

Penelope's early recognition of odysseus essay sample

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When it comes to Penelope there is much controversy surrounding whether or not she recognized her husband Odysseus disguised as the beggar. I believe Penelope intuitively knew that Odysseus was the beggar but did not want to raise any red flags to the suitors, so she conjured up a clever way of ensuring that Odysseus could claim her "fair and square". This recognition may not have been immediate but at a certain point after conversing with the beggar I believe Penelope perceived that the beggar was her husband. There are many questions surrounding whether this is so, however there is quite a bit of evidence that can qualify this theory as plausible.

Some question whether Odysseus was recognized by Penelope and if this helped to build up the intensity of the story. Joseph Russo mentioned this topic in "Interview and Aftermath: Dream, Fantasy and Intuition in Odyssey 19 & 20." The lies told by Odysseus also increased the excitement of The Odyssey. Russo believed that Penelope, in her subconscious, did recognize Odysseus disguised as a beggar. For example, in Book 19, Penelope revealed her innermost thoughts to Odysseus, who was disguised as the beggar. Russo suggested that unconsciously the beggar reminded Penelope of Odysseus when she invited Odysseus to her room to talk and confided in him about her dreams (Russo, 14).

Russo's suggestion is reasonable however there is another way to look at this part of the book. There were not only the outward signs of Penelope encouraging him, but she also gave reasons to believe she did not think Odysseus was alive. By telling Odysseus (the beggar) of her dreams Penelope showed trust in him, but by scheduling the contest of the bow,

Penelope showed that she believed her husband was never coming back. Russo argues that this was only a defense mechanism. "If she were to believe Odysseus was alive, she would be letting her guard down, and she did not want to risk another disappointment" (Russo 15). I agree with Russo's belief that because of the tension between husband and wife, there is a large amount of excitement and stress in Odysseus' house after he returns.

If one were to read the fireside conversation in Book XIX again, imagining that Penelope knows to whom she's talking it seems to fit together. Why else, after holding the suitors at arm's length for three years, would she suddenly decide to bring things to a head by agreeing to marry the man who best shoots Odysseus's bow? She also remarks when he sits down beside her that she imagines Odysseus must look as much the worse for wear by then as the beggar does. Such a comment seems too convenient to be coincidental. Then when she tells the beggar of her decision to hold the bow contest, he tells her that he thinks that's a very good idea, and Odysseus will be there to use it. You'll notice that she doesn't spend the next day anxiously looking out the windows for Odysseus to show up.

Further analysis of this contest gives hints towards Penelope's recognition of Odysseus. When none of the suitors could even bend the bow the inch or two needed to string it and the beggar asks to have a try, she insists that the suitors let him—and adds that, even if he wins, he shouldn't think she'll marry HIM. Is this dramatic irony or irony of another kind? That is, do only Odysseus

and the reader know that she already has, or does she herself know that she married that man twenty-some years ago?

Now here is a loophole in this theory. The night before the contest after talking with the beggar Penelope prays for death. Bruce Loudon suggests that, perhaps because Odysseus hasn't revealed himself to her, she finds him so cold and remote that she wonders whether it was worth her long faithful wait to get him back in such an unfeeling state. So look again at what she does in Book XXIII. If she's already sure that the beggar is Odysseus, why does she test him with that little game about moving the bed? Of course, after waiting so long while he's been out having adventures, she's entitled to give him a bit of a hard time, but according to Parry she has another motive, which is to provoke an emotional reaction, to make him blow his cool. This strategy works as he questions who has been fooling with his bed. I can certainly imagine Penelope mischievously smiling at his reaction.

In book 19 when Penelope interrogates the beggar there are some indications that she has some suspicion about the beggar's identity. The fact that she questions him about the jewelry he is wearing because it resembles something that belongs to her husband might be an indication that she has a notion that the beggar might just be her husband. John B Vlahos expressed similar sentiment about the interview between Penelope and the beggar and her commenting on the jewelry.

“ Penelope suspects in book 19 that the beggar is her husband as the result of his answering, in great detail, her questions regarding the clothes and

jewelry Odysseus wore when he left Ithaca twenty years earlier. Harsh goes on to suggest that, though she is not sure, based on her suspicion, she announces the contest with the bow. He believes that she later uses the so called "test of the bed" in book 23 to be absolutely sure of the stranger's identity" (Vlahos, 6). The fact that she is not only able to pour her heart out to the beggar but also make note of something like the jewelry he is wearing makes this conversation a bit more interesting. She recognizes the jewelry as resembling something belonging to Odysseus and finds it a little strange that this beggar could own such a thing. Penelope has been married to Odysseus for a long time and should be quite perceptive about him. This is another indication that Penelope just might have an inclination to believe that this beggar could be her husband.

There is research which suggests that Penelope had a feeling that Odysseus had returned before her encounter with the beggar. This theory suggests a parallel between the revelation of Odysseus to Telemachus and the proposed early recognition between Odysseus and Penelope. "Telemachos learns his father's identity, Eumaios remains excluded, a close structural parallel, I suggest, for Penelope's position in book 19." (Louden, 82). When Athena reveals Odysseus to Telemachus in Eumaios' hut at first he does not believe but later on recognizes that it is truly his father. "This, then, is delayed recognition: Telemachos does not recognize his father at first, initially refuses to believe that it is he (much like Eumaios), and only recognizes him later in the same scene." (Louden, 81). Athena quickly puts Odysseus back in his disguise to prevent Eumaios from recognizing him. Similarly Athena's

maid-servant was privy to Odysseus' impending return and Athena purposely kept Penelope in the dark which could have been meant to be a prelude for a delayed recognition.

Penelope's recognition of Odysseus seems to be purposely obscured between the early revelation to Eurikleia and the scenes where Penelope encounters the beggar. Homer perhaps intentionally obscures this recognition in order to leave his readers in suspense about whether or not Penelope actually recognizes Odysseus.

"The audience having been teased with the possibility of a recognition scene between Penelope and Odysseus, unexpectedly, a recognition scene does develop, but with Eurykleia. The loyal servant's recognition scene is linked with both Telemachos's recognition, to which it forms a complement, and with Penelope's first scene, into the middle of which it is inserted." (Louden, 87) When the servant is washing the beggar's feet (adhering to the rules of hospitality) she notices the scar on his thigh and this helps her to realize that it is Odysseus. However Athena deliberately ensures that this does not lead Penelope to the same recognition. Athena preventing Penelope from recognizing Odysseus in that moment is what causes criticism of this theory. Russo comments on this as being one of the "biggest obstacle[s] to the theory Homer has tried to describe in this book a subtle and veiled awareness on Penelope's part of the identity of the stranger" (Russo, 28).

The issue remains to discern whether or not Penelope actually recognized her disguised husband. As suggested by Russo, Homer perhaps intentionally

obscured the lines of recognition to create tension and suspense in the storyline. It would have been all too traditional for Odysseus to wait for one grand moment to reveal himself in all his glory to his Kingdom. These series of encounters and subtle hints give intrigue to an otherwise borderline cliché epic tale. Based on the explicit words of the book the readers assume that Penelope did not recognize her husband. Book 19 even references the fact that no one knows of Odysseus' presence (besides Telemachus and Eurikleia) so many readers take that to mean she must not have known and the happenings there after are all sheer coincidence. Critical thinkers however can take circumstantial evidence and see a more implicit meaning to this storyline. Why would this woman who has made it very clear that she wants no one else but her husband suddenly pour out her heart to a beggar? What was the purpose of the beggar revealing a dream to her and her subsequently asking him what he's going to do? This could have been a subtle code to try and figure out exactly what each other was thinking, because I think it a little odd that Penelope would take such an interest in a mere beggar.

The fact that Penelope decides to have such a contest among the suitors is another piece of evidence that points to the fact that she may have had an early recognition. I believe her contest may have been a way of trying to ascertain whether or not the beggar is indeed her husband. She could have also wanted to keep his identity concealed so as not to cause chaos while the suitors were still at an advantage. Penelope greatly abhorred the suitors and so it seems a bit too convenient that she waits until this beggar shows

up to schedule such a specific contest, one that she knows only Odysseus could be triumphant in. This strategy seems far too ingenious to be coincidental.

" Fitzgerald argues that as a result of information Penelope is given in book 17 she is mentally prepared in book 19 for the scene where the stranger answers her questions in such great detail that she suspects that he is her husband and thereafter announces the contest with the bow to get it into his hands" (Vlahos, 7).

Whether or not Penelope recognized Odysseus as the beggar remains a topic of great debate. My research has led me to conclude that she may not have immediately recognized him, but upon conversing with him she began to suspect that the beggar was her husband. The contest was quite possibly her way of confirming her intuition. The book makes it appear as if no one knew that it was Odysseus, but this could have been a play on the readers' ingenuity. There is nothing stronger than a woman's intuition (besides her wrath of course) so Penelope quite likely recognized her husband before he officially revealed himself to her.

Works Cited

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