea that everything alternately has its time and place.¹⁷ According to Austin, the restoration of order on all levels that is brought about by the return of Odysseus should be seen as a sublime instance of this ὥρη, as the 'flowing together of many separate rhythms into a single rhythm' (*Ibid.* p. 8). This characteristic preoccupation of the Odyssey provides an important part of the background against which the Laertes scene has to be read. The scene's subtle symbolism revolves around the reinstatement of this life-structuring rhythm in which giving and receiving, life and death are interwoven.

2. The Laertes scene

2.1. Reasons to Lie

No doubt, Odysseus's encounter with Laertes makes for one of the most problematic scenes of the Odyssey. Scholars throughout the ages have been scandalized by the fact that Odysseus lies to his father about his identity, and for no obvious reason prolongs the old man's suffering. With the suitors dead, there is indeed no more need for caution or trickery. Nevertheless, Odysseus decides to make trial of his father, according to his own words to see whether he will recognize him after his long absence (24.217-8). Admittedly, Odysseus wavers: when he first sees Laertes in his pitiable state, he hides behind a pear tree and weeps. Momentarily he considers simply going up to him to embrace him, but eventually sticks with his first plan (ὤδε δέ οἱ φρονέοντι δοάσσατο κέρδιον εἶναι, πρῶτον κερτομίους ἐπέεσσιν πειρηθῆναι) (24.238-9).

Scholarly criticism has found all kinds of ways to deal with this unsettling passage. For some, Odysseus's less than flattering behaviour was one of the arguments to elide the entire twenty-

fourth book.¹⁸ Others have claimed that, on the auctorial level at least, Odysseus's behaviour makes sense. The trickery motive makes for a more interesting reading, as it heightens the tension and the emotional strain of the story. Also, the traditional pattern might simply demand the automatic recurrence of the lying tale motive. Lord, for instance, gives some examples from oral poetry in which the returning hero unscrupulously lies to his relatives for no reason at all¹⁹ (Lord 1960, 176-9). Scodel likewise remarks that oral narratives usually care more for traditional patterning than psychological verisimilitude, but nevertheless claims that Homer's case is different, as he obviously does care for the latter (e.g. speakers often subtly alter their story for the sake of tact) (Scodel 1998, 1-2, see also Wender 1978, 57). It seems fair to claim, therefore, that even if the traditional pattern was the starting point for the Laertes scene, the poet of the *Odyssey* was autonomous enough to bend it to his own purposes.

When it comes to actorial motivation, then, several options are given. The explanation that Odysseus wants to ascertain that Laertes' sorrow is genuine (e.g. Woolsey 1941, 175) no longer satisfies anyone, as it would be absurd for Odysseus to doubt this. De Jong gives a more sophisticated reason why Odysseus would want to provoke his father's emotions: "He wishes to be recognized as son, just as before he has been recognized as master, father, king, and husband" (De Jong 2009, 73; see also Fenik 1974, 47-50). Many also point to the fact that trickery and suspicion are simply Odysseus's second nature.²⁰ Though this is insufficient as an explanation in itself, it certainly is part of the picture.²¹ The most elucidating explanation, however, claims that Odysseus with his lying tale hopes to subtly steer Laertes' emotions in the right direction. As Scodel remarks, a confrontation with the families of the suitors is at hand, and Odysseus needs a combative ally (Scodel 1998, 10 ff.). This is why Odysseus gradually tries to rouse Laertes up from his self-pity and mental isolation by asking him provoking questions (κερτομίους ἐπέεσσιν) (24.240) and engaging him to ask questions in return (Heubeck 1992, 384 and 389-90).

It seems to me, however, that ascribing Odysseus's behaviour to *nothing but* cold calculation does not do justice to this emotionally charged scene. In our wonderment about Odysseus's lies, we may all too easily assume that there is a self-evident way for a son to tell his decrepit father who considers him dead that he is alive after all. Groping for mastery of the situation, it psychologically makes sense for Odysseus to fall back into his familiar strategy: telling lies. But there may be another reason why Odysseus does not rush into telling Laertes the truth. Seeing whether his father is able to recognize him by himself (αἶ κέ μ' ἐπιγνώη καὶ φράσσεται ὀφθαλμοῖσιν, 24.217) is actually a sensible way of testing whether the old man is able to cope with this information. Odysseus, as we have seen, has been told over and over again about the worrisome physical and emotional state of Laertes, so he has good reasons to fear the emotional shock might be too much for him. Another event, moreover, may have warned Odysseus for this scenario: the death of Argus (13.291-327). I will argue that this recognition-scene might be considered as a (misleading) anticipatory doublet for the reunion with Laertes.

2.2 The death of Argus

Argus is the only one who immediately recognizes Odysseus: he wags his tail and drops his ears, but is too weak to leap up at his old master. After seeing Odysseus one more time, he dies: Ἄργον δ' αὖ κατὰ μοῖρ' ἔλαβεν μέλανος θανάτοιο, αὐτίκ' ἰδόντ' Ὀδυσῆα ἐεικοστῶ ἐνιαυτῶ.'

(17.326-7) This solemn death formula, as De Jong remarks, is normally used for dying warriors; it underlines the dramatic significance of the scene (De Jong 2001, 574). Rose draws the parallel between the fleeting reunion of Odysseus and his mother Anticleia, whose ghost he is not able to embrace one last time (Rose 1979, 220). But the more obvious parallel is with Laertes. As with his father, Odysseus has to hide his tears when he sees the state of neglect the dog is in. Argus is covered with ticks and lies on a pile of dung, similar to Laertes who dresses poorly and sleeps between the dirty ashes. Odysseus, in his disguise of a beggar, asks Eumaeus about the dog, remarking that it is curious that an animal with such an excellent build is left lying in the dirt. The swineherd affirms that Argus was a formidable hunting dog before Odysseus departed. Now, the animal is being neglected by the careless slaves. The resemblance to the meeting with Laertes is striking: Odysseus finds his father working in his orchard, digging about a plant. He goes up to him and complements him on his excellent care for the garden, but immediately reproaches him on his scruffy appearance:

“ἄλλο δέ τοι ἐρέω, σὺ δὲ μὴ χόλον ἔνθεο θυμῷ
αὐτόν σ’ οὐκ ἀγαθὴ κομιδὴ ἔχει, ἀλλ’ ἅμα γῆρας
λυγρὸν ἔχεις ἀχμείς τε κακῶς καὶ ἀεικέα ἔσσαι.
οὐ μὲν ἀεργίης γε ἄναξ ἔνεκ’ οὐ σε κομίζει,
οὐδέ τί τοι δούλειον ἐπιπρέπει εἰσοράσθαι
εἶδος καὶ μέγεθος· βασιλῆϊ γὰρ ἀνδρὶ ἔοικας.
τοιούτῳ δὲ ἔοικας, ἐπεὶ λούσαιτο φάγοι τε,
εὐδέμεναι μαλακῶς· ἢ γὰρ δίκη ἐστὶ γερόντων.” (24.248-255)

Laertes as well as Argus are badly neglected, but their stature still betrays their former excellence. Both Argus and Laertes are emblematic for the decline of Odysseus’s household.²²

But the significance of the parallel goes deeper. This recognition scene (that tragically cannot become a reunion scene) sets the stakes for the anticipated encounter with Laertes: a public that is made to anxiously anticipate Odysseus’s reunion with his aged father might wonder whether Laertes, who is old and weakened like Argus, will be able to withstand the shock. For it is obvious that seeing Odysseus was what dealt Argus the final blow. These fears, moreover, will not prove to be totally unfounded, as Laertes faints when the truth finally gets through to him (24.346-7). And there is yet another way in which both scenes are connected. We are told by the narrator that Odysseus had raised Argus himself, but ‘had no joy of him’ (οὐδ’ ἀπόνητο), because he departed for Troy. The same phrase is also used by Telemachus to point out that Odysseus was denied the satisfaction of seeing his son grow up (16.121). This motive of ‘wasted efforts’ is a recurring element in both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, and mostly applies to parents who have raised their children only to lose them in the war (Scodel 2005, 402). When for instance in the *Iliad* the young warrior Simoeisus is slain, Homer mournfully states that ‘he [did not pay] back to his dear parents the recompense of his upbringing’ (οὐδὲ τοκεῦσι θρέπτρα φίλοις ἀπέδωκε) (4.477-8).²³ Thwarted reciprocity²⁴ is the keyword here: Argus has not been able to pay back Odysseus for his good care, and neither did Odysseus get the chance to reward Argus’s loyalty with a sign of affection on his part. This theme of reciprocity will also be pivotal to the Laertes scene.

2.3 Fictional gifts, and where they come from

Let us return to the actual conversation between Odysseus and Laertes. It is clear why Odysseus insults Laertes by calling him a slave, and then goes on to flatter him for looking like a king: he wants to provoke the old man's pride. His next step is to inform about the owner of the 'slave' and the orchard. He already asked some other man, but this person failed to give him any useful information (24.261). Again, this is an appeal to Laertes' self-esteem, as it incites him to do better. As Scodel (1998, 13) points out, it was an important part of the heroic code to properly receive a guest;²⁵ Odysseus is testing whether Laertes is still responsive to this code. He thus goes on to present himself as a guest-friend of Odysseus – something he has also done in the lying tales to Eumaeus and Penelope. But while the other stories were mixtures of truth and fiction, this tale will discern itself by the fact that almost everything is made up (Heatherington 1976, 234, Woolsey 1941, 173).

Odysseus claims he is trying to find out whether a former guest of him is still alive. This man claimed to be from Ithaca, and said his father was Laertes, son of Arceisius.²⁶ Odysseus then tells Laertes that he kindly welcomed this guest and showered him with precious gifts:

“καί οἱ δῶρα πόρον ξεινίῃα, οἷα ἐώκει.
χρυσοῦ μὲν οἱ δῶκ' εὐεργέος ἑπτὰ τάλαντα,
δῶκα δέ οἱ κρητῆρα πανάργυρον ἀνθεμόεντα,
δώδεκα δ' ἀπλοῖδας χλαίνας, τόσσους δὲ τάπητας,
τόσσα δὲ φάρεα καλά, τόσσους δ' ἐπὶ τοῖσι χιτῶνας,
χωρὶς δ' αὐτε γυναικας, ἀμύμονα ἔργα ἰδυίας,
τέσσαρας εἰδαλίμας, ἃς ἤθελεν αὐτὸς ἐλέσθαι.” (24.273-9)

As De Jong remarks, the listing of these gifts serves to ingratiate the giver with Laertes (De Jong 2001, 578). But the motive of *xeinia* also has its symbolic importance. Discussing the lying tale to Penelope, Katz remarks that the relationship of guest-friendship functions as a homologue to marriage, and thus prepares for the reestablishment of Penelope's and Odysseus's relation as husband and wife (Katz 1991, 154). Exactly the same is true for the father-son relationship of Laertes and Odysseus. In fact, the parallel may even be stronger. This explains why the motive of the gifts vehemently stirs Laertes' emotions, and becomes central to their conversation. In tears, Laertes informs the stranger that his generosity will not be recompensed, though Odysseus would certainly have requited his gifts if his friend would have found him alive, “for that is the due of who begins the kindness” (ἡ γὰρ θέμις, ὅς τις ὑπάρξει) (24.280-6). Obviously, Laertes identifies with the stranger: he too has hoped in vain that Odysseus would requite his fatherly care. This thought seems to trigger the association of that other mutual obligation left unfulfilled: Laertes goes on to grievously mourn the fact that he was not able to bury Odysseus, although “that is the due of the dead” (τὸ γὰρ γέρας ἐστὶ θανόντων) (24.290-6).

But let us return to the description of the gifts. First of all, their abundance draws attention.²⁷ They seem to be inspired on the fabulous treasure Odysseus received from the Phaeacians, that also included many talents of gold and twelve plus one cloaks and tunics – one from every Phaeacean king, and one extra from Alcinous himself (8.390-5 & 424-5). To illustrate the link between guest-friendship and parenthood, it may be worthwhile to look at the farewell of Nausicaa and Odysseus. She watches him while he packs the glorious gifts of her parents, and then decides to remind him that he owes something precious to her as well: “Farewell, stranger,

and hereafter even in thy own native land may you remember me, for to me first you owe the price of your life” (χαῖρε, ξεῖν’, ἵνα καὶ ποτ’ ἐὼν ἐν πατρίδι γαίῃ μνήσῃ ἐμεῦ, ὅτι μοι πρώτη ζωάγρι’ ὀφέλλεις) (8.461-2). Odysseus gallantly assures her he will: “for you maiden, have given me life” (σὺ γάρ μ’ ἐβιώσαο, κούρη) (8.468) The word Nausicaa uses for Odysseus’s debt to her, ζωάγρια, designates the reward for saving someone’s life, but it can also denote the reward for nursing and rearing one (Liddell & Scott 1979, 299). Parenthood thus can be seen as a supreme kind of *xeinia*: a parent has welcomed his child not only in his house, but in the world even, and this child owes him or her everything.

But under the twelve cloaks and tunics hides an even more important allusion. The exact two hexameters of lines 274-5 (δῶδεκα δ’ ἀπλοΐδας χλαίνας, τόσσους δὲ τάπητας, τόσσα δὲ φάρεα καλά, τόσους δ’ ἐπὶ τοῖσι χιτῶνας) are also used in book twenty-four of the Iliad – and nowhere else in the homeric corpus. The only slight difference is the word καλά, that is replaced by λευκά in the Iliad. “Twelve cloaks of single fold, and as many coverlets, mantles, and tunics” are also the first things Priam takes from his treasury when he collects the fabulous ransom for the body of his son Hector (Il. 24.230-1).²⁸ The communal issues of the meeting between Odysseus and Laertes and the meeting between Achilles and Priam are clear by now: both scenes in a way restore a sense of human order that has been lost, and in both cases this disturbance of the proper human order has been signalled by the fact that a father has not been able to bury his son. The love and sense of duty that connects father and son is put forward as the basis on which a more universal human solidarity can be built. The logic of reciprocity by vengeance is replaced by the logic of reciprocity in care.²⁹ In my opinion, the citation of the two hexameters proves that this cluster of themes that was central to the last book of the Iliad was also on the mind of the poet who composed the Laertes scene. Whether the quoting was done consciously or unconsciously is of little importance. But why this reminiscence to precisely the clothes, and no other part of Hector’s ransom? The answer is simple: some of these very robes and tunics would eventually serve the all-important purpose of providing the body of Hector with a shroud, by which Priam’s duty towards his son is fulfilled (24.580-81).

2.4 Names and riddles

When Laertes asks on about the stranger’s identity, Odysseus comes up with a remarkable fiction:

“εἰμὶ μὲν ἐξ Ἀλύβαντος, ὅθι κλυτὰ δῶματα ναίω,
 υἱὸς Ἀφείδαντος Πολυπημονίδαιο ἄνακτος
 αὐτὰρ ἐμοί γ’ ὄνομα ἔστιν Ἐπήριτος” (24.304-6)

In his other lying tales, Odysseus always claims to be a Cretan, and embeds his lies in some well-known names and facts (Woolsey 1941, 173 n. 15). The names he uses here, by contrast, seem to be totally made up, which has led many scholars to conclude that they are especially chosen to suggest some hidden meaning. For each of the names, various readings have been proposed. It seems to me that several of these suggestions might be valid, and do not even necessarily have to exclude each other.

Alybas, to start with, might be derived from Ἀλύβη, a city that is mentioned in the Iliad’s catalogue of ships and is famous for its silver (Il. 2.857). But others connect the name to the verb

ἄλύω (to be in distress, to have no rest) or ἀλάομαι (to wander) (Heubeck 1992, 394; Peradotto 1990, 144 n.3). Robert Fagles for instance, who follows this last reading, translates with ‘Roamer Town’ (Fagles 1997, 477). Brian Breed unconventionally suggests a link with the name of a cult-hero named Alubas/Alibas, who returned as an avenging ghost (1999, 157). He claims Odysseus is posing as his own revenant, playing on Laertes’ feelings of guilt for not having buried his son. Though I am not convinced by his theory as a whole (why would Odysseus want to scare or blame his father?), I feel he might be right in connecting Alubas to the underworld and the motive of lack of burial, for the verb ἀλάομαι is also used for the spirits of the unburied, who wander restlessly on the shores of the Styx.³⁰ Thus, when Odysseus claims to have come from ‘Roamer-Town’, this might be a subtle way of saying not only that he has escaped his long wanderings, but also that he has come back from the (supposedly) dead to the world of the living.

Eperitus, the name Odysseus gives himself, is a typically heroic name that can be translated as ‘the chosen one’ (Heubeck 1992, 395). Others suggest a connection with various words referring to strife (ἔρις, ἐρίζω, ἐπήρεια), which could be seen as an allusion to the meaning of Odysseus’s real name (//Ὀδυσσάμενος, see 19.405-9 and Dimock 1990, 4) (e.g. Clay 1997, 61, but rejected by Heubeck 1992, 395). Another valuable suggestion is made by George Dimock, who remarks that Ἐπήριτος sounds similar to πειρητίζων (Dimock 1990, 328). Again, no exclusive choice has to be made, as these readings can be seen as complementary layers of meaning. On the level of the literal lie, Odysseus poses as the typical heroic guest-friend from rich Silver-City. But at the same time, his name suggests the very game he is playing (πειρητίζων) and alludes to his real identity (the man of strife, returned from his wanderings).³¹

Polypemon, the fictitious name of his grandfather, fits in with both the literal and the hidden meaning: it can either mean ‘great possessor’ or ‘great sufferer’ (Heubeck 1992, 395, see also Authenrieth). As ‘great possessor’, the name can simply fit into the general image of heroic royalty and riches, but it can also suggest a parallel with Odysseus’s recently mentioned grandfather Arceisius, whose name also suggests plenty (ἀρκέω) (Flaumenhaft 1982, 26). As ‘great sufferer’, the patronymic may refer to Odysseus’s own identity.

The most important name for my analysis however is Apheidas, because it denotes the father of the speaker, and might therefore be taken to refer to Laertes himself. The name is unanimously accepted to be derived from ἀφειδέω (adj. ἀφειδής), ‘to be unsparing’. Most scholars³² assume that this name once more refers to the idea of heroic generosity, and should be read as ‘the one who does not spare his property’ (Heubeck 1992, 395). This reading is particularly appealing, as it resumes the idea of *xeinia*. But another association may complete the picture. ἀφειδέω can also mean ‘to take no care of’, ‘to neglect’, and in this sense it would also very well fit the unkempt Laertes. The verb can be used with a reflexive pronoun, as in the following example from Thucydides: αἰσχύνη γὰρ ἠφείδουν σφῶν αὐτῶν (‘honour made them unsparing of themselves’) (Thuc. 2,51,5). Thucydides is explaining here why the most virtuous were the first victims of the plague in Athens: they unselfishly cared for their dying relatives and friends. This illustrates how the idea of generosity and the idea of self-abandonment are actually brought closely together by the verb ἀφειδέω. Another example of this relation can be taken from Homer himself – not surprisingly again from the scene where Priam collects his ransom for Hector. As he picks his last item, a particularly valued cup, Homer comments as

follows: ‘not even this did the old man spare (φείσατ’) in his halls, for he was exceeding eager to ransom his dear son’ (Il. 24.235-7; Homer uses the verb (οὐ) φείδομαι rather than ἀφειδέω).

To be ἀφειδής, in conclusion, means to be unselfish in one’s duty towards others. This might just as well apply to the obligations of a guest-friendship as to the duties of rearing or mourning a son. Apparently, Odysseus is communicating quite a lot by this simple word: he draws attention to Laertes’ neglected state, but at the same time acknowledges this sign of mourning as a token of his father’s love for him. Simultaneously, he reminds Laertes that this sense of reciprocal duty is also part of a heroic code to which he must return, to once again become the man he was before he lost his son.

2.4. Recognition: the token of the trees

Laertes however, absorbed in his sorrow, fails to pick up any of these hidden messages. When Odysseus once more mentions his thwarted hopes of being recompensed for his gifts (24.313-4), Laertes collapses and starts strewing sand on his head in mourning. Odysseus too now breaks down: he embraces his father and tells him everything.³³ When Laertes asks him to prove his identity, he does so by giving him two tokens: the scar that earlier on also identified him to Eurycleia, and the story of how Laertes, when Odysseus was still a child, promised to give him some of the trees in the orchard:

“εἰ δ’ ἄγε τοι καὶ δένδρε’ ἐϋκτιμένην κατ’ ἄλωην
εἶπω, ἃ μοί ποτ’ ἔδωκας, ἐγὼ δ’ ἥτεόν σε ἕκαστα
παιδνὸς ἐών, κατὰ κήπον ἐπισπόμενος: διὰ δ’ αὐτῶν
ἰκνεύμεσθα, σὺ δ’ ὠνόμασας καὶ ἔειπες ἕκαστα
ὄγχνας μοι δῶκας τρισκαίδεκα καὶ δέκα μηλέας,
συκέας τεσσαράκοντ’: ὄρχους δέ μοι ᾧδ’ ὀνόμηνας
δώσειν πενήκοντα, διατρύγιος δὲ ἕκαστος
ἦην: ἔνθα δ’ ἀνὰ σταφυλαὶ παντοῖαι ἔασιν—
ὄππότε δὴ Διὸς ὤραι ἐπιβρίσειαν ὑπερθεν.” (24.334-344)

This token of the orchard is the last element I will discuss here, as it seals the overall symbolism of the Laertes scene. According to Katz, Odysseus adds the second story because “he realizes the insufficiency – or perhaps the inappropriateness” of the first one (Katz 1991, 179). With the *sème* of the trees, Odysseus proves his identity on a much deeper level, not only intellectually but emotionally as well. As with the bed of Penelope, the trees are a tangible token of their history together, as well as of the fact that Odysseus is literally rooted in Ithaca’s earth. By demonstrating his memory of the knowledge Laertes had shared with him, he proves his right to the patrimony that was granted to him long ago. It is no coincidence, moreover, that this listing of the trees echoes the listing of the gifts in Odysseus’s lying tale: both refer to the indebtedness of Odysseus to Laertes, and their mutual bond.

Trees, of course, are some of the most enduring identifying markers of a landscape, and are used as such throughout the *Odyssey* (*Ibid.*; Henderson 1997, 88 & 98) and the *Iliad*³⁴. But there is more to the fact that the scene evolves around a well-tended orchard. Falkner (1989, 48) has pointed out the importance of the fact that Laertes is associated with agriculture: this old man, who withdraws from the city to work on the land, would have no real place in the martial world

of the Iliad. Through the figure of Laertes, the Odyssey puts forward a different kind of hero, the kind that does not die young in battle but that lives to see his children grow up and dies the painless death that Tiresias prophesies for Odysseus: ‘The gentlest [death] imaginable, that shall lay you low when you are overcome with sleek old age, and your people shall be dwelling in prosperity around you’ (11.134-7). Agriculture, as the opposite of martial life, serves as a paradigm for this set of values, as it exemplifies this cyclic harmony (ὥρη) that ultimately is shown to structure the chaotic world of the Odyssey.³⁵

Moreover, trees have been a symbol for the succession of generations since the Iliad. We need only think of Glaucus’ comparison of the generations of men to leaves that are scattered by the wind but sprout anew when spring comes (Il. 6.147), or Apollo’s similar remark that men are like leaves, now full of flaming life and then already withering (Il. 21.464). (Falling) warriors, of course, are often compared to trees³⁶, but less well known is the fact that trees are also often used as a metaphor for children. Thetis says of Achilles that he “he shot up like a sapling, then when I had reared him like a tree in a rich orchard plot” (Il. 18.56-57 & 437-8), and Hecuba calls Hector a “dear plant whom I myself bore” (Il. 22.87) Euphorbus, Panthous’ young son who is slain by Menelaus, is also compared to “a lusty sapling of an olive” that a man has reared “in a lonely place where water wells up abundantly”, but then is torn out by a mighty tempest (Il. 17.53-60).

Contrary to these trees of the Iliad, however, the trees in Laertes’ orchard bear fruit: his child survives, unlike those of Thetis, Hecuba or Panthous. In Odysseus’s description of the vine-trees the word διατρύγιος is used, a *hapax* that almost certainly has to be translated as ‘ripening at different times’. As is often the case in orchards, different kinds of trees are combined so that they bear fruit successively, and supply the owner throughout the year. Falkner (1989, 45), Heubeck (1992, 399) and Henderson (1997, 101) draw the parallel with the magical garden of Alcinous, where “pear upon pear waxes ripe, apple upon apple, grape bunch upon grape bunch” (ὄγχνη ἐπ’ ὄγχνη γηράσκει, μήλον δ’ ἐπὶ μήλῳ, αὐτὰρ ἐπὶ σταφυλῇ σταφυλή) (7.120-1). But while the Phaeaceans live in a semi-divine world where they “escape the vicissitudes of human existence” (Falkner 1989, 45), Laertes’ garden is ruled by seasonal changes. His plenty is the result of hard work and a perfect adjustment to this principle of ὥρη, while Alcinous’s plenty is a gift of the gods (7.132). The symbolism of these ever fruitful vines seems perfectly clear: even in a world that is subject to death and decay something permanent can be achieved by the succession of generations. The only requirement is dedication.

3. Conclusion

As the symbolism of the orchard once more demonstrates, the theme of succession of generations is central to the design of the Odyssey. Seeing one’s children grow up and prosper is presented as maybe the greatest satisfaction man can hope for; this is illustrated by Laertes’ jubilation when he joins Odysseus and Telemachus in the battle against the suitors’ families: ‘What a day is this for me, kind gods! I utterly rejoice: my son and my son’s son are quarrelling over which is the bravest’ (24.514-5). This rejoining of the three generations seals the happy end of the epic (Faulkner 1989, 22). Dealing with these three generations, the Odyssey seems to stage a ‘changing of the guard’: each member of Odysseus’s family moves up one place in the order of

generations. Telemachus strives to become a man like his father. Odysseus struggles to achieve the position of Laertes: to be able to retire and to finally lead a quiet life.

But what about Laertes? I argue that it is no coincidence that the death of the old man is anticipated from the beginning of the *Odyssey*, in the story of the shroud, in the fate of Anticleia, in the death of Argus and in many other ways. Though it is not narrated as such, the implied death of Laertes is inherent to the story because it is an important part of what Odysseus gains with his return. In fact, the good death Tiresias predicts to Odysseus equally well describes what Laertes can hope for now Odysseus has returned: a death among loving relatives that will bury and remember him. Vice versa, the foreshadowed death of Laertes is connected to the fate Odysseus has chosen for himself. From the moment we first meet Odysseus on the isle of Calypso, the question at stake is whether he will be able (and willing) to return to the cyclic order of human society, which is defined, as I have tried to demonstrate, by reciprocity and mortality. The fact that Laertes will be cared for by his son in old age, and finally death, marks the ultimate success of Odysseus's return and his choice to be reintegrated in this order: their reunion represents Odysseus's choice to live and die, to give and to receive, to remember and be remembered, to bury and be buried.

The diverse dangers Odysseus faces all have this in common: they stand for the annihilation of this kind of human order. The watery grave that offers no hope of being remembered, the gruesome death between the jaws of the Cyclops³⁷, but also the vegetative lethargy enjoyed by the Lophophages, the animal degradation brought about by Circe, the divine impassiveness offered by Calypso. Odysseus overcomes all these threats and temptations only to attain what Tiresias promised him – and notably, this is not living happily ever after. Death – the certain kind of death that he will share with his father – is thus presented as something Odysseus actively chooses, because it is inextricably connected to being included in the cycle of generations, in the principle of *ῶρη*. It is this principle that allows the *Odyssey* to achieve something that the *Iliad*, in all its pessimistic grandeur, could never attain: to make mortality bearable, even acceptable.

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¹) There are, of course, linguistic problems in the 24th book (see Page 1955, 104 and Wender 1978, 46 for a refutation). It is my opinion, however, that even positive proof of the fact that the 24th book was a later

addition would by no means exempt us from the task of interpreting this addition, as a more or less successful extension of the *Odyssey*.

²) Falkner points out how especially the part of the *Odyssey* that takes place in Ithaca reflects on old age and death: not only because Odysseus assumes the role of the old beggar (who remarkably resembles the figure of Laertes), but also because of the reunion scene with Penelope points out that the only happiness Odysseus will know will be in old age. (Falkner 1989, 50-1)

³) Many authors focus on the differences between the three accounts; these divergences can be sensibly explained by the different viewpoints of the speakers. See Lowenstam 2000, 334-44; Heubeck 1992, 374; West 1988, 137; Bona 1966, 112. Woolsey remarks on the unifying function of the story: the fact that it is told and retold in the beginning, middle and end strengthens the overall coherence of the epic. (Woolsey 1941, 178)

⁴) Also, the weaving and undoing of the shroud echoes Odysseus's meandering, and thus connects the suffering and endurance of both spouses. (Lowenstam 2000, 338)

⁵) Whallon even raises the theory that the φᾶρος in which Odysseus is clothed as he reassumes his real identity (*Od.* 23.155) is in fact Penelope's notorious web. (Whallon 2000, 135) There is little real evidence to sustain this theory, but even less to definitely repudiate it, and it certainly makes for an elegant reading.

⁶) Lowenstam claims the shroud ultimately does not connect with Laertes because he will be rejuvenated by Athena. (Lowenstam 2000, 340) This to me seems incorrect: while the durability of Athena's magic is open for debate, it is certain that it will not exempt Laertes from death.

⁷) It is remarkable how these mourning rituals of Laertes mimic the fate he might well imagine his son to have suffered: Odysseus as well has been cut off from society, and has indeed often lacked proper clothing. We have seen him improvise a bed of fallen leaves (5, 482-3) and crouch in the ashes of Alcinous' hearth (7, 152-3). This is one more argument for Homer's psychological accuracy, as even today psychologists describe this kind of painful acting out of the identification with the lost or deceased person as a typical symptom of deep mourning and melancholia (see e.g. Leader 2009, 54 ff.).

⁸) Falkner points out that this formula probably does not refer to the beginning of old age, but to old age as the last step towards death: "the threshold (which is) old age". (Falkner 1989, 33)

⁹) For a discussion of this scene and the way it relates the 24th book of the *Odyssey* to the 24th book of the *Iliad*, see Whitehead 1984.

¹⁰) On this issue, see Segal 1971, Vernant 2002, 114-15.

¹¹) Menelaus delays his journey home to bury his helmsmen (3.285-6) and heaps up a mound in honour of his dead brother. (4.583-4) Telemachus is advised and plans to do the same for his father, in case his death should be confirmed. (1.289-92; 2.220-3) And Odysseus meticulously carries out the wishes of the ghost of Elpenor, who in the underworld begged him by his loved ones to bury him (11.55-83 & 12.8-15). By contrast, inhumanity or disloyalty are signalled by the neglect of this duty: Clytaemnestra refuses to close Agamemnon's eyes (11.424-6), the Sirens leave the bodies of their victims to rot upon the shore (12.45-6), and the treacherous maiden who kidnapped Eumaeus is thrown overboard by the Phoenician pirates, 'to be a prey to seals and fishes'. (15.480)

¹²) On this point of comparison between Odysseus and Achilles, see also Dova 2000, 60: "Achilles' separation from his son and father leaves an aura of unfulfillment about his appearance in the underworld".

¹³) It is noteworthy that of all the people who try to persuade Achilles by appealing to the memory of his father (Odysseus, 9.252-9, Phoenix, 9.438-41 and Patroclus 16.33-5), only Priam fully succeeds.

¹⁴) This, of course, is also the logic that underlies the kind of pleas that mention the addressee's loved ones: Hermes advises Priam to 'entreat [Achilles] by his father and his fair-haired mother and his child'. (24. 466-67) Priam, by realizing that Achilles too 'has a father such as I am, Peleus, who begot him and reared him' (*Il.* 22.420-1), acknowledges that he and Achilles are ultimately part of the same human civilisation, and that they ultimately abide by the same laws. This in sharp contrast to his wife Hecuba: she calls Achilles ὠμηστής, 'raw-eating', a designation normally reserved for the dogs, birds and fishes that scavenge the corpses, and *vice versa* fantasizes about sinking her teeth into his heart. (24.206-14) Hecuba no longer sees Achilles as human being, and this inhuman status is defined by the very fact that he violates the principle of respecting the dead.

¹⁵) Human mortality in itself, as Achilles illustrates, can just as well be an argument to ‘live and let die’. See his speech to Lycaon, Il. 22, 99-104.

¹⁶) We can think of the heartbreaking picture Andromache paints of the life of an orphan (the fate that awaits Astyanax after Hector’s death): not backed up by a father, the child has no place to claim in society and is expelled by his compeers. (Il. 22.486-505) *Vice versa*, Menelaus has no male child by his legitimate wife, and presumably for this reason calls his bastard son Megapenthes, ‘great sorrow’. (Od. 4.11-2) (Andersen 1958, 5)

¹⁷) An idea expressed, for example, at 11.78-9 and 15.392-4.

¹⁸) A bibliography is given by Heubeck 1981, 73, nn. 1 and 2 and by Rutherford 2009, 184 n. 84.

¹⁹) See also Fenik 1974, 47-53, who sees it as a thoughtless reiteration of the trickery-motive.

²⁰) E.g. Rutherford 2009, 185; Focke 378, Kakridis 1971, 160-1; Stanford 1976, 60.

²¹) A very original contribution to the understanding of the Laertes scene is given by Walcot. He refers to the folklore habit, still alive today in Greek villages, of teasing and frustrating children with lies to teach them cunning and self-control. (Walcot 2009, 152-3)

²²) See Scodel 2005, 408; De Jong 2001, 574; Race 1993, 79-107 and Kirk 1971, 132-133. According to Katz, Argus’s death means that Odysseus can never go back to Ithaka the way it was. Something is irrevocably lost. (Katz 1991, 154)

²³) The same expression is used by Hesiod when in *Works and Days* he describes the degeneration of the fifth race: οὐδέ κεν οἷ γε γηράντεσσι τοκεῦσιν ἀπὸ θρεπτήρια δοῖεν. (W&D, 187-188) Here it is not war, but moral decadence that disrupts the reciprocal bond between parent and child. For Hesiod, this kind of lawlessness evokes an ultimate dystopia: if this fundamental social bond isn’t respected, no other will be either: οὐδέ πατὴρ παῖδεσσι ὁμοῖος οὐδέ τι παῖδες, οὐδέ ξεῖνος ξεινοδόκῳ καὶ ἑταῖρος ἑταίρῳ. (W&D, 182-3) In the *Odyssey*, the disruptions of war (Odysseus’s absence) and decadence (the rule of the suitors) have gone hand in hand.

²⁴) On the importance of the principle of reciprocity in the Homeric epics, see Donlan 1982. Donlan’s discussion mostly focuses on economic exchange, but naturally, those economics are inseparably connected to the social and the cultural.

²⁵) See Scodel 1998, 13: “Behavior in guest-friend-ship is a crucial test in the *Odyssey*, not only dividing the hospitable and godfearing from the wild and unjust (6.120-21 = 9.105-76, 13.201-2), but defining the heroic qualities of civilized participants in its proprieties”. Laertes fails the test: he does not offer the customary bath and meal to the stranger before asking about his identity, because he is too absorbed by his sorrow. Scodel’s point is that Athena will achieve what was impossible for Odysseus: she will rejuvenate Laertes, and the old man will fully regain his former heroism by his victory on Eupheides, the leader of the vengeful families. (Scodel 1998, 15) (24.368-374 and 24.518-525)

²⁶) Henderson has pointed out that Odysseus thus subtly reminds Laertes of his own lineage, in one more attempt to rekindle his pride. (Henderson 1997, 96)

²⁷) For comparison: in the lying tale to Penelope Odysseus only claims to have given himself a sword of bronze, one purple cloak of double fold and one fringed tunic. (19.241-2)

²⁸) It has often been stated that there is a thematic parallel between the last book of the *Iliad* and the last book of the *Odyssey*. Doherty, for instance, remarks that both epics have a “violent climax motivated by revenge”, followed by “a dénouement in which [the hero] demonstrates his qualities of thought and feeling in a meeting with one other character: an enemy in the *Iliad*, a wife in the *Odyssey*.” “The *Odyssey*,” she continues, “adds a second such meeting, with the hero’s father, perhaps to echo more fully the issues raised by the ending of the *Iliad* and to contrast its hero’s success with the tragic fate of Achilles.” (Doherty 2009, 7)

²⁹) For this reason there is a bitter streak to the fact that Laertes himself kills Eupheides. In this case, the common experience of grief over a lost son does not unite the opposite parties.

³⁰) The ghost of Patroclus, for example: αὐτως ἀλάλημαι ἀν’ εὐρυπυλῆς Ἄϊδος δῶ. (Il. 23.74).

³¹) Some may find this reading is oversophisticated, and suffers from the infamous ‘intentional fallacy’. I do not want to claim, however, that some poet deliberately aimed to combine all these different layers of meaning. I simply state that the text somehow came to function in this way, as it obviously allows for all of

these different associations. This functioning of the text, rather than the authorial intentions (a precarious concept in any case when it comes to oral poetry) functions as my touchstone here.

³²) Some, however, suggest it might allude to Odysseus's unsparing behaviour towards the suitors (e.g. Clay 1997, 61, Peradotto 1990, 140 n. 3).

³³) It certainly is significant that in the two final recognition scenes, both with Penelope and with Laertes, it is the ever composed master of deceit, Odysseus himself, who loses control. I am inclined to interpret this as a part of his reintegration in his former life and identity: the lies that have helped him everywhere else will no longer do, he has to return to his true identity. I agree with the theory of Katz, Whitman and Wender, who claim that in the recognition scenes Odysseus as well as the other person looks for validation of his own identity. In these scenes he rehearses his role of husband, master, or son. (Katz 1991, 178-9; Whitman 301-305; Wender 1978, 60) As Wender aptly puts it: "Is there a Me that stays the same even when my body ages and suffers accident, even when my opinions change and my manners are altered by time? The best recognition scenes of Homer offer - symbolically and perhaps unconsciously - an answer to this naive but certainly perplexing question: the Real Me is my past, my memory (shared or not with others) of my unique and continuous experience in the world. Thus to Penelope the Real Odysseus is her young husband who built the marriage bed with root in the earth." (*Ibid.* p. 61)

³⁴) For trees as identifying markers of a landscape in the Iliad see a.o. Il. 6.421-2 (the elms on the grave of Eetion) 6.433 & 22.145 (the fig tree that marks the weakest point in Troy's wall), 9.354 (The oak at the Scaean gate 11.166); 10. 466-70 (The tamarisk bush on which Odysseus hangs the spoils of Dolon); 18.558 (the oak on the shield of Achilles, under which the heralds gather); 23.327 (the old stump that marks the turning point for the race, and may also mark an old grave).

³⁵) This ultimate reestablishment of order is expressed by Laertes' exclamation when he hears of Odysseus's victory on the suitors: "Father Zeus, truly you gods still hold sway on high Olympus". (24.351)

³⁶) See e.g. 12.132; 13.180; 16.481; 13.389; 13.136; 14.414; 17.53.

³⁷) Who, significantly, violates the laws of guest-friendship. See Donlan 1982, 148-9.