

## Book 17: The Beggar and the Faithful Dog

*Telemachus returns to the family compound and is greeted tearfully by his mother and his old nurse, Eurycleia. A soothsayer tells Penelope that Odysseus is alive and is already in Ithaca. The suspense builds, as Odysseus, once again disguised as a beggar, finally returns to his home accompanied only by the swineherd. He has been away for twenty years. Only one creature recognizes him.*

An old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears  
and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos,  
trained as a puppy by Odysseus,  
but never taken on a hunt before  
1475 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  
upon a mass of dung before the gates—



1480 manure of mules and cows, piled there until  
fieldhands could spread it on the king's estate.  
Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,  
old Argos lay.

But when he knew he heard  
Odysseus's voice nearby, he did his best  
1485 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  
hid this from Eumaeus. Then he said:

*Hound gnawing a bone*  
(Greek, 2nd century B.C.). Bronze.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
Fletcher Fund, 1936. (36.11.12)

1490 "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,  
though I can't say as to his power and speed  
when he was young. You find the same good build  
1495 in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep  
all for style."

And you replied, Eumaeus:

"A hunter owned him—but the man is dead  
in some far place. If this old hound could show  
the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him,  
1500 going to Troy, you'd see him swift and strong.  
He never shrank from any savage thing  
he'd brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent  
no other dog kept up with him. Now misery  
has him in leash. His owner died abroad,  
1505 and here the women slaves will take no care of him.  
You know how servants are: without a master  
they have no will to labor, or excel.  
For Zeus who views the wide world takes away  
half the manhood of a man, that day  
1510 he goes into captivity and slavery."

Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward  
into the megaron<sup>o</sup> among the suitors;  
but death and darkness in that instant closed  
the eyes of Argos, who had seen his master,  
1515 Odysseus, after twenty years.

1512. megaron: the great hall, or central room.

*In the hall, the beggar is taunted by the suitors, but Penelope supports him. She has heard that the ragged stranger claims to have news of her husband. Unaware of who this beggar is, she invites him to visit her later in the night to talk about Odysseus.*

*In Book 18, Penelope appears among the suitors and chastises Telemachus for allowing the stranger to be abused. She certainly must have warmed her husband's heart by doing this and by further singing the praises of her lost Odysseus.*

## Book 19: Penelope, the Beggar, and the Nurse

*After the suitors depart for the night and after Odysseus and Telemachus discuss their strategy, the wily hero goes as appointed to Penelope with the idea of testing her and her maids. (Remember that some of the maids have not been loyal to the*

household and have worked with the suitors against them.) The faithful wife receives her disguised husband. We can imagine the tension Homer's audience must have felt. Would Odysseus be recognized?

Willing hands

brought a smooth bench, and dropped a fleece upon it.  
Here the adventurer and king sat down;  
then carefully, Penelope began:

1520 "Friend, let me ask you first of all:  
who are you, where do you come from, of what nation  
and parents were you born?"

And he replied:

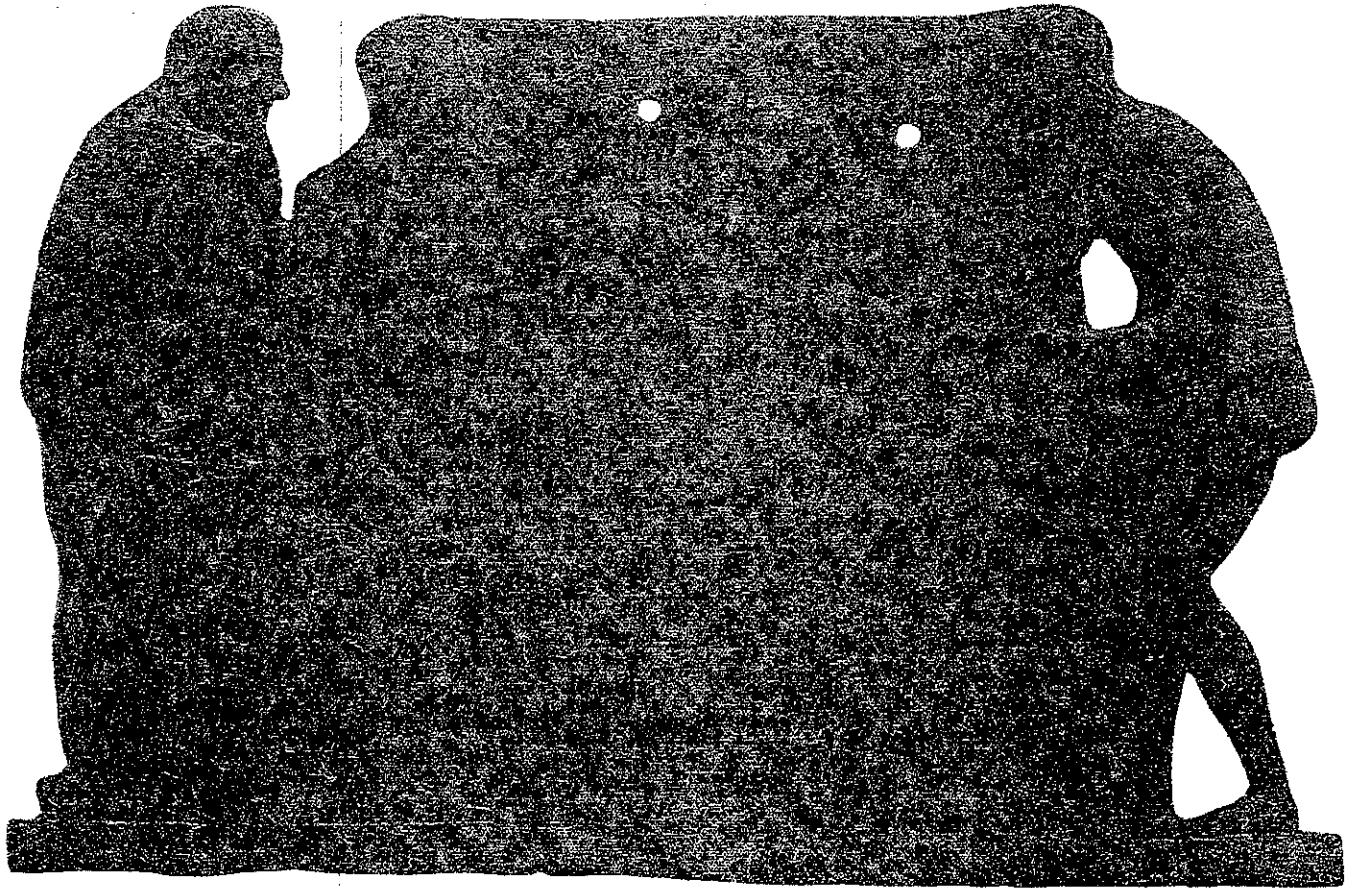
"My lady, never a man in the wide world  
should have a fault to find with you. Your name  
1525 has gone out under heaven like the sweet  
honor of some god-fearing king, who rules  
in equity over the strong: his black lands bear  
both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright,  
new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea  
1530 gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy,  
so that his folk fare well.

O my dear lady,

this being so, let it suffice to ask me  
of other matters—not my blood, my homeland.  
Do not enforce me to recall my pain.  
1535 My heart is sore: but I must not be found  
sitting in tears here, in another's house:  
it is not well forever to be grieving.  
One of the maids might say—or you might think—  
I had got maudlin over cups of wine."

And Penelope replied:

1540 "Stranger, my looks,  
my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded  
when the Achaeans crossed the sea to Troy,  
Odysseus my lord among the rest.  
If he returned, if he were here to care for me,  
1545 I might be happily renowned!  
But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain.  
Sons of the noblest families on the islands,  
Doulikhion, Same, wooded Zakynthos,  
with native Ithacans, are here to court me,  
1550 against my wish; and they consume this house.



Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant  
or herald on the realm's affairs?

How could I?

wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here  
they press for marriage. . . .

- 1555 And now, as matters stand at last,  
I have no strength left to evade a marriage,  
cannot find any further way; my parents  
urge it upon me, and my son  
will not stand by while they eat up his property.  
1560 He comprehends it, being a man full grown,  
able to oversee the kind of house  
Zeus would endow with honor.

But you too

confide in me, tell me your ancestry.  
You were not born of mythic oak or stone."

*Here the beggar spins a yarn about his origins, pretending that he has met Odysseus on his travels. He cannot resist praising*

*Return of Ulysses* (5th century B.C.).  
Terracotta relief.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Fletcher Fund, 1930. (30.11.9)

the "lost" hero, and he does so successfully enough to bring tears to Penelope's eyes. We can be sure that this does not displease the beggar.

1565 Now all these lies he made appear so truthful  
she wept as she sat listening. The skin  
of her pale face grew moist the way pure snow  
softens and glistens on the mountains, thawed  
by Southwind after powdering from the West,  
1570 and, as the snow melts, mountain streams run full:  
so her white cheeks were wetted by these tears  
shed for her lord—and he close by her side.  
Imagine how his heart ached for his lady,  
his wife in tears; and yet he never blinked;  
1575 his eyes might have been made of horn or iron  
for all that she could see. He had this trick—  
wept, if he willed to, inwardly.

Well, then,

as soon as her relieving tears were shed  
she spoke once more:

"I think that I shall say, friend,

1580 give me some proof, if it is really true  
that you were host in that place to my husband  
with his brave men, as you declare. Come, tell me  
the quality of his clothing, how he looked,  
and some particular of his company."

1585 Odysseus answered, and his mind ranged far:

"Lady, so long a time now lies between,  
it is hard to speak of it. Here is the twentieth year  
since that man left the island of my father.  
But I shall tell what memory calls to mind.

1590 A purple cloak, and fleecy, he had on—  
a double thick one. Then, he wore a brooch  
made of pure gold with twin tubes for the prongs,  
and on the face a work of art: a hunting dog  
pinning a spotted fawn in agony  
1595 between his forepaws—wonderful to see  
how being gold, and nothing more, he bit  
the golden deer convulsed, with wild hooves flying.  
Odysseus's shirt I noticed, too—a fine  
closefitting tunic like dry onion skin,  
1600 so soft it was, and shiny. . . ."

Now hearing these details—minutely true—  
she felt more strangely moved, and tears flowed  
until she had tasted her salt grief again.

*The story-telling beggar reveals that he has heard Odysseus is alive and is even now sailing for home. Penelope calls for the old nurse and asks her to wash the guest's feet—a sign of respect and honor. What follows is a scene of great emotional suspense. Eurycleia speaks to the supposed beggar:*

“My heart within me stirs,  
1605 mindful of something. Listen to what I say:  
strangers have come here, many through the years,  
but no one ever came, I swear, who seemed  
so like Odysseus—body, voice, and limbs—  
as you do.”

Ready for this, Odysseus answered:

1610 “Old woman, that is what they say. All who have seen  
the two of us remark how like we are,  
as you yourself have said, and rightly, too.”

Then he kept still, while the old nurse filled up  
her basin glittering in firelight; she poured  
cold water in, then hot.

1615 But Lord Odysseus  
whirled suddenly from the fire to face the dark.  
The scar: he had forgotten that. She must not  
handle his scarred thigh, or the game was up.  
But when she bared her lord's leg, bending near,  
she knew the groove at once.

1620 An old wound  
a boar's white tusk inflicted, on Parnassus<sup>o</sup>  
years ago. . . .

This was the scar the old nurse recognized;  
she traced it under her spread hands, then let go,  
1625 and into the basin fell the lower leg  
making the bronze clang, sloshing the water out.  
Then joy and anguish seized her heart; her eyes  
filled up with tears; her throat closed, and she whispered,  
with hand held out to touch his chin:

“Oh yes!  
1630 *You are Odysseus!* Ah, dear child! I could not  
see you until now—not till I knew  
my master's very body with my hands!”

*Quickly, Odysseus swears Eurycleia to secrecy. Meanwhile, Athena has cast a spell on Penelope so that she has taken no notice of this recognition scene. Penelope adds to the suspense by deciding on a test for the suitors on the next day. Without realizing it, she now has given Odysseus a way to defeat the suitors.*

1621. Parnassus: a mountain in central Greece.

# Responding to the Epic

## Analyzing the Epic

### Identifying Facts

1. What is Argos's condition when Odysseus sees him? In telling us how Odysseus's dog is kept, what is Homer also telling us about conditions in Ithaca?
2. Odysseus continues to maintain his disguise by telling "lying tales"—even to his wife. What yarn does the "beggar" tell Penelope? How does he describe Odysseus (and why do you think he adds these details)?
3. Clever as he is, Odysseus slips up when Euryclia bathes his feet. By what hidden sign does she recognize him?

### Interpreting Meanings

4. What do we learn about the **character** of Penelope in her interview with the "beggar"?
5. What do we learn about the **character** of Odysseus in his interview with his wife?
6. Why do you think Odysseus continues to keep his identity hidden from his wife?
7. How is Penelope's interview with the "beggar" **ironic**?
8. The scene between Odysseus and Penelope is one of the most famous scenes in literature. Some readers have suggested that Penelope actually knows the identity of the beggar by now but is not revealing it. What do you think about this interpretation? Support your answer with specific reference to the epic.
9. The *Odyssey* is centuries and centuries old. Are the human feelings revealed by the people in the *Odyssey* still important to people today? Are the needs of people still exactly the same today? Explain.

## Analyzing Language and Vocabulary

### The Epithet

An **epithet** is an adjective or phrase used to characterize someone. *Good King Wenceslaus, Katherine the Great, The Brat Pack, Land of the Free*—these epithets are used to characterize a king, a queen, a group of actors, and a country. The word *epithet* means "put on" or "added."

Homer uses many epithets as formulas to characterize places and people. Penelope, for example, is frequently referred to as "faithful Penelope," and we are instantly reminded of her outstanding character trait.

The following questions focus on some of Homer's famous epithets.

1. Odysseus is called "*versatile* Odysseus," "*wily* Odysseus," "*the strategist*," and "*the noble and enduring* man." What does each italicized word mean?
2. Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld, is called "*the iron* queen." What does the word *iron* suggest about the realm she rules over and her own character? (Think of how different she would seem if she were called "*the golden* queen.")
3. Telemachus is called "*clear-headed* Telemachus." How would you define "*clear-headed*"?
4. One of Homer's most famous epithets is the formula description "*the wine-dark* sea." Many scholars and even scientists have argued about this description. Since wine is either red or white or yellowish, and the sea is none of these hues, the description is puzzling. Some say that the ancient Greeks diluted their wine with water and that the alkaline in the water changed the color of the wine from red to blue. Others think the sea was covered with red-colored marine algae. Still others even suggest that the Greeks were color blind. But Robert Fitzgerald, the great translator of the *Odyssey*, thought about the question when he was on a ship sailing into the Aegean Sea:

"The contrast of the bare arid baked land against the sea gave the sea such a richness of hue that I felt as though we were sailing through a bowl of dye. The depth of hue of the water was like the depth of hue of a good red wine."

How would you explain Homer's "wine-dark sea"?