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Tiberiana 3: Odysseus at Rome – a Problem

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Abstract: This is one of five *parerga* preparatory to a book to be entitled *Tiberius on Capri*, which will explore the interrelationship between culture and empire, between Tiberius' intellectual passions (including astrology, gastronomy, medicine, mythology, and literature) and his role as *princeps*. These five papers do not so much develop an argument as explore significant themes which will be examined and deployed in the book in different contexts.

“Odysseus at Rome” is an appendix to the previous paper on Tiberius' obsession with the Greek hero. It draws attention to some startling evidence for Odysseus' unpopularity in the Roman world.

Tiberiana 3: Odysseus at Rome – a Problem

Heikki Solin's splendid compilation and careful taxonomy of Greek personal names attested in the city of Rome is a monumental work of exacting scholarship, a vast and ordered database of thousands of names marching in columns and indices over 1700 pages.¹ It is also a treasury of insight into the self-perception and presentation of the masses at Rome, or at least those affluent enough to erect inscriptions, and its very size ensures some statistical force.

Take for instance the lists of names under "Political Personalities". In the subsection devoted to "Macedonians and Rulers of the Hellenistic World", Alexander and its many derivatives (in both male and female forms) dwarf the competition, with some 760 examples at Rome. A clear second is Antiochus (with derivatives) at 426; then Philippus, 143, and Antigonus, 107. Surprising are the meager representations of the two other dynastic names, Seleucus of Syria, 71, and weakest of all, Ptolemaeus of Egypt, a mere 40, reduced to the third tier behind Attalus, 88, barely ahead of Nicomedes, 34 – and Seleucus and Ptolemaeus are joined by their female relatives, Cleopatra, 88, Laodice (Laodice), 52, Berenice, 51, and Arsinoe, 36. The women are in fact led by Olympias, the mother of Alexander, with 95. This must all mean something, but what?

The choice of a name is contingent on a number of factors or combination of factors, from individual taste to cultural influences, from liking the sound of it (for

¹ Solin 2003.

whatever reason), to honoring relatives and friends, to expressing admiration for public figures past and present, real, fictional, or divine. Roman patterns of naming were also influenced by the involvement not just of family members but of slave-owners as choosers of names (think of Trimalchio's *ingenio meo impositum est illi nomen bellissimum*²), and by the blending of very different systems of nomenclature in the great tapestry of cultures woven in the capital city. That said, to take the most obvious example, whatever aesthetic or familial reasons there might be for naming one's son Alexander, the overwhelming cult of Alexander the Great in the Graeco-Roman world must have been the decisive element. Antiochus and Philippus may represent a combination of more than one glamorous bearer of those names, but how to account for the poor showing of Seleucus and Ptolemaeus? Sheer chance, or the popular judgment of history?

Take the famous Athenians represented at Rome. Miltiades, Themistocles, and Pericles are virtually ignored, whereas Alcibiades weighs in with 23 namesakes and Solon with 14. Here we might suspect a combination of ethnic pride with a specifically Roman historical resonance: a statue of Alcibiades as the bravest of the Greeks stood for centuries in the Comitium, while fable had it that before the publication of the revered Twelve Tables a commission of senators had studied the laws of Solon at Athens.³

In a culture saturated with myth, admirers naturally chose the names of their heroes for use in daily life. The War at Troy offered a fine repertory of choices. Achilles / Achilleus matches the historical Alexander as the clear favorite here, with 86 examples and another 18 or so names derived from his name. Then follow, on the Greek side:

² Petronius 70. 2.

³ Stories best known from, respectively, Pliny *NH* 34. 26, and Livy 3. 31. 8.

Diomedes with 65; Nestor 31 plus 3 derivatives; Patroclus 12 + 1; Ajax 10 + 2; Menelaus 8 + 2; Teucer 6 + 1; Euryalus 6; Neoptolemus 4; Idomeneus 3; Agamemnon, 2; Tlepolemus 1 + 1; Meriones 1; Protesilaus 1; Philoctetes perhaps 1. And amongst the Trojans: Helenus 72; Paris 56 + 4; Priamus 28; Troilus 19 + 1; Hector 15; Polydorus 6; Aeneas 5; Rhesus 4; Antenor 3; Astyanax 3; Deiphobus 2; Anchises 1; Sarpedon 1.

Obviously such numbers should be handled with caution. Helenus may be inflated by names derived not from the son of Priam but from Helen of Troy, who inspired no fewer than 199 + 5 (female) examples in her own right. Paris' figures on the other hand might well be augmented by examples of his other name (the one commonly used of him in the *Iliad*) lurking among the hundreds of attestations assigned to the historical Alexander, the Great. And the numbers may be skewed by passing fashion or by the intervening existence of a real person with the same name – a famous character, a relative, a family friend – who is thus commemorated. That said, the clear preference for Nestor over Agamemnon, say, or Paris over Hector, surely reflects a popular taste. And despite the idiosyncratic appearance of some minor characters, all the great heroes of the *Iliad* are represented. Or rather, all but one, and he one of the greatest: there is no Odysseus at all.

His astonishing absence from Roman nomenclature is emphasized in different contexts. First, Rome is not an aberration. The huge online *Epigraphik-Datenbase Clauss/Slaby (ECDS)* offers a searchable collection of over three hundred thousand Latin inscriptions from all of *CIL*, *AE*, and many other corpora, covering the entire empire. All but three of the Greek and Trojan heroes named above are well attested outside of Rome,

sometimes in considerable numbers.⁴ But search turns up only one possible Odysseus and he is to be rejected: the name is actually restored on a Numidian inscription (*CIL* VIII. 20163, Cuicul) where [Ody]sseus is much more likely to be an indigenous Nasseus, Basseus, or Isseus. A quick search of the indices of *CIL* VI, X, and XIV, and *IG* IX (which includes Ithaca) and XIV reveals no one named after Odysseus. In Solin's great collection the only trace of the hero surfaces in one example of a person named after not the hero but the poem, the *Odyssey* (along with 16 people named after the *Iliad*). The four volumes (in five) of the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names (LGPN)* which have so far appeared produce two men named Odysseidas in lists of names from third-century BC Thespieae (*SEG* 22. 389 I. 33; 37. 385. 42), and, at last, an Odysseus at Nola in Campania, a slave or possibly freedman member of a funeral collegium in that town (*Atti Acc. Pont.* 21(1972) 393). Thus far, he seems to be the only Odysseus attested in hundreds of thousands of Greek and Latin inscriptions.⁵

Second: could it be that the hero is to be found in the Latin version of his name? After all, Pollux is very common in Latin, Polydeuces almost non-existent. But the search for Ulixes is likewise fruitless.

Third, where Odysseus is astonishingly absent, so too is Penelope. The names of well over two dozen heroines are represented in double digits in Solin: Aegiale (10), Antigona (21), Ariadne (12), Atalante (24+2), and so forth. Some appear in substantial numbers: Helen as above, Hermione with 151 examples, Auge with 109. Some are

⁴ Meriones, Tlepolemus, and Astyanax (not exactly a hero) appear to be attested only at Rome. Protesilaus appears only once, but with Laodamia: *CIL* V. 1348 (Aquileia).

⁵ The hero is likewise absent from documentary papyri as represented in the standard name lists of F. Preisigke's *Namenbuch* (1922) and D. Foraboschi's *Onomasticon* (1967).

relatively obscure. But apparently no one wanted to commemorate the faithful and resourceful wife of Odysseus. She is likewise absent from the *EDCS* and the *LGPN*.⁶

Fourth, the perspective of nomenclature seems badly skewed from a modern point of view. Odysseus was one of the great heroes of literature for centuries, scarcely an author of consequence does not mention him, and his adventures are depicted countless times in every form of art imaginable, statuary, relief sculpture, painting, coins: that the culture was saturated with his image scarcely needs proof. By contrast, the single love story of Pyramus and Thisbe did not exist in western literature before Ovid inserted it into book IV of his *Metamorphoses*, published around the turn of the millennium, and it has obviously left far less trace than the *Odyssey* in art: 4 pages and 26 entries in *LIMC*, as against a hefty 40 and 376 devoted to Odysseus (and his Etruscan version), and 5 and 43 to Penelope. Why then does no Penelope or Odysseus / Ulixes appear in the inscriptions of Rome – but 21 Pyramuses and 19 Thisbes?!

Fifth, if we sail the vast seas of Solin and of the *EDCS*, we encounter Polyphemus and Aeolus, Circe perhaps and a Siren, Scylla and Charybdis, Calypso and Alcinous – but no Odysseus. And when we come home, Telemachus and Eumaeus and Antinous await us – but no Penelope. None of these names is common, granted, but where there are only one or two attestations of each, *our* sense of proportion insists that there should have been hundreds of men named after brave Ulysses.

How to gauge and account for the popular perception of myths at Rome? How do we explain the fact that the most common names in Solin's enormous repertory are not those of the great heroes of Troy or Thebes, but the royal twins Zet(h)us and Amphio(n),

⁶ And from Preisigke and Foraboschi.

who appear 87 (+5) and 105 (+1) times, respectively?⁷ They turn up peripherally in various tales, but are hardly household names today. They are known essentially from one adventure, the terrible vengeance they took on Dirce, their stepmother, for her brutal treatment of their mother. Comparable then, perhaps, in their strong and simple morality, to the inseparable Orestes (31+16) and Pylades (44+3), and far ahead of Menelaus and Agamemnon in popular nomenclature: Cicero twice remarks on how in the second century the entire audience rose to its feet in an uproar of applause at the scene in Pacuvius' *Chryses* where Orestes and Pylades are prepared to die for each other.⁸

Mythology offered not a monolithic canon but rather a spectrum of reference for daily life.⁹ The poor and illiterate man and woman in the Roman street would not know of the adventures of gods and heroes at first hand from Homer and the Greek tragedians or from works of fine art. Their knowledge derived from an end of the spectrum now largely lost to us, from the oral culture of theatrical performance and of story telling. The former ran a gamut from revivals of the standard dramatists (such as Pacuvius), whose texts now survive only in fragments, through recitals of prominent passages, to the broad burlesques of mime and the *Atellana*, to the telegraphic vignettes of pantomime (not oral, but still). Story-telling included what was current in the streets and markets, the world of the traveling folk and the tellers of tales, and the *aniles fabellae* of the domestic hearth – a whole world familiar to millions of which we catch only the echoes. It is the level of society that inexplicably (to us) prefers one pair of avenging brothers, Zethus and

⁷ On the phenomenon, see also Solin 1990: 7-36.

⁸ Cicero *Fin.* 5. 63, *Amic.* 24

⁹ Notable here also are the sometimes astonishing discrepancies between literature and art: see especially Woodford 2003, chapters 14-17, "Distinguishing One Myth from Another", "Confusing One Myth with Another", "Misunderstandings and Muddles", and "Can the Key to an Image Always Be Found?"

Amphion, to another, the Atreidae, a world where wise Nestor may be more popular than the King of Kings, and lovesick Paris and tragic old Priam more attractive than the warrior Hector. High art and literature celebrated Odysseus and Penelope; the man and woman in the street preferred Pyramus and Thisbe.

Everyone will recall how a magnificent freedman gloriously mangles Greek myth in the *Satyricon*, with his tales (otherwise unknown) of how Hannibal created Corinthian ware at the sack of Troy (*Sat.* 50. 5), how Cassandra killed her sons and Daedalus shut up Niobe in the Trojan Horse (52. 1: both in scenes depicted on Trimalchio's silverware), how Agamemnon stole Helen from her brothers Diomedes and Ganymede, substituted a hind for her in sacrifice to Diana, won the war of the Tarentines against Troy, and gave his daughter in marriage to Achilles, thus causing Ajax to go mad (59. 4-5). I wonder if, when Petronius makes fun of Trimalchio's vision of the Trojan War, he captures and caricatures not just a rich and vulgar freedman, but a whole different world-view. In so doing, perhaps, he exposes the yawning gap between what may unfashionably be called High and Low Cultures, between the orderly, intertextual development of myth in the elite world with which we are too familiar, and the rough, unregulated, oral market-place of the folk, which is all but escapes record.

Despite his possession of two libraries, one Greek and one Latin, Trimalchio was no great reader. His quotation of a Virgilian tag, *sic notus Ulixes* (*Sat.* 39. 3), while appropriate to the context, suggests a commonplace rather than any intimate knowledge of the *Aeneid*.¹⁰ And his familiarity with the *Odyssey* is refreshingly personal:

¹⁰ 2. 44: Laocoon's warning about the Trojan horse, appropriate to Trimalchio's deceptive dishes.

‘Rogo’ inquit ‘Agamemnon mihi carissime, numquid duodecim aerumnas
Herculis tenes, aut de Ulixē fabulam, quemadmodum illi Cyclops pollicem
!poricino! extorsit? Solebam haec ego puer apud Homerum legere.’ (48. 7)

Tell me, Agamemnon, my dearest friend; have you any recollection of the twelve
labours of Hercules, or that story of how Ulysses had his thumb twisted off by the
Cyclops with his pincers? I used to read these stories in Homer when I was a boy.

(tr. P.G. Walsh)

Fortunately for his guest, Trimalchio does not pause for an answer. It could be that he
simply mangles a misremembered tale. But it is also worth considering that the thumb
story was “perhaps taken from one of the farcical comedies about Polyphemus which
must by now have become familiar.”¹¹ That is, not that Trimalchio gets it quite wrong,
but that his Homeric pretensions mask a remembered low version of an adventure of
Ulysses in which the clever hero suffered to comic effect.

To put the matter simply: despite all his attractions for artists, craftsmen, writers,
and their patrons, Odysseus was just not popular.¹² The stout-hearted adventurer, the wily
counselor, the formidable warrior, present just one side of his character. The impression
of him in Greek tragedy and in much of the Iliad is that of a treacherous, cold-blooded
schemer, and this negative image is carried over into Roman drama, the public vehicle

¹¹ Smith 1975: 131.

¹² In this regard Odysseus joins two other figures, well known from art and literature but
(as far as I can tell) completely and conspicuously absent from the inscriptions: Oedipus
and Hecuba / Hekabe – well known and ill omened. Oedipus’ Iocasta / Epikaste
accompanies him *in absentia*; Hecuba’s equally unhappy Priam, on the other hand, was
curiously popular.

through which most ordinary people would know him: all of this was well laid out by W.B. Stanford.¹³

At the other end of the social scale, the emperor Tiberius so identified himself with Ulysses, or Odysseus, that he seems at times to have been channeling the hero, a tale to be pursued elsewhere. The point here is that the emperor and his hero were both deeply unpopular great men – not that this would have bothered Tiberius too much.

¹³ Stanford 1968.

ECDS = *Epigraphik-Datenbase Claus/Slaby*:

<http://compute-in.ku-eichstaett.de:8888/pls/epigr/epiergebnis>

LIMC = *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*. Zurich, Munich: 1981-

LGPN = P.M. Fraser, E. Matthews, edd., *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*. Oxford: 1987-

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