

Anagnoresis

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



The theme of recognition plays an important role in Homer's *The Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Two key recognition scenes are that between Odysseus and Penelope and that between Oedipus and Jocasta. Many differences can be found between the two, and although they are less apparent certain similarities can be drawn as well. The way in which identity is established in these two texts is different. From the beginning, Odysseus and Oedipus are in reversed situations: Odysseus has always known who he is, whereas Oedipus's goal is to discover his own true identity. One of the last people who Odysseus reveals himself to is his wife, Penelope. After he has killed the suitors, he sends the nurse, Eurykleia, to summon Penelope. Penelope's first reaction is disbelief even after Eurykleia mentions the scar on his leg. Penelope hesitates to accept the truth, telling her, "it would be hard for you to baffle the purposes of the everlasting gods" (XXIII. 81-82). Penelope suspects that some clever god has disguised himself as the beggar and has slain the suitors. Only after she tests him with the knowledge of the marriage bed does she finally believe that this man is her husband. Aside from Eurykleia, Odysseus is the only person who knows that he himself had built the bed around a living olive tree and therefore the bed cannot be moved. The recognition scene between Odysseus and Penelope ends happily as she "burst[s] into tears and ran straight to him, throwing her arms around the neck and kissed his head" (XXIII. 207-208). The recognition scene between Oedipus and Jocasta, however, ends with sadness. Everyone discovers Oedipus' true identity before he realizes it. In fact, he receives numerous warnings from various people not to pursue the search for the murderer of Laius, the former King of Thebes. The blind prophet Teiresias

begs Oedipus: " Let me go home. It will be easiest if you will follow my advice" (lines 320-322). His wife, Jocasta, upon realizing Oedipus' true identity pleads with him: " I beg you do not hunt this out I beg you" (line 1060). Even the herdsman who Oedipus summons asks him to stop questioning him: " O master, please I beg you, master, please don't ask me more" (line 1165). However, Oedipus continues to ignore these warnings until he discovers that he has committed patricide and incest, and is the murderer whom he seeks and thus is the source of Thebes' plague. Jocasta makes this connection earlier when the messenger reveals significant information about Oedipus, especially the fact that he has pierced ankles. In strong contrast to the loving embrace which Odysseus and Penelope exchange, she cries, " O Oedipus, unhappy Oedipus!/that is all I can call you, and the last thing/that I shall ever call you" (lines 1071-1072) before she commits suicide. Likewise, when Oedipus realizes what he has done, he blinds and banishes himself from Thebes. Both texts defer the recognition again and again, for very different reasons. In Oedipus the King, everyone is trying to protect Oedipus from the horrible truth by begging him not to carry his investigation further. They know it will only bring unhappiness. However, Oedipus is driven by his duty and responsibility as King to find out who the murderer is in order to rid Thebes of the plague. For this reason, he ignores everyone's warning. On the other hand, Odysseus is driven by his own mission to " judge the faith of the women,/and make trial of the serving men" (XVI. 304-305). He has to purge the suitors' plague on his home. Keeping his identity unknown is a crucial element for success since he plans to kill the suitors by surprise. This explains why he responds so violently to

Eurykleia when she discovers his true identity, taking “ her by the throat and [saying] to her: “Nurse, why are you trying to kill me?” (XIX. 480-482). To explain why he reveals himself to Penelope only after he has revealed himself to everyone else (except his father), Odysseus is testing his wife’s faithfulness and loyalty. When he visits Hades during his wanderings, he meets Agamemnon who relates the story of how his wife, Clytaemestra, plotted his death as a cautionary tale. Agamemnon tells him of his wife who “ with thoughts surpassingly grisly/ splashed the shame on herself and the rest of her sex, on women/still to come, even on the one whose acts are virtuous” (XI. 432-434). He advises Odysseus to “ not be easy even with [his] wife” (XI. 441) even though Agamemnon speaks highly of Penelope as “ all too virtuous and her mind stored with good thoughts” (XI. 446). Odysseus listens to Agamemnon’s advice and thus defers revealing his true identity to Penelope until the end. For the playwrights, the delay of the recognition scenes serves another purpose. The revelation of Odysseus’ identity brings about the resolution of *The Odyssey*. Homer knows all about suspense and how pleasure is heightened if it is delayed. Thus, Homer stalls the arrival of the climax, keeping the audience tantalized. On the other hand, the *Oedipus* story is well known to the audience. Sophocles takes advantage of this for dramatic irony. Since the audience knows what has happened to Oedipus in the past, much irony is attached to various statements he makes, such as: “ If with my knowledge he lives at my hearth I pray that I myself may feel my curse” (lines 250-251). The audience knows that the person whom he seeks is himself and it is ironic that he is cursing himself. Aside from these differences, the two texts share the important similarity that recognition

serves the same purpose. Odysseus and Oedipus are each recognized by a loved one, bridging the past with the future. With recognition comes the establishment of their roles. Odysseus assumes his true position as King of Ithaca again, after ten years of war and another ten years of wandering. He is finally home. Oedipus establishes his place in Thebes by shedding light on the past. Discovering his identity, he realizes he has been home the entire time. After anagnoresis, they both have new responsibilities that only their newfound or regained identities can accomplish. With recognition and the establishment of their roles, further action is then allowed and expected. During the recognition scene with Penelope, Odysseus says to her: " Dear wife, we have not yet come to the limit of all our/trials. There is unmeasured labor left for the future/both difficult and great, and all of it I must accomplish" (XXIII. 248-250). Odysseus still has to do what Teiresias instructs him to. Similarly, Oedipus, upon recognition, tells Creon: "Send me out to live away from Thebes" (line 1518) in order to purge Thebes of the plague that he brings on his land. Responsibility and purpose is immediately given upon anagnoresis. The purpose of recognition in both texts, therefore, is to provide a catalyst for movement; each character, in his realization, is forced by his own past and duty to act. The identities of Odysseus and Oedipus are established in different ways and each recognition evokes extremely opposite actions and responses. Each text defers anagnoresis for different reasons. However, they are alike in that the role of recognition is not just an end but also a beginning.