



“EUMAEUS IS THE MOST ADMIRABLE CHARACTER IN ‘THE ODYSSEY’”

HOW FAR WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THIS STATEMENT?

CLASSICAL CIVILISATIONS ESSAY

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HOMER’S ‘THE ODYSSEY’ CONTAINS MANY DIFFERENT CHARACTERS. SOME ARE monsters, some are slaves, some are beautiful and cunning women and some are powerful kings. In Homeric literature, a character is either good or bad depending on their xenia or shape (e.g. Charybdis). However, from reading ‘The Odyssey’, one can see the admirable characters and the not so admirable characters. Such characters have either good or bad xenia, old or young, male or female, some can be a menial as a slave (such as Eumaeus) and some can be as great as a Troy hero and king (such as Nestor). This is an exploration of whether or not Eumaeus is the most admirable character in ‘The Odyssey’ or not.

We first meet Odysseus’ swineherd in Book Fourteen in the porch of his hut. He had been caring for Odysseus’ property during his absence. Odysseus appears to him as a beggar and despite the status that such person has, Eumaeus being but a servant understands xenia and entertains Odysseus by preparing a feast for him.

In Book Fourteen, Eumaeus grieves not only for the loss of Odysseus but also for Telemachus who had gone to find his father. It is clear from Book Sixteen, that Eumaeus loves Telemachus like a father loves a son as when he returns he drops everything and kisses Telemachus and cries with pleasure of his safe return to Ithaca.

He shows respect for his masters in Book Fourteen, another admirable trait, when he says to the disguised Odysseus that servants can’t give admirable gifts when they work in fear of their overpowering masters. This shows that Eumaeus understands his place and Odysseus and Telemachus both recognise this and treat Eumaeus with great respect.

One could argue that Homer created Eumaeus as the most admirable character as there is a not in Book Fourteen that claims that Homer loved his created character and sometimes the literature speaks directly to Eumaeus.

After Eumaeus’ prayer that Odysseus may return, Odysseus feels that it is right that he should reveal his scar and prove that he is with them. The text says that Eumaeus is overwhelmed to see his master again and is weeping and kissing him so much, that if Odysseus hadn’t stopped them, it would have gone on all day and all night! This shows a great and respecting love for the King of Ithaca.

Eumaeus speaks out, bravely (or foolishly some could argue) against the Suitors. This shows bravery in his character as well as loyalty and love. He is truly characterised as a noble and respectable person. He also helps in the execution of the maidservants and the mutilation of Melanthius.

All of the above describe how admirable Eumaeus is and there is not a point in the text when he is not admirable, loving, kind or brave. However, there are other admirable characters in ‘The Odyssey’.

I would argue that King Nestor of Pylos, a hero against Troy with Odysseus, is an admirable character in ‘The Odyssey’. He is a very generous host and actually is so generous and so loyal to xenia that in Book Fifteen, Telemachus pleads with Nestor’s



son, Peisistratus (Telemachus' Patroclus type character) to not let him see Telemachus, as he will keep him against his will with his passion for hospitality! Some could argue that this in its self is an abuse of xenia.

Nestor also stops Telemachus from sleeping on his 'hollowed ship' and says that he should sleep in the palace. This shows true loyalty to xenia. Before this however, Nestor believes that Telemachus even looks like Odysseus and tells Telemachus of his faith in him. This shows a caring for his friend's family. Nestor is even kind enough to let his son act as a friend and guardian to Telemachus on his journeys.

Nestor's character is one of great caring and compassion and he looks out for Telemachus as a father would look out for a son and I think that this is a truly admirable trait of King Nestor.

Another admirable character is Antinous and Arete's daughter, Nausicaa, princess of Phaeacia. She meets Odysseus when he has been washed up on the shore of the island and is wearing no more than a fig leaf over his genitalia. Anyone would have thought him mad or overly promiscuous, however, despite her first impressions, the young woman hears of Odysseus' story and shows pity on the great man in his miserable state. She orders her ladies to bathe him and even tells him how to get into the city and speak with her father, Antinous through his wife Arete). With all this guidance she shows mercy on a man in a state where others would have either ran or jeered at him. This shows a merciful character in Nausicaa and for such a young girl she has an understanding of xenia.

She falls in love with Odysseus and she is even offered by Antinous as a wife for Odysseus, but Odysseus is having none of it and just wants his presents and one of their good ships to go home in.

Nausicaa demonstrates mercy on Odysseus in the only time we see him as being so disparate and needy for help. The only time when he loses face and the only time really when all he has are his articulate words to help him out of situation. This shows that Nausicaa probably knew that Odysseus was a great man and that his state would have de-motivated him so the very fact that she shows such compassion towards him shows that she sympathises with his situation. This I believe is a very admirable thing to do and shows great intelligence for someone so young.

Therefore, Eumaeus is one of the most admirable but not the most. Nestor and Nausicaa, both explored above are equally as admirable but in slightly different ways. Eumaeus' admiralty comes from his loyalty to Odysseus and his want to defend his right to be loyal. Nestor is admirable for his hospitality and the way he speaks of Odysseus and the help that he gives to Telemachus on his journey to track down his father. Lastly, Nausicaa is admirable as she is able to trust a man that others would have thought bonkers. He appears to her naked and she accepts his honesty and mercifully helps him due to his articulate speech. Homer has truly created some of the greatest characters in the world of literature and these good and admirable persons are part of the huge enjoyment one has when one reads his 'Odyssey'.

