

CLINGING TO THE FIG TREE

A note on Od. 12.432–6

There are five occasions in the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus' escape from doom is associated with olive wood or an olive tree.¹ In 5.234–6, the handle of the ax that Calypso gives Odysseus to build his raft is made of olive wood.² At the end of book 5 (474–93), Odysseus, who at this point of the story has barely escaped from the storm unleashed by Poseidon, finds refuge underneath two bushes, one a cultivated olive tree.³ In 13.96–123, the Phaeacians place the sleeping Odysseus on the shores of Ithaca by the trunk of an olive tree.⁴ It is also in this place Athena and Odysseus sit down together and plot the destruction of Penelope's suitors (372–3). In the Cyclops story, Odysseus blinds Polyphemus with an olive-wood stake, which he finds in the cave of the Cyclops (9.315–20).⁵ Finally, in 23.173–204, the foundation of Penelope and Odysseus' marriage bed is an olive tree. The goal of the present study is to bring to attention relatively new facts concerning the symbolism of the olive tree in the *Odyssey*.

The symbolic presence of the olive tree in the passages mentioned above has stirred attention since antiquity. However, there are relatively few scholarly treatments of this issue.⁶ According to Porphyry, the olive tree in book 13 symbolizes the cosmic order and wisdom of Athena.⁷ In modern times, Wilamowitz (1884: 106

1) Cf. Schein (1970: 75–6).

2) Cf. 5.236: στείλειον περικαλλές ἐλάϊνον.

3) Cf. 5.477: ὁ μὲν φυλῆς ὁ δ' ἐλαίης; Dindorf (1855: 291–92) (scholia B, P, Q, T) takes φυλῆς as a wild olive but this identification has been disputed since antiquity; cf. Stanford (1959: 306); Heubeck/West/Hainsworth (1988: 287); Schein (1970: 76 n. 7).

4) Cf. 13.102: τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη.

5) Cf. 9.319–20: μέγα ῥόπαλον ... χλωρὸν ἐλαίνεον.

6) The extant scholia do not say much about this issue; to give an example, for the scholiast T on 9.320 the stake that blinds Polyphemus is made of olive wood because the olive wood ταχέως ἐκπυροῦνται 'gets heated easily'; cf. Dindorf (1855: 431).

7) Cf. De antr. nymph. 32: σύμβολον φρονήσεως θεοῦ ἢ ἐλαία. Ἀθηνᾶς μὲν γὰρ τὸ φυτόν, φρόνησις δὲ ἡ Ἀθηνᾶ.

n. 17) notes that the poet of the *Odyssey* calls this tree in book 13 ‘einen heiligen Ölbaum’, a sacred tree.⁸ Germain (1954: 308–9) argues that the presence of the olive tree(s) under which Odysseus finds refuge at the end of book 5 symbolizes Athena’s first victory against Poseidon. From this moment on Athena would openly guide Odysseus to Ithaca. For Schein (1970: 76), the olive-wood devices with which Odysseus blinds Polyphemus or builds a raft are the expression of Odysseus’ skills and wisdom. Needless to say, wisdom is one of Athena’s main attributes. Van Leeuwen (1917: 680) suggests that the olive tree of the marriage bed is sacred (*oliva sacra*). Stanford (1958: 399–400), however, rightly notes that a sacred tree could hardly have been treated by Odysseus as described in 23.195–6.⁹ Ameis / Hentze (1900: 92) think that the olive wood of the marriage bed symbolizes the solidity of the marriage between Odysseus and his wife.¹⁰

An earlier opinion, which is relevant for the present study, is Eustathius (Od. 1944.3–4). This medieval scholar argues that the frequent presence of the olive tree by Odysseus’ side is due to Athena.¹¹ In modern times, Segal (1962: 62 n. 31, 63 n. 41) also argues that Athena and the olive tree are interchangeable and thus complementary symbols of safety and security for Odysseus.¹² Similar ideas are expressed by Cook (1995: 6–8, 106–10) for whom the well-known episode of Athena guiding Odysseus and Telemachus with her lamp (book 19) is also related to the presence of the olive. Indeed, Athena’s lamp (λύχνος), which was an object of cult in the Athenian Erechtheum and symbolized the continued

8) Cf. 13.372, in which Athena and Odysseus sit by the trunk of the olive tree: τὸ δὲ καθέζομένω ἱερῆς παρὰ πυθμὲν’ ἐλαίης; cf. also Eustathius, Od. 1744.30.

9) ‘Then I cut away the foliage of the long-leaved olive / and trimmed the trunk from the roots up ...’

10) Similarly, Zeitlin (1996: 23) argues that the bed represents a “double-sided sign – of identity for him, fidelity for her” and notes that, since no blueprint can be extracted from the Homeric details of the bed’s manufacture, the bed must be considered as a “mental construct”, that is, a symbol (52).

11) ἔστι δὲ ἐννοήσασθαι καὶ ὡς διὰ τὴν Ἀθηνᾶν χαίρει Ὀδυσσεὺς τῷ φυτῷ τῆς ἐλαίας, ὃ πολλαχοῦ φαίνεται ἀνεῖσθαι αὐτῇ; this is Eustathius’ comment on 23.190 (on the marriage bed).

12) Porter (1962: 5–6) argues that the olive tree in the *Odyssey* symbolizes rebirth; cf. Schein (1970: 75 n. 6); also Pease (1937: 2015).

Line 317 above was considered by some scholars to be an interpolation. The reason is the allegedly conspicuous absence of Athena from Odysseus' side during his fairy-tale wanderings in books 9–12.¹⁶ The proponents of this theory, therefore, claim that the poet who composed 317 is not identical to the poet who composed the whole passage. In other words, they claim the initial poet did not make any connection between the olive tree and Athena.¹⁷ This theory is hard to accept. First, the olive tree / wood is clearly associated with Athena in the *Odyssey*. Second, there is nothing in the syntax or semantics of this passage which could indicate an interpolation. On the contrary, line 317 seems to be a necessary continuation of 316, in which Odysseus is said to ponder 'black thoughts' (κακά βυσσοδομεύων); it precisely describes what these 'black thoughts' are about.¹⁸ Last but not least, the presence of Athena's symbol in this passage is not at odds with her alleged absence from the other episodes of the *Wanderings*. Indeed, in 13.341–2, Athena herself explains to Odysseus that she did not help him during his wanderings because she did not wish to fight Poseidon. Poseidon, on the other hand, gets mad at Odysseus only after (as a result of) the *Cyclopeia*.¹⁹ In such a case, the absence of Athena by Odysseus' side concerns only the episodes after the *Cyclopeia*. Therefore, it is not in contradiction with her being mentioned in the cave of the Cyclops. The interpolation theory does not appear to be based on a firm ground.

16) Aside from this passage, Athena is mentioned in the *Wanderings* only two other times, both of which in the *Nekyia*. She appears as either a judge in the contest between Ajax and Odysseus (11.547) or Heracles' escort (11.626). For the issue of Athena's absence during the *Wanderings*, cf. Ameis / Hentze (1889: 65); Calhoun (1940: 274–5). Recently, Clay (1983: 44–6, 51) argues that Athena does not start helping Odysseus until he reaches Calypso, therefore until after the *Wanderings*. Murnaghan (1995: 64–5) is somewhat more cautious arguing that Athena is "obliged to cede control of events to Poseidon" during the *Wanderings*.

17) The mention of the olive tree in 9.320 clearly shows that the poet who composed 317 did it precisely because he made the association between Athena and the olive tree.

18) Cf. 9.316–17: ... ἀντὰρ ἐγὼ λιπόμην κακὰ βυσσοδομεύων / εἴ πως τισαίμην, δότι δέ μοι εὐχος Ἀθήνη.

19) Cf. 13.341–3: 'But, you see, I did not want to fight with my father's / brother, Poseidon, who was holding a grudge against you /, in his heart, and, because you blinded his dear son, hated you.' The same idea is expressed by the poet's own remark that Athena did not want to appear to Odysseus in Scheria out of respect for Poseidon (6.328–30); cf. Cook (1995: 52–3).

no other than Zeus. Athena, who can help Odysseus in other situations, has no choice but to refrain herself from showing Zeus any sign of her presence. This time, Odysseus' fate is in Zeus' hands.²²

These considerations can easily explain why the olive tree is absent from the passage in question here. This is not, however, the only possible solution to this issue. The absence of the olive tree and the poet's choice for the wild fig tree can also be explained from a different perspective.

It is important to note that not any tree can grow on rocks. Olive trees, for example, can grow on rocky soil that contains a mixture of clay and gravel.²³ Fig trees, however, especially ones in the wild, can grow in very extreme conditions, even on rocks.²⁴ From this perspective, the wild fig tree is a much better fit than the olive tree for the rock of Charybdis. Other elements point as well to the fact that the tree corresponding perfectly to the landscape of the Charybdis rock is the wild fig tree and not the olive tree.²⁵ First, the fig tree in this passage is tall and grown at an angle, allowing Odysseus to get a hold of its trunk. This perfectly fits the description of a wild fig tree growing on a rock.²⁶ Second, the fact that the branches of this tree are placed high on the trunk also corresponds to the description of a fig tree. An olive tree has branches placed low on the trunk. If an olive tree had been on the Charybdis rock, Odysseus could have been able to reach its branches and climb up. The subsequent scene in which he is forced to throw himself into the sea would have not been possible.

That the wild fig tree is invented by the poet of the *Odyssey* to correspond to the circumstances of the story is also shown by the metaphor of the bats in 12.433. Odysseus clings to the fig tree like a bat. It is known that bats like figs. They hang on fig trees,

22) In 12.445, right after Odysseus saves himself by clinging to the fig tree, Zeus saves him from Skylla.

23) Cf. Pease (1937: 2005).

24) They can grow even on tombstones or abandoned walls; cf. Juv. 10.145; Mart. 10.2.9; Olck (1909: 2112–13).

25) For the botanical details regarding these two trees, cf. Hora (1981: 155–8, 245–6).

26) The poet suggests that Odysseus embraced the trunk of the fig tree with his hands and feet. This would not be possible if the tree did not spread from the rock at a certain angle; cf. Heubeck / Hoekstra (1989: 142). The olive tree, which is in general shorter than the fig tree, does not grow in such position.

eating the fruit. The fig seeds are eliminated during the digestion process, which is essential for the propagation of the fig tree.²⁷ Therefore, the metaphor of the bats in 12.433 is not randomly invented but corresponds to a biological reality.²⁸

All these clues indicate the wild fig tree as the tree that best fits the situation described in 12.432–6. Therefore, the absence of the olive tree in this most difficult moment for Odysseus can be easily explained through the natural conditions of the landscape. Under these circumstances, the first solution to the issue of the absence of the olive tree seems to be superfluous. It is, however, undeniable that Odysseus has a special relation with the olive tree. This observation invites a third hypothesis, a combination of the first two. Thus, the storm unleashed by Zeus brings Odysseus to a place in which not even the olive tree, the symbol of Athena, can take root. If this observation is correct, then the totally unfavorable conditions in which Odysseus finds himself in the Charybdis episode symbolically indicate Athena's helplessness in front of Zeus' wrath.²⁹

To conclude: The olive tree can play various symbolic roles in the *Odyssey*. All of them underscore the association of this tree with Athena. In 12.432–6, on the other hand, when Odysseus is closer to death than ever, the olive tree is absent from the side of Odysseus. Paradoxically, this absence possibly shows as well that the generic role of this tree in the *Odyssey* is to mark Athena's presence by the side of her favorite hero on his path to Ithaca.³⁰

27) Cf., e. g., Shanahan (2001: 549).

28) In 24.6–10, the souls of the suitors are compared to bats in a cave, which is also a common place to find bats; cf. n.21.

29) Athena, therefore, refrains from helping Odysseus not out of respect for Poseidon but because in this case it is Zeus, not Poseidon, who acts. It is important to note that it is only after this episode that Athena will start revealing again her presence by Odysseus' side. This will happen during Calypso's episode. Obviously, Athena's decision is based on Zeus' consent in book 1.

30) In Od. 24.340–2, after having shown Laertes the scar, Odysseus appeals to a second recognition sign, which is his knowledge of the tree orchard that Laertes gave him when he was a child. Henderson (1997: 91–4) argues that these signs are both complementary and meaningful. The scar would tell of an 'ephebic ritual' of maturation whereas Odysseus' knowledge of the orchard trees would point to his childhood in Ithaca. Interestingly, the olive tree is not present among the trees Odysseus received from Laertes, a fact which Henderson did not notice. This possibly shows, in my view, that Athena's special relationship with Odysseus concerns only his adult years, the years of wisdom and accomplishment for a man.

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