

# Odysseus and recognition

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Which scenes of the *Odyssey* between Odysseus' return to Ithaca and his slaughter of the Suitors show Homer at his best as a story teller.' (Books 14-24) In the *Odyssey* Homer has created a poem to stir the depths of an audience's emotions, able to create scenes both full of anger at the Suitors' arrogance and tragic with sorrow and hardship. In books 14 to 21, he has assembled a series of poignant recognition scenes which intersperse small incidents showing the threat posed by the usurping Suitors. These scenes between Odysseus and his faithful servants are some of the most powerful in the *Odyssey*, and add much to the tension in the run up to the final battle against the Suitors. In book 14, Homer pays particular attention to the faithful servant Eumaeus in order to highlight the difference between him and the unfaithful servants in the palace: 'unwilling to sleep there away from his boars... He got himself ready for a night outside, and Odysseus was delighted to see his diligent concern for his absent master's property.' This shows not only how laudable Eumaeus is, but also how detestable the actions of the Suitors are. Such scenes as this are able to charm the audience and create great sympathy and admiration for Eumaeus and the other struggling servants true to Odysseus. We can see how much Homer loved the swineherd from his use of apostrophe in addressing Eumaeus, a privilege reserved for him alone. Eumaeus is shown to be a strange mixture of nobility and humility; he owns his own servants and yet carries out the most humble tasks, perhaps showing how Homer feels all people should behave and providing a stark contrast to the pride and boastfulness of the Suitors. Eumaeus is also used to create tension in the play. He calls Odysseus 'old friend' subconsciously it seems; a subtle hint at their

relationship? Eurymachus' words are also employed by Homer to create much dramatic irony: 'the gods showed their utter hatred of him [Odysseus] ... he is dead and gone: the dogs and the birds of the air must by now have torn the flesh from his bones' Homer makes a point of devoting much of the conversation in this section of the poem to a discussion as to whether Odysseus is dead. Eumaeus is adamant that he is, and Odysseus is adamant he isn't. This creates irony as Odysseus is unable to convince Eumaeus, whom we know to be wrong, and makes the final battle, when it eventually comes, far more dramatic as it dispels all the tension previously built up. Another scene of great power is the recognition of Odysseus by Telemachus in book 16. We are told: 'Telemachus could not yet accept that it was his father...' Telemachus flung his arms around his noble father's neck and burst into tears... they cried aloud piercingly and more convulsively than birds of prey when... robbed... of their... young.' These quotations show firstly the skilful way in which Homer draws out Telemachus' acceptance of his father with his disbelief to create more tension in the audience, and secondly the strong emotive language and images he uses to make the scene more powerful. The simile is particularly notable as it suggests wild uncontrollable emotions ravaging the two men and shows the depth of their feelings as well as adding an element of danger, and perhaps nobility (many birds of prey were associated with the gods; Zeus' eagles, for example) to them. Recognition scenes are perhaps the most powerful in this poem; the scene in book 19 where Eurycleia recognises Odysseus being a prime example: 'Abruptly she let go of her master's foot which made the metal ring as it dropped against the basin, upsetting and spilling all the water on the

floor... her voice stuck in her throat... Odysseus'... hand sought and gripped... [her] throat.' This section of the book shows Homer using all his skill to create the surprise of Eurycleia. The basin is focused on as it is an everyday object allowing the audience to relate to it, and the contrast with steady Eurycleia and her sudden loss of speech and grip show the extent of her shock. It is a response both realistic and authentic, giving Eurycleia a human side which makes her more understandable and more pitiable to an audience. This impression is further backed up when Eurycleia 'lifted her hand to Odysseus' chin', giving a visible signal of her affection for her 'master'. She calls him 'my dear child', showing the closeness of the relationship between these two, and making this a more powerful scene. Another sentence in this section is: 'Delight and anguish swept through her heart together' This shows the conflicting emotions unleashed in the old woman; delight at Odysseus' safe return, yet worry at the hardships he must have suffered, and must still suffer at the hands of the Suitors. The contrast of these two feelings help to show an audience the sudden rush of uncontrollable emotion which overwhelms Eurycleia, making this section more effective, and more emotive to an audience. Odysseus' reaction here (grabbing Eurycleia by the throat) may seem violent to a modern audience, but I believe it serves to show the strain Odysseus is under, and how much is at stake here. His anxiety makes him harsher than perhaps he would normally be as it is of vital importance that he is not discovered at this early stage, and this heightens the audience's sense of anticipation making it more effective and more dramatic. Homer's use of strong similes throughout books 13-21 is particularly striking. For example, his comparison of Odysseus

with a dog when he is tempted to kill the maids prematurely: 'His heart growled within him as a bitch growls standing guard over her helpless pups, ready to fight when she sees a stranger.' This simile suggests the protectiveness Odysseus feels for his 'pups'; his family and possessions, and also his bravery. The Suitors are like the stranger, threatening and unwanted, and the whole scene is vivid, emotive, and easy for a Greek audience to relate to. Homer's easily understandable similes are much in evidence in the rest of the poem as well: 'he looked like some wretched old beggar leaning on a stick, his body covered with filthy rags.' (book 17) This shows how complete the disguise provided by Athene is, and how dejected Odysseus now appears. Pathos cannot help but be created for him by such a vivid simile, even though we know he is really 'godlike', showing Homer at his best as a story teller. Homer gives us yet another poignant and potent scene in the death of Argus the dog: 'There, full of vermin, lay Argus... directly he became aware of Odysseus' presence, he wagged his tail... though he lacked the strength now to come nearer to his master' This touching reunion shows the degradation that has taken place in Odysseus' absence, and serves to further the plot as well as being highly emotive. It is the start of a series of recognition scenes, and there is a sense of tragic irony in that the dog cannot be taken in by a goddess' disguise. The dog is the lowliest of all Odysseus' subjects, yet it is still loyal to him (like Eumaeus), creating more irony, and when 'the black hand of Death' descends on him, there is a great amount of pathos created in an audience. The 'battle' of Odysseus and Irus, too, is a highly effective piece of writing. As he fells Irus, we are reminded of Odysseus' tremendous power, and the language Homer uses is particularly

vivid, yet there is still an overtone of the menacing Suitors cast over the scene: 'Irus... fell down in the dust with a scream, grimacing and drumming on the earth with his feet. At this the noble Suitors threw up their hands and died of laughing.' This is a disturbing passage; the proximity of the violence and the Suitor's mirth seems unnatural, and the strange phrase 'died of laughing' adds morbidity and a chill of death to the Suitors, either making their death seem inevitable, or making them seem eerie and oddly preternatural. Homer here is able to create excitement and genuine entertainment for an audience, whilst casting an air of death over the scene. Homer, then, is able to create great scenes using imagery and emotive language. The Odyssey is a work of great sensitivity to the character's feelings and the audience is manipulated with great skill, whilst at the same time there is the cut and thrust of action and adventure. Recognition scenes are cunningly woven into the fabric of the poetry with every scene exploited to the full.