

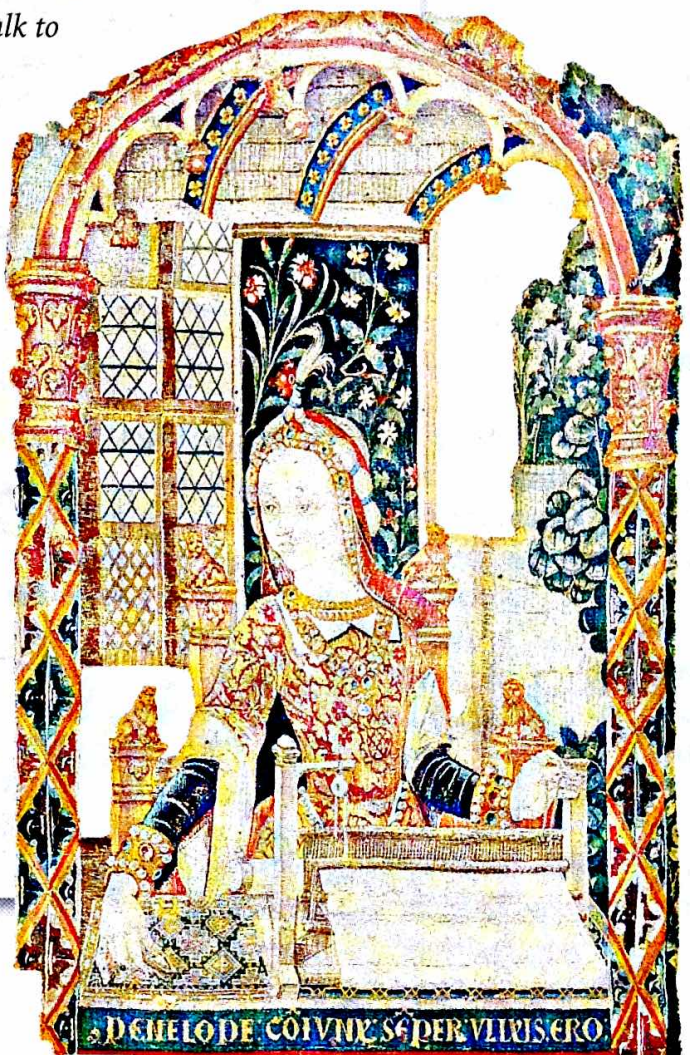
PART TWO: COMING HOME

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 Sparta 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.



Penelope at Her Loom (detail), from *The Story of Virtuous Women* series (c. 1480–1483). Wool tapestry.

Marie Antoinette Evans Fund. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

965 Telemachus with his clear candor said:
“I am with you, Uncle.^o 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
970 left 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 nights and days
are wearied out with grieving.”

Stepping back

975 he took the bronze-shod 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:

980 “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—

A then gave them trenchers^o of good meat, left over
985 from the roast pork of yesterday, and heaped up
willow baskets full of bread, and mixed
an ivy bowl of honey-hearted wine.

990 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 rags:

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

Vocabulary

candor (kan’dər) *n.*: honesty; frankness.


966. **Uncle:** here, a term of affection.



The return of Odysseus. Terra-cotta relief believed to be from the island of Melos (first half of the 5th century B.C.).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Fletcher Fund, 1930 (30.11.9). Photograph ©1982 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

984. **trenchers** (tren’chərz) *n.*: wooden platters.

 974–990. *Who is still in disguise in this scene? How does the ancient Greeks’ regard for hospitality affect the way the other characters treat him? What do you think each character is feeling and thinking as he eats?*

993. **lithe** (līth) *adj.*: limber.

995 ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard
no longer gray upon his chin. And she
withdrew when she had done.

Then Lord Odysseus
reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck.
Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away
as though it were a god, and whispered:

1000 you are no longer what you were just now!
Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are
one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven!
Be kind to us, we'll make you fair oblation^o
and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!”

1005 The noble and enduring man replied:

“No god. Why take me for a god? No, no.
I am that father whom your boyhood lacked
and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks
as he embraced his son.

1010 Only Telemachus,
uncomprehending, wild
with incredulity,^o cried out:

“You cannot

be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits
conceived this trick to twist the knife in me!

1015 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 rags and old,
and here you stand like one of the immortals!”

1020 Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear
and said:

1025 “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

B

“Stranger,

1003. **oblation** (äb·lä'ʃən) *n.*:
offering of a sacrifice. Telemachus
thinks the stranger is a god.

C

1012. **incredulity** (in'krə·dōō'lə·tē)
n.: disbelief.

D




Telemachus Sees His Father (1875).
Lithograph by Friedrich Preller the
Elder.

Archiv f.Kunst and Geschichte, Berlin.

1030 rose from the wells of longing in both men,
A and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
 as those of the great taloned hawk,
 whose nestlings° farmers take before they fly.
 So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
1035 and might have gone on weeping so till sundown. . . .

(from Book 16)

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

 **1005–1035.** Which part of this recognition scene between father and son do you find most moving or most dramatic? Sum up the problems that now face father and son in the palace at Ithaca.

THE BEGGAR AND THE FAITHFUL DOG

Telemachus returns to the family compound and is greeted tearfully by his mother, Penelope, and his old nurse, Eurycleia. 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

B an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears
 and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos,
 trained as a puppy by Odysseus,
1040 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.

C Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last
 upon a mass of dung before the gates—
 manure of mules and cows, piled there until
1045 field hands could spread it on the king's estate.
 Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,
 old Argos lay.

But when he knew he heard

1050 Odysseus' voice nearby, he did his best
 to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears,
 having no strength to move nearer his master.

D And the man looked away,
 wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he
1055 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,



Laconian hound scratching his head. Detail from an Attic red-figured ceramic scyphus, or drinking cup, by the Euergides Painter (c. 500 B.C.). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.



1060 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:

1065 "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 brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent
no other dog kept up with him. Now misery
1070 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
1075 half the manhood of a man, that day
he goes into captivity and slavery."

1080 Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward
into the megaron^o 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)

Odysseus is recognized by Eurycleia when she washes his feet. Roman relief.

Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Italy.

E

F

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

1078. **megaron** (meg'ə · rän) *n.*: great hall or central room.

The Epic Continues

In the hall the “beggar” is taunted by the evil suitors, but Penelope supports him. She has learned that the ragged stranger claims to have news of her husband. Unaware of who the beggar is, she invites him to visit her later in the night to talk about Odysseus.

A In Book 18, Penelope appears among the suitors and reproaches Telemachus for allowing the stranger to be abused. She certainly must have warmed her husband’s heart by doing this and by singing the praises of her lost Odysseus.

B In Book 19, the suitors depart for the night, and Odysseus and Telemachus discuss their strategy. The clever hero goes as appointed to Penelope with the idea of testing her and her maids. (Some of the maids have not been loyal to the household and have been involved with the suitors.) The faithful wife receives her disguised husband. We can imagine the tension Homer’s audience must have felt. Would Odysseus be recognized?

The “beggar” spins a yarn about his origins, pretending that he has met Odysseus on his travels. He cannot resist praising the lost hero, and he does so successfully enough to bring tears to Penelope’s eyes. We can be sure that this does not displease her husband.

The storytelling beggar reveals that he has heard that Odysseus is alive and is even now sailing for home. Penelope calls for the old nurse and asks her to wash the guest’s feet—a sign of respect and honor. As Eurycleia does so, she recognizes Odysseus from a scar on his leg.

Quickly Odysseus swears the old nurse to secrecy.

C Meanwhile, Athena has cast a spell on Penelope so that she has taken no notice of this recognition scene. Penelope adds to the suspense by deciding on a test for the suitors on the next day. Without realizing it, she has now given Odysseus a way to defeat the men who threaten his wife and kingdom.

In Book 20, Odysseus, brooding over the shameless behavior of the maidservants and the suitors, longs to destroy his enemies but fears the revenge of their friends. Athena reassures him. Odysseus is told that the suitors will die.



Odysseus is recognized by Eurycleia. Detail from a scyphus, a drinking cup.

Museo Archeologico, Chiusi, Italy.

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 wove 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.

Like a spider committing suicide
 each night I unweave the web of my day.
 I have no peace.
 About me the insistent buzz of flies
 5 drones louder every day.
 I am starving.
 I watch them, always, unblinking stare.
 All my dwindling will
 I use in not moving, not trying, unweaving.
 10 I pull in my empty nets
 eating myself, waiting.

—Meredith Schwartz
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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 weaving all day
 And undoing it all through the night;
 5 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.

10 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
 15 To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
 He learned it from Penelope . . .
 Penelope, who really cried.