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Odysseus' Sardonic Smile and the Gift that Bites Back

This paper considers Odysseus' puzzling sardonic smile in light of ancient Greek myths of territorial expropriation. The suitor Ktesippos throws an ox-hoof at Odysseus, who is disguised as a beggar, and calls it a "guest-gift [*xeinion*]." Odysseus evades the hoof easily then he smiles, Homer says, "very sardonically [*mala sardanion*]" (*Od.* 20. 299-302). This smile has perplexed scholars since antiquity.

I will not attempt to explain what a "sardonic smile" looks like, nor what it means in itself. Instead I will focus on why the specific interaction between Ktesippos and Odysseus is singularly marked out. The key is in the mock "gift-exchange" between Ktesippos and Odysseus' alter ego, the beggar Aithon. A comparison with three myths will reveal its significance. The myths of Aletes in Korinth (Sch. Pind. *N.* 7. 155a), Perdikkas in Makedonia (Hdt. 8. 137-9), and Temon in Ainiania (Plut. *Mor.* 293f-294c), to my knowledge, have not been brought to bear on the question of Odysseus' sardonic smile, but they are relevant. All three myths concern conquest and expropriation. All three involve kings in lowly guise (beggars or serfs) in a foreign land. While in such guise the kings are insulted by an inhabitant or the local king with the "gift" of an ambiguous object: Aletes begs for food and is given dirt instead; Temon likewise; and Perdikkas is given dirt instead of his due wages. Each myth's respective narrative makes clear that the unwitting exchange presages the subsequent expropriation of the donor's territory at the hands of the recipient.

I suggest that Odysseus' sardonic smile should be read as reflecting the awareness that Ktesippos' hoof-toss—along with his mockingly calling it a "gift"—signaled the inevitable reconquest of Odysseus' house and property from the occupying suitors.