Penelope's Recognition of Odysseus

Odyssey XIX.102-604

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Penelope's Recognition of Odysseus

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The interview scene between Penelope and Odysseus in Book XIX of the *Odyssey* is a famous one. It has not, however, often been given its due as a *tour de force* of a description of two like minds meeting and discussing plans, where no one else may understand. To under-rate this scene as simply a meeting between a beggar and the mistress of the house is to remove the essence of the entire relationship between Odysseus and Penelope, which is one of the great themes of the *Odyssey*.

Penelope has been waiting patiently for Odysseus for twenty years. In the last four years her situation has become increasingly precarious, and, although it is not as of yet untenable, there will soon be a new element added which may force her to make a choice. Telemakhos is coming of age, and beginning to assert himself within the *oikos*. He is also beginning to win friends and influence people. His power is growing, and the suitors begin plotting to kill him. No other clue is needed to know that if Odysseus simply walks in the front door of his home, the suitors will destroy him too.

Odysseus has learned the situation in his house from Eumaios, and he has certainly been considering the problem of how to stand against over a hundred men, with only his son and possibly one or two others to assist him. He makes his way into his own home, disguised, as a virtual unknown, recognized only by his now-ancient hound Argos. It is a difficult problem, and he has not decided what to do yet, other than to tell Telemakhos to remove the arms in the hall, which obviously must not be on hand for the suitors to use during a fight.

[1] All references are to Lattimore's translation.

It must be kept in mind at all times that Penelope is an extremely intelligent and intuitive woman, possibly more so than Odysseus himself. It must also be kept in mind that there are a hundred men in the house who will kill Odysseus, and Telemakhos as well, if they know Odysseus has returned. Everything Penelope says is within earshot of her serving-girls, some of who are sleeping with various suitors. They have already betrayed her once, with her scheme of Laertes' shroud, and she assumes now that everything she may say or do is broadcast directly to the suitors.

She knows there is a strange beggar in the house, and she has just had the prophecy of Theoklymenos, who, when Telemakhos is relating his news from Menelaus, breaks in and tells her he does not know the half of it, Odysseus is on Ithaka at that moment. The thought of Odysseus must be uppermost in her mind, and in fact the reason she gives Eumaios for inviting the beggar up is that she wishes to ask him for news of Odysseus. Up to this point, Penelope conceivably might not think the beggar is Odysseus. But after Eumaios prattles about what entertaining stories the stranger tells, and that the stranger is a personal friend of Odysseus, it would be an insult to Penelope's intelligence to assume that she still does not suspect who the beggar may be. Her next words, from XVII.529-540, show her thoughts have already moved to the situation Odysseus will face, with Telemakhos, against the suitors. When Telemakhos, below in the hall, sneezes in response, she laughs, almost giddily, and tells Eumaios to tell the stranger to come.

Penelope can barely contain her anxiousness when Eumaios returns without him. She subsides, however, upon hearing Odysseus' message. She still does not know for sure if the beggar is Odysseus, and the only way now to find out is to go downstairs to

see for herself. She cannot wait until the beggar is brought to her later, so after the boxing match between Iros and Odysseus, she goes down on the pretext of showing herself to the suitors, and speaking to Telemakhos. Odysseus is amused because the suitors give her gifts, but she has now had a sight of him, presumably from behind her veil while speaking to Telemakhos. After the fight with Iros, Odysseus has returned to the doorsill (XVIII.110), well lit from outside, and his form must be familiar enough to make her heart quicken.

After she leaves, and night falls, Odysseus volunteers to tend the fires alone in the hall. He has still not worked out his problem of tactics past the point of removing the weapons in the hall. Penelope comes down, and we, along with Odysseus, are reminded of the presence of the traitorous serving-girls, and by extension the suitors, when Melantho scolds Odysseus for hanging about the hall.

Penelope has now seen Odysseus at close range, and he is not completely unrecognizable. Helen's earlier story in IV.250 of recognizing him in Troy is a hint that his disguise is not foolproof. It is most improbable that she does not know who he is – and yet, she can give no sign, because of the presence of Melantho and the rest. She cannot even send them away, for it would eventually come to the ears of Eurymakhos through Melantho that Penelope had held audience alone with the stranger, and Eurymakhos is no fool.

Seen in this light, the interview between Penelope and the beggar is quite remarkable. It is almost an exact parallel of the conversation a husband and wife would have after a long separation, but coded for the benefit of Melantho and the others. Penelope follows all the normal conventions of speaking to a stranger: asking where he is

from, and about his parents. She must of course be wondering where he has been all this time, and is hoping he will tell her in the story of his origins. When he refuses to tell her, she tells him instead what she has been doing in his absence, slipping in a warning about her servant girls who are present, and then asks him again where he is from. One can imagine a wifely rebuke hidden within this repeated questioning. Odysseus, being Odysseus, tells her nothing of the truth, but spins a tale of Crete and hardship. Penelope begins weeping, ostensibly for the absent Odysseus, but more likely because his craftiness is so characteristic of her husband that she cannot control her relief that he is finally home. She then asks him what Odysseus had been wearing when he saw him, and, of course, Odysseus gives her a letter-perfect description of his attire when he left. (He teases her a bit with the observation that the Cretan women had admired him in his fine clothes.) Penelope's question is rather deeper than it appears on the surface, however. The implied question is, where are those clothes now? By extension, she is asking him what happened to his possessions, and the Trojan treasure he ought to be carrying back with him. Odysseus answers her in line 262, telling her Odysseus is returning with treasure, telling her something of the truth about where he has been, and offering a slight explanation for his long absence.

Penelope's tone changes after this explanation. She becomes much less anxious, and seems concerned now with his dirt and fatigue. The scene with Eurykleia is full of small hints – it is less clear whether Eurykleia suspects him at first of actually being Odysseus, but she remarks in 380-81 that he looks quite a lot like him. Penelope is withdrawn, and the recognition of Odysseus' scar by Eurykleia goes apparently unnoticed.

Penelope is thinking deeply during this scene. The wifely questions have been exhausted, and now she moves naturally on to the larger problem facing them – what to do about the suitors. She knows Telemakhos moved the armor from the hall, and now she realizes the true reason – that Odysseus must be planning shortly to kill the suitors. In her next passage, she tells Odysseus her dream of the geese. She seems to be saying that the prospect of Odysseus killing the suitors is just a dream, since she makes a point of saying the geese are all still alive when she awakens. Odysseus tells her the dream has the right of it, and the suitors will be killed, without doubt.

Penelope has obviously realized that Odysseus is at a serious disadvantage. She does not know of the extent to which he is known among his men, although Telemakhos' actions must tell her that he knows the beggar's true identity. Odysseus has just told her in no uncertain terms that he is planning to kill the suitors, and she has replied, speaking of anxiety, and the uncertain dream of the geese.

She seems suddenly to come to a decision in line 570. This is probably the most crucial passage of the interview. It cannot be supposed that Penelope, after four years of successfully fending off the suitors, and at least one reliable report that day that Odysseus is coming home, suddenly decides to wait on him no longer. Even if that were the case, it is quite impossible that Penelope, an aristocratic, well-bred lady, would deign to inform a ragged vagabond of her plans for marriage.

Odysseus has told her his plans, and she knows they are incomplete. Now she provides the missing pieces. She tells the beggar that she will hold a contest for her hand, in which the suitors will shoot through twelve axes in a line – with a bow. She has devised a way to put into Odysseus' hands the only practical weapon with which one man

may hold off many for any length of time. It will be no contest at all, but a slaughter. Homer admits so much in XXI.04.

After this interview, and the eventual success of Odysseus, Penelope's hesitation seems rather out of place. No one understands why she does not run to Odysseus – except Odysseus. It may be that he is the only one allowed to truly understand Penelope. There is no doubt in the narrative that she believes he is Odysseus, but perhaps his unexpected return, her constant anxiety for his safety, and the sudden end of her predicament has left her in a state of disbelief. The single clue to her hesitation comes after he convinces her with his knowledge of their bed. She says she has been afraid that a god deceived her into thinking a stranger was Odysseus. If one takes into account the considerable length of time Odysseus has been absent, her hesitation is quite understandable.

The importance of the interview scene as a bulwark to the themes of the Odyssey is vast. If it is interpreted as purely an interview with a beggar, Penelope loses the magnificence of character that gives Odysseus a reason to come home to her. Instead, she shows bravery and resolution, and craftiness to equal her husband's, while giving him what he needs to return them both to the interrupted course of their lives.

Sources

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