

Read First.

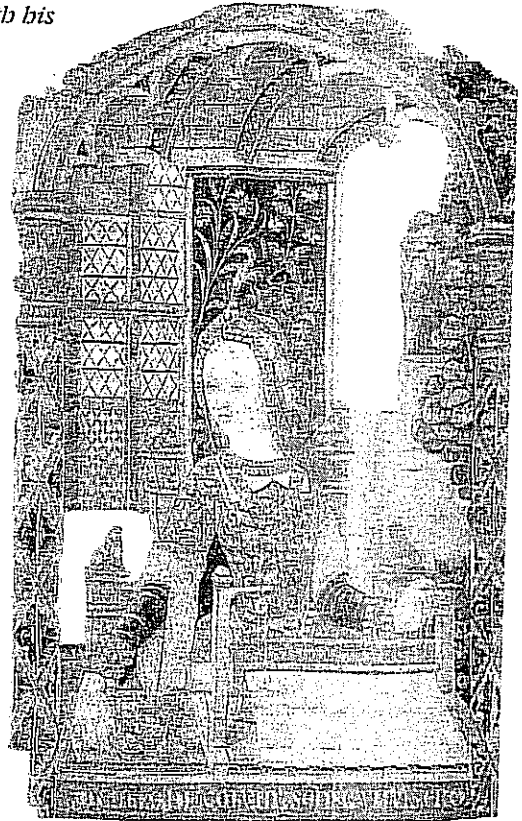
PART TWO: COMING HOME

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. This new hero of the postwar age 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 but of his old and trusty swineherd, Eumaeus. 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' 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—is overrun with his mother's suitors. These arrogant men have taken over Odysseus' house. They are partying with money from the son's inheritance and 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 cottage of the swineherd.

As father and son move closer and closer together, the suspense becomes great. Now Homer is ready for 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 (1480–1483) from the series "The Story of Virtuous Women." Wool; tapestry weave.


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!"


 985 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^o of good meat, left over
from the roast 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
990 as they fell to, ridding themselves of hunger. . . .

Not realizing that the stranger is his father, Telemachus agrees to protect him as best he can. But 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,
ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard
995 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!"

984. trenchers: wooden platters.



We have seen the host-guest relationship played out at several points. Who is still in disguise in this scene? What do you think each of these men is feeling and thinking as he eats?

995. lithe: limber.

1003. oblation: offering of a sacrifice. Telemachus thinks the stranger is a god.

1005 The noble and enduring man replied: (C)

"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,⁹ 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!"

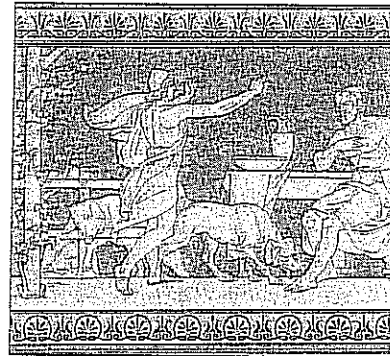
1020 Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear
and said:

"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
1025 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
1030 rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering (E)
as those of the great taloned hawk,
whose nestlings⁹ 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)

1012. incredulity: disbelief.



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

Archiv f.Kunst und Geschichte, Berlin.

1033. nestlings: young birds that
are not ready to leave the nest.



Which part of this recog-
nition scene between
father and son do you
think is most moving or most
dramatic? Sum up the problems
that now face the 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 and his old nurse, Euryclieia. A soothsayer has told his mother, Penelope, that Odysseus is alive and in Ithaca. But 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

1040 an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears
and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos,
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.
1045 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 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.
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,
though I can't say as to his power and speed
1060 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



Museo Nazionale Romano delle Terme, Rome, Italy

Odysseus is recognized by Eurycleia when she washes his feet (Book 19) (1st century A.D.).

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.”

Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward
 into the megaron^o among the suitors;
 but death and darkness in that instant closed
 1080 the eyes of Argos, who had seen his master,
 Odysseus, after twenty years. . . .

(from Book 17)

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.

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.

1078. megaron: great hall or central room.

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?