

Portraits of Pain and Wrath: Translating the Name of Odysseus

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Perhaps few other characters in Western literature have a more fitting eponym than Odysseus when he is called “the man of many turns.” It seems that every step of his journey brings with it the revelation of something previously unknown or the upturning of something once thought to be known. So deep do the many turnings run that, as Odysseus nears the end of maintaining his concealed identity in Book XIX of the *Odyssey*, the story is rerouted back to Odysseus’ beginnings and the events that surround him receiving his name. Not to be outdone by the protagonist of the epic they study, scholars have discussed and debated the meaning of this scene and its irony. Of special interest here is Odysseus’ name itself. How should the meaning of Odysseus’ name be best understood? Following George Dimock, many translations, especially recent ones, have favored an understanding that sees Odysseus’ name as linked with giving or receiving pain. Yet the Greek term, ὀδύσσομαι, from which Odysseus’ name is derived means “to be angry.” Which is the more justified interpretive move?

A brief review of the passage in question from a handful of the more popular translations of the *Odyssey* will demonstrate the breadth and importance of the interpretive choices pursued by the various translators. At this point in the narrative Odysseus has returned to Ithaca but is working to keep his identity hidden from those in his house. At Penelope’s invitation, Eurycleia begins to bathe Odysseus and sees the telltale scar Odysseus received in his youth. Her recognition begins a flashback that reveals the origins of the most fundamental aspect of Odysseus’ identity: his name. Robert Fagles translates the passage in question. Autolycus is

speaking: “Just as I have come from afar, creating pain for many—men and women across the good green earth—so let his name be Odysseus...the Son of Pain, a name he’ll earn in full.”¹ Bernard Knox, author of the accompanying notes to Fagles’ translation, points out the key lexical issues at hand as well as some of the interpretive choices that have come into use. Knox notes that the Greek word ὀδύσσομαι is the verb that stands behind Odysseus’ name. He writes:

The verb, however, appears to function in the middle voice, a cross between the active and the passive, implying that Odysseus is not only an agent of rage or hatred, but its target too. Particularly to the point are...[those] who suggest that Odysseus suffers for making others suffer, not as an end to itself but, insofar as *odussomai* brings to mind the verb *odino*—to suffer pain, especially the pain of labor—as the rigors by which the hero brings his identity to life.²

Knox lays out the key issues here. First, he identifies the verb in question: ὀδύσσομαι. He also lays out the key interpretive issue in view in this paper: Is the verb better linked with anger or with pain? Knox obviously favors the pain interpretation and in doing so offers yet one more interpretive feature. It is significant that the verb is in the middle voice. It provides a sense of doubling, an agent who acts upon himself. This will require further comment later.

A. T. Murray’s translation in the Loeb Classical Library reads: “Inasmuch as I have come here as one that has willed pain to many, both men and women, over the fruitful earth, therefore let the name by which the child is named be Odysseus.”³ Murray has emphasized pain, and like Fagles, it appears as the object of the verb. The pain in this passage is that pain Autolycus has visited upon others. Autolycus gives Odysseus this

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1 Homer, *Odyssey* XIX.456-464, trans. Robert Fagles, 403.

2 Knox, “Note on 19.463-64,” 514.

3 Homer, *Odyssey* XIX.405-409, trans. A. T. Murray, 265.

name in hopes that Odysseus shall one day cause pain to others just as he has done.

Richard Lattimore handles the passage this way: “since I have come to this place distasteful to many, women and men alike on the prospering earth, so let him be given the name Odysseus, that is distasteful.”⁴ Lattimore takes something of a mediating position between pain and anger, opting to render the content by the word “distasteful.” In English, both pain and anger are generally conceived as distasteful states. P.V. Jones, in his *Companion* to Lattimore’s work, notes, “the Greek is *odussamenos*, meaning a man who deals out or incurs hatred.”⁵ Earlier in the work Jones notes that Athene uses the same term to describe what she supposes to be Zeus’ anger in Book I. The same term is also found in Book XIX.

Robert Fitzgerald translates the lines: “Well you know, my hand has been against the world of men and women; odium and distrust I’ve won. Odysseus should be his given name.”⁶ Here the term odium attempts to bring the wordplay from the Greek into the English.⁷ It works in English and hints at the negative connotations for the word that is otherwise translated as either pain or anger. A word that means hateful captures not only the sense of the original but also captures the pun that exists in the original. Ralph Hexter has this to say about Fitzgerald’s rendering of these lines:

Odysseus’ name itself would mean ‘child of woe’ or ‘one who is hated,’ but it suggests as well that Odysseus would deal out his share of woe to others as the Trojans, the suitors, and Polyphemos could testify. In this very scene, he is inflicting pain, however temporary and strategic, on Penelope, and his treatment of Eurykleia, though expedient, will be harsh. Autolykos grounds the name in his experience, but of course Odysseus fills out the fate of his name in his own career. Both ancient Greeks and Latins memorialized the widely assumed connection

4 Homer, *Odyssey* XIX.405-409, trans Richmond Lattimore, 282.

5 Jones, *Homer’s Odyssey*, 180.

6 Homer, *Odyssey* XIX, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, 401.

7 In the *Companion* Jones also suggests using the term ‘odious’ to bring the wordplay into English. See Jones, *Homer’s “Odyssey”*, 6.

between a person's name and his or her destiny in proverbs which means, in essence, 'one's name is a prophetic sign.'⁸

Hexter, like Knox mentioned above, draws out some of the latent subtleties in describing Odysseus. Whereas Knox emphasizes the reflexive character of Odysseus' name, Hexter draws out some of the wrathful qualities of his character displayed throughout the course of the story. Knox emphasizes Odysseus' own suffering. Hexter emphasizes those who suffer on account of Odysseus. Yet both commenters emphasize pain. By this point in the narrative Odysseus has brought suffering to a great number of people, most obviously the Trojans, is currently bringing suffering to Penelope and Eurykleia, and will soon bring suffering to many more, namely the suitors. Pain is dealt and received, not only in the present, but also into both directions of time. Not only is the character Odysseus multi-faceted, but his name itself has many facets as well.

Finally, Cook's rendering of this passage stands in contrast to these others. He translates these lines: "I myself come here as one who has been enraged at many, at men and at women, throughout the much-nourishing earth, and let him be named Man of Wrath: Odysseus."⁹ Cook's translation is the only one considered here that takes the Greek to be referencing anger. As an examination of the lexicography will show later in this paper, wrath or anger is the primary meaning of the term ὀδύσσομαι. Cook's translation then promises to be the most accurate, yet it stands alone¹⁰ in rendering ὀδύσσομαι with a term that signifies anger.

There must be a reason why so many translators and commentators choose to emphasize the concept of pain or disgust rather than anger or wrath. Cook stands alone in choosing to translate Odysseus' name with a term that has unambiguous connections to anger. Norman Austin's article on naming in the *Odyssey* points to some of the salient reasons why so many translators have opted for translations that emphasize pain rather than anger. Poetic concerns seem to trump lexical ones.

Austin points to the dramatic scene in which Odysseus tauntingly reveals his true name to the wounded Polyphemos. Until the point

8 Hexter, *A Guide to the "Odyssey"*, 250-1.

9 Homer, *Odyssey* XIX.405-409, trans. Albert Cook, 215.

10 At least of the translations consulted for this paper.

Odysseus sails away, he has referred to himself as a Nobody, reveling in the supposed triumph from his own craftiness, unaware that another's shifty craftiness would come upon him in short order. Not only does the pain visited upon Odysseus for revealing his name shed some light on the importance of the episode of receiving his name, it also opens up the importance of irony. Pain inflicted and received offers an obvious means of demonstrating this irony. Permit another quote from Austin:

In this poem where beggars are kings, the wise foolish, the drunk accuse the sober of insobriety, grown sons masquerade behind naivete, and a faithful wife beautifies herself for boorish louts whom she despises, few events have only a surface. The figure of Odysseus is the central paradigm for the poem...The ironist in Odysseus is no mere dissembler, nor merely the stylistic ironist who cultivates ... the practice of expressing the opposite of what one means. Odysseus's irony takes form at a deeper level, foreshadowing, if not fully embodying, the 'infinite absolute negativity'.¹¹

The events surrounding the escape from Polyphemos illustrate this ironic doubling nicely.

In short, choosing to interpret Odysseus' name through the lens of pain opens the doors to multi-layered interpretations that emphasize the irony present throughout the poem. In the aftermath of painfully gouging out Polyphemos' eye and having Poseidon revisit the pain of years of seemingly aimless wandering back upon Odysseus, it is perhaps small wonder that Odysseus and those who count him a friend would be reticent in revealing his true identity. Austin goes on: "The *Odyssey* introduces Odysseus obliquely because that is the way in which sympathetic characters consistently introduce or talk about Odysseus...If Odysseus is the man whom friends will not name, he is also the man whose name is everywhere known, respected and feared."¹² To further demonstrate his point Austin provides a litany of examples in which Odysseus' name is withheld, often from characters who seek to aid and abet him on his journeys. The occurrence of hidden names affords commentators an opportunity to emphasize the workings of poetic irony.

11 Austin, "Name Magic in the *Odyssey*," 14.

12 Austin, "Name Magic in the *Odyssey*," 10.

The Polyphemos scene is laden with irony. The reader knows full well the identities of all involved, but none of the characters know the full truth of who they are each dealing with. The ironies do not stop with the introductions of characters. They continue to occur throughout the poem. The outcomes of actions are also often ironic.

While Austin's account of the pain visited upon Polyphemos demonstrates the importance of irony in *The Odyssey* and begins to show why translators tend to favor connecting Odysseus' name with pain, the clearest and most influential explanation of the shift from anger to pain can be found in George Dimock's "The Name of Odysseus":

Now, all we know from the *Odyssey* about Autolycus' career is that he was the foremost liar and thief of his day. Most naturally, by 'odysseusing many' he means that he has been the bane of many people's existence. The secret of his palpable success would seem to be that he has never given a sucker an even break, and he wants his grandson to be like him. In the career of Autolycus, and in the attitude which it implies, we are much closer to the *polytropon* 'crafty' of the *Odyssey's* first line, than to the *menin* 'wrath' of the *Iliad's*. So let us think no more of 'wrath,' which implies provocation and mental perturbation, but rather of a hand and mind against every man, by nature, or as a matter of policy...These considerations, and others, lead me to think that in the *Odyssey odyssthai* means essentially 'to cause pain (*odyne*), and be willing to do so.'¹³

Dimock continues at length in his article, showing how the replacement of wrath with pain works itself out through the poem. It is insightful commentary, well worth reading; however, he offers no further argumentation on the superiority of taking Odysseus' name to mean pain than what is offered in the quote above. The reason pain is preferred to anger is because pain affords Dimock the opportunity to emphasize the wily aspects of Odysseus' character. In short, poetic considerations carry the field. The remainder of his article assumes the primacy of pain and shows what can be made of it. Dimock acknowledges that there may be reason for reading ὀδύσσομαι as anger, but he eschews it for "poetical" reasons.

13 Dimock, "The Name of Odysseus," 52-53.

Now that the commentary has been explored, what do the lexical tools offer? Stated bluntly, the lexicography stands in contrast to Dimock and Austin. Liddell and Scott, the standard Attic lexicon, emphasizes the frequency, nay exclusivity, with which the term appears in the middle or passive voice. The generic definition offered reads, “to be wroth against, hate,” and goes on specifically to single out the mythic naming of Odysseus, rendering his name “as hated by gods and men.”¹⁴ Liddell and Scott offer ten passages in which the term is used, seven of which come from either the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, or Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Each passage cited refers to a god’s anger, with the naming of Odysseus as the only exception.¹⁵ The frequency with which ὀδύσσομαι appears in the middle and passive voice is reminiscent of Dimock’s argument. The middle voice, as noted above, typically shows an agent acting upon himself. It inhabits the space between the active and passive and, as such, lends itself nicely to the emphasis Dimock places on irony and doublings. One can be angry at oneself just as one can inflict pain upon oneself.

Cunliffe’s lexicon, too, specifically lists this passage from Book XIX in the lexical entry for ὀδύσσομαι. The definition Cunliffe provides reads, “To be angry, wroth, incensed, to rage.”¹⁶ Cunliffe offers much the same list of examples as Liddell and Scott, most of which deal with the anger of the gods. Not only is the passage from *Odyssey* XIX mentioned, but so too is the passage from Book I in which Zeus is the referent. Both Murray and Lattimore refer to the passage in Book I in order to ground their translation of Odysseus’ name. Dimock points out that it is not Zeus that is angry with Odysseus in this passage, but this seems to overlook the fact that it is Athene speaking, asking why Zeus is angry. Even if Zeus is not the angry party, the travails of Odysseus are the result of someone’s anger. Pain is not in view here; anger is the primary referent. Athene briefly misplaces that anger in Zeus rather than Poseidon. This mistake is something that Zeus clears up not by suggesting there is no anger, but by

14 Liddell and Scott, s.v. “ὀδύσσομαι.”

15 The passages are as follows. In Hesiod’s *Theogony* 617-622 Ouranos is angry at Briareos, Kottos, and Gyges. In the *Iliad* VI.138 the gods are angry at Lykourgos and again at VIII.37 Athena refers to Zeus’ anger directed toward the Argives. In the *Odyssey* Zeus’ anger at Odysseus is found in I.62. Book V.340 mentions Poseidon’s anger directed at Odysseus and finally, in V.423 Odysseus references Poseidon’s anger at him.

16 Cunliffe, “ὀδύσσομαι,” in *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*.

showing the correct locus and reason for that anger. Poseidon “remains obstinately enraged about the Cyclops whom he (Odysseus) blinded in the eye.”¹⁷ In his analysis Austin opts, not without visceral reason, for pain. Polyphemos has his eye gouged out, after all. Despite this, it must not be forgotten that the consequences the scene in Book IX will have on Odysseus is already credited to Poseidon’s anger at the beginning of the *Odyssey*. Even though Polyphemos suffers excruciating pain, he reacts angrily (IX. 480)¹⁸ and inspires anger in Poseidon.

Dimock and Austin raise valuable insight concerning the irony at work in the *Odyssey*. Surely this lies at the very heart of the work, and pain is a concept which bears such doublings, ambivalence, and irony. In the presence of pain there must always be not only the pain itself but its cause and its effect, its subject and object. It seems to me, however, that the emphasis on pain overlooks one crucial aspect. Pain pertains primarily to the senses. While it is undeniably a factor in human existence, it is not uniquely a human, or for that matter divine, phenomenon. The standard analysis of anger is that it is a response to an insult or slight.¹⁹ Further, this analysis holds that anger is a feeling of being slighted and that anger is accompanied by pain. It holds anger separate from pain and holds anger logically prior. The key feature of what makes anger anger is the recognition of a slight or insult. It is not overstating the case to say that it takes someone with a mind to be angry. Pain pertains merely to sensation and as such, according to the classical analysis, is not distinctly human. Animals feel pain, but animals cannot properly experience anger. It takes someone capable of perceiving an insult to be angry. Within the world of the *Odyssey* that would mean a character, either human or divine, alone can be angry. This claim is further strengthened by an appeal to the lexical tools since the majority of the texts in question deal with the gods’ anger. The overwhelming number of examples provided in the lexical tools refer to the anger of the gods.

Maintaining the status of anger as a properly human or divine emotion allows the term to be understood in its standard lexical way while also subtly reinforcing Odysseus’ agency throughout the poem. In order

17 Homer, *Odyssey* I.68-69, trans. Albert Cook, 4.

18 It must be admitted that the word for anger in IX.480 is not ὀδύσσομαι but rather χολόω, although it does appear in the middle voice.

19 Konstan, "Translating Ancient Emotions," 3-4.

to be angry, one must be capable of agency. It is perhaps also true that to be a proper object of anger, one must be capable of agency too. It is possible to imagine becoming angry at an inanimate object or animal, but an object, in and of itself, cannot insult or give slight. Only an agent can intend to give offense. Odysseus is the man of many turnings. While much happens to him that is beyond his control, he is never merely passive. Odysseus never lacks for some clever response to the situations he finds himself in, whether they are the products of his own machinations or foisted upon him. Odysseus maintains agency, even if that agency can only be manifested in his choice of object of anger.

Furthermore, the overwhelming use of ὀδύσσομαι in reference to the gods provides a subtle connection between Odysseus and the gods. While Odysseus has congress with the gods throughout the poem, a subtle, lexical reminder of his connections with the divine serves to add a layer of poetic complexity, the very concern that led Dimock and Austin to eschew anger in the first place. Anger preserves the lexical roots of the term and highlights the connections between Book I and Book IX of the *Odyssey*. At any given point in the poem there is potential for irony and craftiness concerning who is angry at whom. Additionally, the presence of the middle voice serves the purposes of irony as well. Dimock and Austin emphasize the importance of hiddenness and irony. Those thematic considerations lead them to favor interpretations that connect Odysseus' name to pain. But the middle voice, with its reflexivity, seems to fulfill the poetic themes of irony well. An agent acting upon himself has the potential for doubling and irony built into the very lexical form. Further analysis on the use of the middle voice would be required to demonstrate ironic uses of the middle voice. But suffice it to say, given the twists and turns of Odysseus, both in his wanderings and in his character, reflexivity is present.

Nor does switching the emphasis from pain to anger necessarily contradict Dimock and Austin's creative interpretive work. Both Dimock and Austin develop the theme of irony and such interpretations would still in large part hold if anger is inserted in the place of pain. More so than the issue of giving and receiving pain, Dimock and Austin work to emphasize the role of ironic doublings in the poem. That is to say, their concern seems to be to preserve or to elucidate an important poetic feature of the poem. They think the topic of pain does that better than anger;

however, anger allows for just as much poetic interpretation. Anger can be hidden just as well as a name can. One can be angry at oneself and others. One can misplace anger. Anger can be dealt and received. All of these can be seen at one point or another in the poem. Allowing Odysseus' name to manifest its lexical roots not only preserves those lexical meanings and associations, but also offers equally fecund poetic interpretation.

In conclusion, Dimock and those who follow him helpfully and rightly point to the importance of irony within the *Odyssey*. They choose to employ a rendering of ὀδύσσομαι as "pain" to accomplish this. Dimock's work, in particular, seems to stand at the head of this trend. However, rendering ὀδύσσομαι as "pain" obscures its lexical roots. What is more, the poetic benefits that motivate the elevation of pain still apply if the more lexically accurate "anger" or "rage" is maintained. The ironic doubling works just as well when anger is utilized. Maintaining the lexical roots offers the additional benefit of emphasizing Odysseus' agency by more clearly using words to describe him that are most often used of the gods.²⁰

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