

# Pseudodementia, malingering and revenge in Ancient Greece: Odysseus and Palamedes

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Greco-Latin tradition is a rich source of metaphors and eponyms in medicine. In this paper, we unearth from ancient Greece one of the oldest portraits of malingering in Western literature.

**Summary:** The kidnapping of Helen of Troy triggered a military alliance within Greece against the Trojans. Odysseus, king of Ithaca, feigned madness in order to avoid being recruited. Palamedes, in a manoeuvre that risked the life of Odysseus' son Telemachus, succeeded in unmasking him. Eventually, the cunning Odysseus would take revenge. We review classical texts from Greek and Roman authors concerning these mythical deeds and establish the diagnosis of malingering after excluding mimics.

**Key messages:** Odysseus' attempt at deception provides one of the oldest depictions of this behaviour in written history. We suggest using the expression "Revenge on Palamedes" to define the relatively common phenomenon of retaliation against a doctor who has diagnosed malingering.

## KEYWORDS

Deception, pseudodementia, factitious disorders, malingering, medicine in ancient history, medicine in literature, Greece, revenge

## Introduction

Myths and legends<sup>1</sup> reflect ancestral explanations for life, death, disease, human behaviour, and other sentinel events of existence, and they form the core of cultural identity. Greek mythology is one of the pillars of European civilization, contributing to basic historical, religious, artistic, scientific and philosophical concepts. This also holds true in the medical field, where acute clinical observations made by classical Greco-Latin medical or literary authors have provided abundant metaphors and fitting eponyms for diseases and syndromes.<sup>2</sup> The mythical figure of Odysseus –Ulysses to the Romans– is an example of this concept.<sup>3-5</sup> Our aim is to highlight a deed immediately preceding those narrated in the *Iliad* and providing a classical precedent of

malingering. We will address the issue of how Odysseus from Ithaca feigned dementia in an attempt to avoid taking part in the war of wars: the Trojan conflict.

## Development

The legend of Troy: Odysseus' deception

The legend of Troy is arguably the grandest product of Greek mythology. The larger part of the events is described in the *Iliad*, a masterpiece attributed to the poet Homer. However there were many events before and after the Trojan War of which we are aware thanks to references in texts by Greek or Latin authors other than Homer.

The abduction of Helen of Troy by Paris, a foreign ambassador, violated fundamental hospitality obligations

(Apollod, III 10, 9; E, IA, 57 ss.) and triggered a call to arms among various Greek cities, which rapidly came together to form the Achaean league. Only two princes were missing. One of them was Odysseus, famous for his cunning, who was reluctant to leave home, wife, and son for the sake of the unfaithful woman of a Spartan. When Menelaus –Helen’s husband and king of Sparta– went to Ithaca to convince Odysseus, he brought with him his friend Palamedes, who rivalled Odysseus in intelligence. The latter then decided to feign madness in order to shirk his duty. Thus, in Apollodorus:

they visit Odysseus in Ithaca, but he, unwilling to take part in the campaign, alleges dementia. But Palamedes, son of Nauplio, showed his madness was feigned: he remained in the company of the simulator and, grabbing Telemachus from Penelope’s lap, drew forth the sword as if he were to kill him. Only then Odysseus, concerned for his son’s safety, confessed the falseness of his dementia and marched to war (Apollod, Epit III 7).

Other more elaborate versions, such as the one collected in Gustav Schwab’s *Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen*

*Altertums* (1838-1840)<sup>6</sup> relate that in his performance, Odysseus ploughed with an ox and a donkey harnessed together, and threw salt instead of seed in the furrows. Palamedes understood his intention and secretly entered the palace of the Ithacan. He took Telemachus from the cradle and placed him in the path of the plough. When he reached his son, Odysseus carefully lifted the plough or else turned it aside (Figure 1). It was then evident that he was of sound mind and could not refuse to join the Achaean league. Hyginus (64 BC-17 AC) provides a similar description in his *Fabulae*:

when he found out that emissaries would appear before him, he feigned insanity, putting on a hat and harnessing together to the plough a horse and an ox. Immediately Palamedes realized he was pretending. He then took Ulysses’ son from the cradle, put him under the plough and exclaimed: stop pretending and join the league! Then Ulysses gave his word that he would go to war. That was the reason for his enmity with Palamedes (Hyg, Fab 95, 2).

In the same vein, Lycophron (III century BC) exclaims in his poem “Alexandra”: “How much better off would you



Figure 1. Odysseus ploughs the sterile beach, but turns aside to avoid killing Telemachus. *Ulysses ploughing the sea shore*. Heywood Hardy and Charles Cousen, 1888

be, wretched, ploughing in your homeland, harnessing together the ox and the laborious donkey, driven by a fictitious madness, than suffering such misfortune!” (Alexandra 815-819)

#### Odysseus’ malingering. Revenge on Palamedes

The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) defines malingering (Z76.5) as conscious simulation. The malingerer is a person feigning illness with an obvious motive for doing so. The feigned symptoms may be somatic or psychological, and they may be motivated by incentives or stressful situations. The most common are the desire to escape justice, to improve living conditions, to obtain illegal drugs, to avoid dangerous military duty or recruitment, and to obtain sickness benefits. It is considered a less common condition in ordinary civilian life, but more frequent in military and legal environments.<sup>7</sup> Malingering is also a behaviour as old as mankind, indeed intrinsic to human intelligence: it was already mentioned in early medical texts such as the *Corpus Hippocraticum*.<sup>8</sup>

The diagnosis of malingering is often difficult,<sup>9-11</sup> but the case of Odysseus seems clear. First of all, he admits feigning illness. The symptoms abruptly ceased when the life of a loved one was threatened, in a risky diagnostic test that would be unthinkable nowadays. Other evidence that supports the diagnosis of malingering is the fact that during the rest of his lifetime Odysseus did not present similar episodes, nor did he suffer progressive cognitive decline. Indeed, ten years of amazing feats were yet to come, both in the Trojan War and during his perilous voyage home.

It should also be noted that Odysseus’ symptoms resolved suddenly with no amnesia, making seizure, transient global amnesia, or legitimate acute confusional state unlikely.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the Ithacan remembered the incident so well that he could not rest until he had taken revenge on his rival. Again in Hyginus: “Every day Ulysses wondered in what way could he kill Palamedes, son of Nauplius, after having fallen into his trap” (Hyg, Fab 105, 1). And in Apollodorus:

Later on Odysseus forced a Phrygian prisoner to write a message on a tablet, apparently from Pryamus, that accused Palamedes of treason. He then buried gold in Palamedes’ tent and left the tablet in the middle of the camp. Agamemnon, after reading

the message and unearthing the gold, had Palamedes stoned (Apollod, Epit, III, 8).

The presence of obvious motivation to avoid undesirable recruitment, rather than simply an intrinsic gain derived from playing the medical patient role argues against a factitious disorder. Lastly, Odysseus is perfectly aware of his actions and intends to deceive others, which also excludes the diagnosis of a dissociative disorder.<sup>13,14</sup>

#### The reasons for feigning

According to Hyginus, Odysseus was aware of a dire prediction: “An oracle had answered him that, if he were to leave for Troy, he would come back home twenty years later, impoverished and alone” (Hyg, Fab 95, 1). However, a direct refusal to keep an oath he had sworn before the very gods could turn their wrath upon himself, his house and –being a king– upon his people. Therefore, to avoid joining the expedition, he had to find a way of bypassing his oath. The strategy of being excused by those responsible for securing its fulfilment was very convenient.

Apart from the mythical explanations, there are practical reasons that can give other clues concerning Odysseus’ dilemma. Ithaca is a small island of only 96 km<sup>2</sup> located to the northeast of Kefalonia. It is controversial whether the current Ithaca was really the homeland of Odysseus, since Homer’s description does not match exactly.<sup>15</sup> In any case, it is reasonable to believe that a smaller island, whose king would consequently be less powerful than those of Sparta or Mycenae, would have had no choice but to accept forming part of the league, as it could not risk reprisal. On the other hand, Odysseus may have feared what did in fact happen during his absence: political instability in his kingdom, with a swarm of insolent suitors fighting for his wife Penelope and posing a threat to Telemachus’ dynastic rights.

#### Conclusions

All in all, the descriptions of Odysseus’ transient “dementia” prior to the Trojan War provide a clear portrait of malingering: the subject feigned neuropsychiatric symptoms in an attempt to avoid recruitment for a military campaign. This is, to the best of our knowledge, not only one of the most ancient but

also a superbly detailed description of this behaviour in classical literature.

In closing, we suggest using the expression “revenge on Palamedes” to describe the relatively common phenomenon of retaliating against the doctor –often a neurologist– who has diagnosed malingering.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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