PART TWO: COMING HOME

In Book 13, Odysseus, laden with gifts, is returned in secret to Ithaca in one of the magically swift Phaeacian ships. In Ithaca, Athena appears to the hero. Because his home is full of enemies, she advises him to proceed disguised as a beggar. Now Odysseus must succeed not only by physical power but also by intelligence.

In Book 14, Odysseus, in his beggar’s disguise, finds his way to the hut of Eumaeus, his old and trusty swineherd. Eumaeus is the very image of faithfulness in a servant—a quality much admired by Homer’s society. The introduction of members of the so-called servant class as important actors is unusual in epic poetry, and it indicates Homer’s originality. Odysseus is politely entertained by Eumaeus, but the king remains disguised from his old servant.

In Book 15, Athena appears to Odysseus’s son, Telemachus. The young man has gone to Pylos and Sporta to talk to old comrades of his father’s to try to discover if Odysseus is alive or dead. Athena advises him to return to Ithaca. His home—the palace of Odysseus—has been overrun by his mother’s suitors. These arrogant men are spending money from Telemachus’s inheritance on feasting and drinking, and they are demanding that his mother, Penelope, take one of them as a husband. Athena warns Telemachus that the suitors plan to ambush him. Telemachus boards a ship for home, lands secretly on Ithaca, and heads toward the hut of the swineherd.

As father and son move closer and closer together, the suspense becomes great. Now Homer is ready to recount what could be the most dramatic moment in the epic. Remember that Odysseus has not seen his son for twenty years. Telemachus has been away from Ithaca for a year.

THE MEETING OF FATHER AND SON

But there were two men in the mountain hut—
Odysseus and the swineherd. At first light
blowing their fire up, they cooked their breakfast
and sent their lads out, driving herds to root
in the tall timber.

When Telemachus came,
the wily flock of watchdogs only frowned on him
as he advanced. Odysseus heard them go
and heard the light crunch of a man’s footfall
at which he turned quickly to say:

“Eumaeus,
here is one of your crew come back, or maybe
another friend: the dogs are out there sniffing
bale down; not one has even growled.
I can hear footsteps—”

But before he finished
his tall son stood at the door.

The swineherd
rose in surprise, letting a bottle and jug
tumble from his fingers. Going forward,
he kissed the young man’s head, his shining eyes
and both hands, while his own tears brimmed and fell.
Think of a man whose dear and only son,
born to him in exile, reared with labor,
had lived ten years abroad and now returns:
how would that man embrace his son? Just so
the birdsman clapped his arms around Telemachus
and covered him with kisses—for he knew
the lad had got away from death. He said:

“Light of my days, Telemachus,
you made it back! When you took ship for Pylos
I never thought to see you here again.
Come in, dear child, and let me feast my eyes;
here you are, home from the distant places!
How rarely, anyway, you visit us,
your own men, and your own woods and pastures!
Always in the town, a man would think
you loved the suitors’ company, those dogs!”
Telemachus with his clear candor said:

"I am with you, Uncle." See now, I have come because I wanted to see you first, to hear from you if Mother stayed at home—or is she married off to someone, and Odysseus' bed

deeply empty for some gloomy spider's weaving?"

Gently the forester replied to this:

"At home indeed your mother is, poor lady still in the women's hall. Her rights and days are worn out with grieving."

Stepping back he took the bronze-ash lance, and the young prince entered the cabin over the worn door stone. Odysseus moved aside, yielding his couch, but from across the room Telemachus checked him:

"Friend, sit down; we'll find another chair in our own hut. Here is the man to make one!"

The swineherd, when the quiet man sank down, built a new pile of evergreens and fleeces—a couch for the dear son of great Odysseus—then gave them trenchers' of good meat, left over from the roasting pork of yesterday, and heaped up willow baskets full of bread, and mixed an ivy bowl of honey-hearted wine. Then he in turn sat down, facing Odysseus, their hands went out upon the meat and drink as they fell to, ridding themselves of hunger.

Not realizing that the stranger is his father, Telemachus tries to protect him as best he can. He says that the beggar cannot stay in the palace hall because he will be abused by the drunken suitors.

The swineherd is sent to Penelope with news of her son's return. Now even Athena cannot stand the suspense any longer. She turns to Odysseus, who is still in beggar's rage:

...She tipped her golden wand upon the man, making his cloak pure white, and the knelt tunic fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him.

Vocabulary

candor (kan'dor) n.: honesty, frankness.

966. Uncle, here, a term of affection.


984. trenchers (trońchər) n.: wooden platters.

993. lithe (lith) adj.: lithe.

993. "Lithe" and young she made him.

1003. obligation (əˌbəˈleʃən) n.: offering of a sacrifice. Telemachus thinks the stranger is a god.

1012. incredulity (inˈkrēdələtē) n.: disbelief.

1012. "You cannot be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirit conceived this trick to twist the knife in me!"

1013. No man of woman born could work these wonders by his own craft, unless a god came into it with ease to turn him young or old at will. I swear you were in rage and old, and here you stand like one of the immortals!"

1020. Odysseus brought his raging mind to bear and said:

"This is not princely, to be swept away by wonder at your father's presence. No other Odysseus will ever come, for he and I are one, the same; his bitter fortune and his wanderings are mine. Twenty years gone, and I am back again on my own island...""

Then, throwing his arms around this marvel of a father, Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears..."
rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
as those of the great tawny hawk,
whose nestlings* farmers take before they fly.
So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
and might have gone on weeping till sundown. . . .

(from Book 16)

1033. nestlings (nest'linz) n. young
birds that are not ready to leave the
nest.

1035. 1035–1035. Which part of
this recognition scene between
father and son do you find most
moving or most dramatic? Sort out
the problems that now face father
and son in the palace at Ithaca.

1038. Odysseus is recognized by
Euryclinda when she washes his feet.
Roman relief.
Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Italy.

1044–1071. Here again we hear about people who
muck the sacred laws of respect and hospital-
ity. In showing us how the old dog is
treated, what is Homer telling us about
conditions in Ithaca?

1078. megaron (meg'ar-on) n. great
hall or central room.

---

THE BEGGAR AND THE FAITHFUL DOG

Telemachus returns to the family compound and is greeted tearfully by his
mother, Penelope, and his old nurse, Euryclinda. A soothsayer has told his
mother that Odysseus is alive and in Ithaca. However, Telemachus does not report
that he has seen his father. The suspense builds as Odysseus, once again disguised
as a beggar, returns to his home, accompanied only by the swineherd. He has been away for
twenty years. Only one creature recognizes him.

While he spoke
an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears
and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argo,
trained as a puppy by Odysseus,
but never taken on a hunt before
his master sailed for Troy. The young men, afterward,
hunted wild goats with him, and hare, and deer,
but he had grown old in his master’s absence.
Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last
upon a mass of dung before the gates—
manure of mules and cows, piled there until
field hands could spread it on the king’s estate.
Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,
old Argo lay.

But when he knew he heard
Odysseus’ voice nearby, he did his best
to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears,
having no strength to move nearer his master.
And the man looked away,
wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he
hid this from Eumaeus. Then he said:

"I marvel that they leave this hound to lie
here on the dung pile;
he would have been a fine dog, from the look of him,

1050 though I can’t say as to his power and speed
when he was young. You find the same good build
in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep
all for style."

And you replied, Eumaeus:

"A hunter owned him—but the man is dead
in some far place. If this old hound could show
the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him,
going to Troy, you’d see him swift and strong.
He never shrank from any savage thing
he’d bring to bay in the deep woods on the scent
no other dog kept up with him. Now misery
has him in leash. His owner died abroad,
and here the women slaves will take no care of him.
You know how servants are: without a master
they have no will to labor, or excel.
For Zeus who views the wide world takes away
half the manhood of a man, that day
he goes into captivity and slavery.
Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward
into the megaron* among the suitors;
but death and darkness in that instant closed
the eyes of Argos, who had seen his master,
Odysseus, after twenty years. . . .

(from Book 17)
Penelope to Ulysses

Penelope, distressed by the suitors’ demands that she marry one of them, plays a trick on them. She has told them that she is weaving a shroud (a cloth used to wrap a body for burial) for Laertes, her father-in-law. She promises that she will choose a husband when she has completed the work. “So every day I work on the great loom, but every night by torchlight I unwove it . . . .” With this simple trick she has deceived her suitors for three years. What do this trick and this poem reveal about Penelope? As you read the Odyssey, look for places where she displays these same traits.

An Ancient Gesture

Edna St. Vincent Millay

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
Penelope did this too.
And more than once you can’t keep weeping all day
And undoing it all through the night;
your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets tight;
And along towards morning, when you think it will never be light,
And your husband has been gone, and you don’t know where, for years,
Suddenly you burst into tears;
There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek.
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
He learned it from Penelope . . .
Penelope, who really cried.