

## **How important is Odysseus' disguise as a beggar to the success of The Odyssey?**

Odysseus is disguised as a beggar by the goddess Athena, who helps him plot his revenge against the suitors who are courting his wife. From the vantage point of a beggar in his own court, Odysseus is able to assess who remains loyal to him, who the suitors are, their habits, and he is able to create disagreements amongst them. The information he collects allows him to formulate a plan for revenge. It also adds an element of surprise, so they don't recognize him and kill him first. It is undoubtedly important to the success of the epic to an extent seeing as without his disguise Odysseus' homecoming would not have been as impressive as it is now; the delay he disguise provides to the plot increasing the anticipation for Odysseus' true return.

He doesn't disguise himself, Athena does it for him, and he conceals his identity at her urging as well. In this way, the creation of his disguise also displays the wisdom of Athene as it is she who disguises Odysseus into a beggar and leads him to the swineherd and plots and plans the fall of the suitors in Odysseus' house. Athena demonstrates her role as an active leader in her protection of Odysseus and his family by helping Odysseus with minor things such as his disguise, enhancing his physical appearance or making sure the suitors' arrows miss Odysseus at one point in the massacre, as well as giving Odysseus the grounds to be a hero in his own right by leaving vital decisions up to him. The mastery of such a skill as disguise is an accomplishment that demonstrates the self-discipline that only Athene, the goddess of wisdom and strategy, would value. Odysseus, favoured by Athene in return for his devotion to her, would also understand this value. Never does Homer negatively imply that the practice of disguise should be understood as false pretence. Both, Odysseus and Athene unashamedly practice disguise and therefore fits Homer's notion of heroism; a positive quality.

Odysseus' disguise also allows him to assess who remains loyal to him. First of all he is able to consider the swineherd Eumaeus' faithfulness when Odysseus is led to his hut by Athene. He discovers that Eumaeus is in fact loyal to his master despite his long absence, providing meat for the suitors in order to be hospitable to the guests of Odysseus. The first suitor Odysseus encounters is Melanthius who is immediately cast out as arrogant and most likely to be disloyal. The same goes for his maid Melanthe who is cruel to Odysseus as a beggar, and Odysseus is able to establish that she is disloyal in her affair with one of the suitors. In this way, Odysseus' disguise allows him to see the truth behind each individual's personality from an outsider's view, similarly to how the gods take human form in order to test mortals on their attitudes and devotion towards them.

As well as allowing Odysseus to decide who has remained loyal to him, his disguise as a beggar lets him to understand the suitors' habits and traits, in turn helping him determine the foulest of the lot. Right from his first meeting the suitors as a beggar, he discovers the arrogance and insolence of Antinous, Melanthius and Eurymachus. They treat him as extremely inferior in his position, thus provoking Odysseus into feeling sheer hatred towards them that will ultimately spur him on to murderously kill first Antinous then the entire group of inhospitable suitors. Although Athene also aids in provoking Odysseus by making the suitors insult him even more at various points, his disguise is vital simply as it is his way of observing the suitors before putting them all to a gruesome death.

In addition, his disguise also heightens the suspense and emotion of Telemachus and Eurykleia's recognition, as well Penelope's at the very end. The way Telemachus is so

delighted to see his father also increases pathos in a way, seeing as the reader knows that the worst is not yet over and Odysseus will not be able to reveal himself until he avenges the suitors' inhospitality. With Euryclia's recognition due to the scar Odysseus received from a boar's tusk during childhood, Homer is able to digress from the plot by recounting the story of how he received the scar, therefore providing a parenthesis to give the reader a break from the plot. She is ecstatic, and her cheerfulness would increase the reader's optimism and eagerness for Odysseus' true return. The way he also abruptly tells her to stay quiet shows the importance of his disguise; it is vital Odysseus' disguise is not revealed seeing as his plan is half in motion, and ruining it now by exposing himself would undoubtedly have disastrous consequences.

Furthermore his disguise adds an element of surprise due to the delay caused by putting off his exposal as Odysseus. With the possible recognition from other characters, the tension is increased and the reader is left waiting for the instance when his disguise will not prove good enough. Philoetius is an example of someone who notices the beggar's resemblance to Odysseus, and as a reader you are left in anxiety as to whether or not he will identify him, seeing as the importance of his disguise is established before. Moreover, if Odysseus had not been disguised, Penelope's recognition of Odysseus would have happened much earlier, the anticipation of their reunion being cut short. In this way, his disguise is a way Homer provides dramatic tension in the *Odyssey*, prolonging these arguably non-eventful books in an exciting and gripping way.

Besides allowing Odysseus to observe other characters, his disguise as a poor beggar shows his more enduring yet cunning side. After all his adventures and journeys he is forced to stay in one place for once and resist his temptation to react to the suitors' rude remarks, seeing as he is in lower position than all of them and any sign of his true strength and power would give away his identity. His disguise tests his endurance in a similar way to the challenges he faced on his journeys; he must sit back and use his cunning to think of a plan before acting on impulse, similarly to when he was trapped in the Cyclops' cave for instance. Moreover, Odysseus' disguise as a beggar gives him time to scheme; the information he collects during his time disguised allows him to formulate an unflinching plan for revenge on the suitors.

His disguise is a way of demonstrating the maturity that Odysseus has developed since the encounter with Polyphemus. The discipline of the skill mastered by Odysseus proves how cunning he is, and proves to be far greater than any strength he possesses. However, Odysseus foolishly divulges his identity in a bragging moment of pride. Ultimately, Odysseus learns to practice disguise and understands through his own experience that only through prudence and humility regarding his identity will he most likely defeat the suitors. An example of this is during his fight with the beggar Iros; Odysseus could have easily killed the beggar in an instant due to his heroic strength, but instead holds back this strength and allows him to live, knowing that the suitors would be suspicious if he displayed too much power. In this sense, his disguise is able to portray the life lessons Odysseus has learned on his adventures, showing his increase in maturity, wisdom and self-control.

In conclusion, Odysseus' disguise is vital for the success of the *Odyssey*; it provides delay thus creates dramatic tension, allows him to decide who is or has remained loyal, intensifies the emotional recognition scenes, helps him recognise the suitors' bad habits and traits as well as allows Odysseus to display his epithets of being cunning and enduring. His disguise

gives him time to formulate his plan as well as time to observe the people in his palace in order to be sure of his judgements and gives Athene a chance to provoke Odysseus so that he is fuming and aggravated enough to go through with the massacre of the suitors.