

Stolen or Fabricated Identity?
On Beggars, House Slaves, and Composite Disguises in the *Odyssey*

My paper examines how Odysseus' fabrication of identity at Troy and Ithaca contributes to the *Odyssey*'s heroic ethos. Helen's Book 4 banquet speech has long provoked controversy due to her composite description of Odysseus' disguise as a house slave (οἰκέυς) and beggar (δέκτης). A scholion to *Odyssey* 4.248 mentions disagreement about the term δέκτης in Helen's speech.

ὁ κυκλικὸς τὸ Δέκτη ὀνοματικῶς ἀκούει, παρ' οὗ φησι τὸν Ὀδυσσεῖα τὰ ῥάκη λαβόντα μετημφιάσθαι... Ἀρίσταρχος δὲ δέκτη μὲν ἐπαίτη (Dindorf 1962).

The Cyclic poet takes the term “δέκτη” as a name, from whom he says that Odysseus took the rags and changed clothes...but Aristarchus says that “δέκτη” means “beggar”.

According to the ancient critic, Aristarchus, the Cyclic poet misinterprets the term by elaborating on the episode from the *Odyssey* and making a certain Dektes the source of Odysseus' disguise. In the context of Helen's Book 4 banquet speech, this means that she would have recognized him at Troy despite his appearance in another man's clothes. Aristarchus rejects the Cyclic poet's reading of the proper name (ὀνοματικῶς) by glossing δέκτη in Helen's speech as an agent noun meaning “beggar” (ἐπαίτη). Since the scholion is our earliest source of Aristarchus' claim, we cannot know the evidence he chose to support his rejection of Dektes as a mythological figure. West and Burgess have more recently posited the validity of the Cyclic poet's claim by noting the problem of conflicting identities in the house slave and beggar disguise. According to Burgess, Odysseus necessarily takes the form of a certain Dektes rather than a beggar-type due to the incompatibility of οἰκέυς and δέκτης (Burgess 2001). West similarly claims that the beggar interpretation “does not really harmonize” with the hero's status

as an οἰκέυς (West 2013). In my paper, I explore the evidence of composite disguises in the *Odyssey* to show how the beggar and house slave work as incidents within the narrative tapestry of the heroic ethos.

I propose that a case of stolen identity would break the fictitious pattern of every other disguise that the hero constructs. For example, Odysseus takes on two false names, Aithon (19.183) and Eperitos (24.306), after returning to Ithaka. I draw on scholarly investigations of these names to argue that the Cyclic poet's interpretation of a certain Dektes would mark an unprecedented departure from Odysseus' use of false names elsewhere. Following the category proposed by Stanford, Homerists often read Aithon and Eperitos as examples of "significant names," a term for fictitious identities made to etymologically reflect the context of the narrative at the time they appear (Stanford 1947). Levaniouk and Walcot propose that Odysseus chose the name "Aithon" as a reflection of his "burning" hunger as a beggar and the "burning" desire of his former status as ruler (Levaniouk 2000, Walcot 2009). Similarly, Heubeck links "Eperitos son of Apheidas," to the meanings "Chosen one, son of Unsparing," as a reiteration of his prosperity at the narrative's conclusion (Heubeck 1988). As significant names, scholars read Aithon and Eperitos as the fictitious inventions of Odysseus rather than references to extant mythological figures. Based on the pattern of fabricated rather than stolen identities, I argue against the Cyclic poet's interpretation of "Dektes" as an epic figure who traded clothes with Odysseus.

I further show that the composite identity of Odysseus in his fictitious tales at Ithaka supports the juxtaposition of beggar and house slave disguises in Helen's Book 4 speech. For example, the hero's begging performance in Book 17 includes a speech narrating his fall from land-owner status, to pirate, to slave after a series of misfortunes (17.415-44). I draw attention to

the beggar's former slave status in Book 17 to corroborate Helen's Book 4 description of the house slave (οἰκεύς) and beggar (δέκτης). Repeating the disguise at Troy, the begging performance at Ithaka establishes continuity between Odysseus at war and at home. I read the connections between past and present disguises as a move to resolve the narrative by restoring the former heroic ethos in the epic's final stages. My paper brings new comparanda to the controversy between Aristarchus and the Cyclic poet to show how the hero's pattern of disguises links remote episodes of the *Odyssey* into a continuous narrative.

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