

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.

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—
 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.
 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 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.

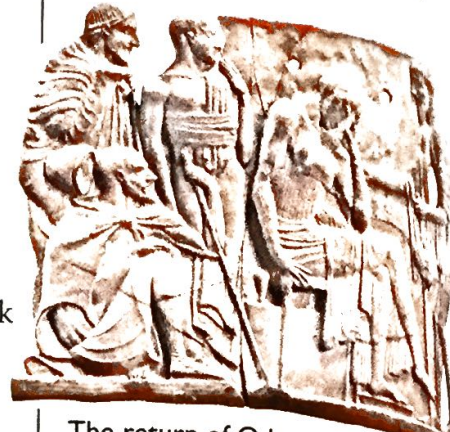
The swineherd is sent to Penelope with news of her son’s return. Now even Athena cannot stand the suspense any longer. She turns to Odysseus, who is still in beggar’s rags:

. . . 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 “Stranger,
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:

“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

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

1012. incredulity (in'krä·dōō'lä·tē)
n.: disbelief.




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,
 and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
 as those of the great taloned hawk,
 whose nestlings^o 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

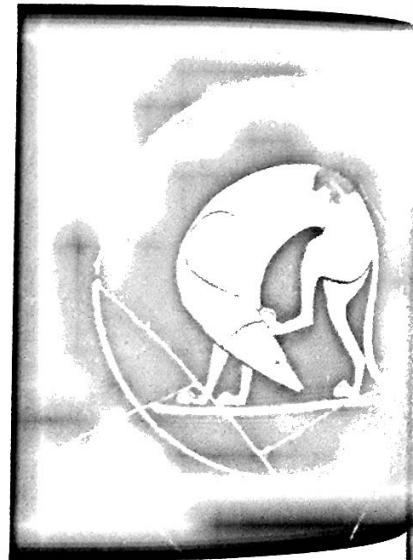
Telemachus returns to the family compound and is greeted tearfully by his mother, Penelope, and his old nurse, Eurycleia. A soothsayer has told his mother that Odysseus is alive and in Ithaca. However, Telemachus does not report that he has seen his father. The suspense builds as Odysseus, once again 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

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.
 Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last
 1045 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,



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.