

The Significance of Odysseus' Disguised Return

Book 23 in Homer's *The Odyssey* chronicles Odysseus' return to his wife Penelope after his twenty years away at sea. Odysseus' return is unanticipated, and Penelope assumes that Odysseus is dead since twenty years elapsed since she has seen or heard from him. Odysseus' return to Ithaca answers and poses many questions about his epic journey, and serves to confirm that he is not dead and that he still loves and misses his wife. Homer uses Odysseus' disguise as dramatic irony to heighten the tension before the climax of the epic when Odysseus reveals himself. This disguise allows Odysseus to test those around him to see who really loves and cares about him. Although Odysseus knows his wife grieved him as if he were dead, he still disguises himself in order to test

Penelope's love and loyalty.

Odysseus' multitude of tests starts with his entrusting Eurycleia with the secret of his return. When Odysseus returns to Ithaca disguised as an itinerant beggar, Penelope takes him in, and subsequently Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus by a scar on his foot. Eurycleia is the first to find out about Odysseus' return, and notifies Penelope when Odysseus tells her that the time is right. Homer has Eurycleia find out first because she is the epitome of loyalty - she has been with Odysseus' family for years, and is obviously someone whom Odysseus can trust with his secret. Odysseus' trusting Eurycleia is the first example of a test the reader sees in book 23. Eurycleia proves her loyalty to Odysseus through her secrecy. When Eurycleia tells Penelope of Odysseus' return, Penelope does not believe her, so there is a clear difference in trust between Odysseus and Eurycleia and Penelope and Eurycleia.

Penelope sleeps through Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors, which, had she been awake, would be strong evidence that he is her husband. Homer purposely has Penelope sleep through this whole ordeal to heighten the action and suspense; the reader knows that Penelope will eventually wake up and face Odysseus, and that the killing will not be disregarded - there must be resolution. Penelope is initially skeptical when Eurycleia tells her about Odysseus' return: "dear old nurse, the gods have made you mad. They have unhinged you, and you were once so sane. Why do you mock me?--haven't I wept enough?" (11-16). She says this under the impression that the gods are trying to play a trick on her. Penelope knows that it is against her better judgment to think of Odysseus as alive, so when she sees Odysseus, she cannot help her disbelief. Penelope's reluctance to accept Odysseus as her husband is something that Odysseus expects; Homer inserts this to heighten the tension before Odysseus' climactic proof and unveiling.

The tension grows even greater when Penelope asks Eurycleia to move her bridal bed, in doing so "putting her husband to the proof" (203). Penelope wants to evoke a response from the beggar claiming to be her husband. Odysseus, who remains composed for the entire book, lashes out: "your words cut me to the core!...move my bed? Impossible task? no man on earth, not even at peak strength? a great sign, a hallmark in its construction" (204-212). Odysseus explains the intricate designs of the bed, which prove that he is Penelope's husband and that he is still in love with her. Homer shows the release of tension by incorporating the dramatic speeches between the characters to show their intense love, passion and trust for each other even after Odysseus' twenty years of absence.

Odysseus' return answers the paramount question of whether he would return and

confirms the fact that he is still alive and that his love for Penelope is still alive as well. Odysseus' disguise allows him to test Eurycleia's loyalty and to return home without Penelope knowing so that he can test the authenticity of her loyalty and love. Throughout book 23 there are two palpable, burning questions: whether Penelope will recognize Odysseus if/when he reveals himself, and whether Eurycleia and Penelope will prove themselves to be the loyal family Odysseus left twenty years before. The buildup of tension gets resolved from the unveiling of Odysseus' disguise. Homer uses the theme of disguise as a device to reveal characteristics that are not readily apparent from the story alone. In this case, light is shed on Penelope and how she copes with Odysseus' absence and return.