

Eumaios' Knowledge of the Scar

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ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE episodes in the *Odyssey* is Eurycleia's recognition of Odysseus in Book 19 (308–507). There, at the end of her first private conversation with Odysseus, Penelope proposes that he be bathed by her maidservants before going to sleep. Odysseus responds to this offer by saying that he would prefer an old woman to perform the task (346–348). What follows is well known: Eurycleia, his nurse, takes up the task and, while washing Odysseus' feet, recognizes him by the scar (οὐλή) above one of his knees. This episode gives Homer the opportunity to tell the story of what has been called “the most famous digression in all literature,” how Odysseus got the scar:¹ invited by Autolykos, his mother's father, to go hunting, Odysseus comes upon a wild boar, which inflicts a wound upon him with its tusks.

The scar as Odysseus' sign of recognition appears three more times in the *Odyssey*:² at 21.205–227 he reveals himself to his faithful servants Eumaios and Philoitios; at 23.70–79 Eurycleia tells Penelope that she recognized Odysseus by the scar; and, finally, at 24.327–335 he shows the scar to his father Laertes.

The passages that concern Odysseus' scar have stirred endless controversies. I start with 19.346–348, in which Odysseus

¹ J. Russo, in J. Russo, Manuel Fernández-Galiano, Alfred Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey III* (Oxford 1992) 95; cf. W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer*² (London 1962) II 331–332. W. J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford 1930) 74 n.8, argues that the digression was inserted “for the purpose of tension”; we shall see that the digression is presupposed as known to the audience in all the recognition scenes that follow and represents more than a device for creating suspense.

² Fernández-Galiano, *Commentary III* 171.

tells Penelope that he would not let a woman wash him unless she was old and had suffered as much as himself in her life:

εἰ μή τις γρηῦς ἔστι παλαιή, κεδν' εἰδυῖα,
 ἢ τις δὴ τέτληκε τόσα φρεσὶν ὅσσα τ' ἐγὼ περ·
 τῆ δ' οὐκ ἄν φθονέοιμι ποδῶν ἄψασθαι ἐμεῖο.

The Alexandrians athetized these lines on the main ground that it is unlikely that Odysseus, who at this point in the story still wants to be incognito, could carelessly choose the very woman who could identify him.³

These objections and others were refuted point by point long ago.⁴ First, if one athetized these lines then other complications would arise, e.g. Penelope's reply (19.353) to Odysseus, that she does have such an old woman, would have to be athetized as well. Second, Odysseus does not completely forget about the scar in this episode; indeed, just before being bathed by Eurycleia he suddenly (αὐτίκα) remembers the scar but it is already too late; his attempt to avoid being recognized by turning away from the light of the fire fails.⁵

In Book 23 Eurycleia tells Penelope how she recognized Odysseus by the scar and how he prevented her from telling Penelope about his presence in the house (23.73–77):

³ W. Dindorf, *Scholias Graeca in Homeri Odysseam* II (Oxford 1855) 679; cf. P. Knight, *Carmina Homerica* (London 1820) Notae 100; Stanford, *The Odyssey* II 330; Russo, *Commentary* III 93–94.

⁴ W. Büchner, "Die Niptra in der Odyssee," *RhM* 80 (1931) 129–136; Woodhouse, *Composition* 75 n.9; F. Focke, *Die Odyssee* (Stuttgart/Berlin 1943) 329; H. Erbse, *Beiträge zum Verständnis der Odyssee* (Berlin/New York 1972) 75 and 94–95.

⁵ 19.390–394: αὐτίκα γὰρ κατὰ θυμὸν οἴσατο, μή ἐ λαβοῦσα / οὐλήν ἀμφράσαιτο καὶ ἀμφοδὰ ἔργα γένοιτο. / νίξε δ' ἄρ' ἄσσον ἰοῦσα ἄναχθ' ἐόν· αὐτίκα δ' ἔγνω / οὐλήν, τὴν ποτέ μιν σῦς ἤλασε λευκῶ ὀδόντι. See Stanford, *The Odyssey* II 329. Woodhouse, *Composition* 75, notes that Odysseus' apparent recklessness in this episode is "a common element of Romance"; in such stories the fortunes of the hero are often brought to the brink of ruin by his own carelessness.

ἀλλ' ἄγε τοι καὶ σῆμα ἀριφραδὲς ἄλλο τι εἶπω·
 οὐλήν, τὴν ποτέ μιν σὺς ἤλασε λευκῶ ὀδόντι,
 τὴν ἀπονίζουσα φρασάμην, ἔθελον δὲ σοὶ αὐτῇ
 εἰπέμεν· ἀλλὰ με κείνος ἔλών ἐπὶ μάστακα χέρσιν
 οὐκ ἔα εἰπέμεναι πολυκερδείησι νόοιο.

These verses have been considered to be awkwardly modeled on those in Book 19 and therefore as interpolated.⁶ They are however indispensable to the poem.⁷ Since Penelope's reply⁸ clearly implies Eurycleia's mention of the scar, one cannot mechanically excise 73–77.

In Book 21 Odysseus, who needs more people to help him against the suitors, reveals himself to his loyal servants Eumaios and Philoitios by showing them the scar (21.217–221):

εἰ δ' ἄγε δὴ καὶ σῆμα ἀριφραδὲς ἄλλο τι δείξω,
 ὄφρα μ' ἐν γνῶτον πιστωθῆτόν τ' ἐνὶ θυμῶ,
 οὐλήν, τὴν ποτέ με σὺς ἤλασε λευκῶ ὀδόντι
 Παρνησόδ' ἐλθόντα σὺν υἰάσιν Ἀυτολύκοιο.
 ὡς εἰπὼν ῥάκεα μεγάλης ἀποέργαθεν οὐλής.

Fernández-Galiano has argued that the recognition scene with the servants is superfluous as the servants had no way of knowing about the scar as Eurycleia did;⁹ his conclusion is that these five lines are a late interpolation, perhaps even later than the recognition scene in Book 24, which I discuss below.¹⁰

⁶ See Knight, *Carmina Homérica* 100; C. F. Ameis and C. Hentze, *Anhang zu Homers Odyssee* IV (Leipzig 1900) 88; U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Die Heimkehr des Odysseus* (Berlin 1927) 68; P. von der Mühl, "Odyssee," *RE* Suppl. VII (1940) 696–768, at 761.

⁷ See A. Köhnken, "Odysseus' Scar: An Essay on Homeric Epic Narrative Technique," in L. E. Doherty (ed.), *Homer's Odyssey. Oxford Readings in Classical Studies* (Oxford 2009) 44–61 (orig. *A&A* 22 [1976] 101–114). Focke, *Die Odyssee* 331, 364–365, notes that the Alexandrians never athetized the 'Parnassus episode'.

⁸ 23.81–82: μαῖα φίλη, χαλεπὸν σε θεῶν αἰειγενετῶν / δῆνεα εἴρυσθαι, μάλα περ πολυῖδριν ἐοῦσαν.

⁹ *Commentary* III 133, 171.

¹⁰ This opinion can be found already in Wilamowitz, *Die Heimkehr* 57, and von der Mühl, *RE* Suppl. VII (1940) 761; against it see Focke, *Die Odyssee*

The final recognition scene occurs in Book 24 between Laertes and Odysseus. Laertes does not believe that the stranger in front of him is Odysseus and asks for a recognition sign (24.328–329):

εἰ μὲν δὴ Ὀδυσσεύς γε ἐμὸς πάϊς ἐνθάδ' ἰκάνεις,
σῆμα τί μοι νῦν εἶπὲ ἀριφραδὲς ὄφρα πεποίθω.

In reply Odysseus provides Laertes with not one but two signs; the first is the scar (331–333):

οὐλήν μὲν πρῶτον τήνδε φράσαι ὀφθαλμοῖσιν
τήν ἐν Παρνησῶ μ' ἔλασεν σῦς λευκῶ ὀδόντι
οἰχόμενον·

The second consists of the names of the trees and vines in the orchard once given to him as a gift by his father (336–344). This last recognition scene brings to mind the one in Book 23: just as Penelope there rejected the scar as a conclusive sign in favor of another one, known only to herself and her husband, the marriage bed, so here Odysseus gives Laertes a second sign known only to himself and his father.

The mention of the scar in so many places towards the end of the *Odyssey* may indeed have the effect of increasing the tension of the story (cf. n.1 above). This however does not seem to be the main role of the scar. J. Henderson argues that the mention of the scar in the episode of Laertes (Book 24) underscores the poem's "complex systematic of recognition narratives of many different types"; the scar in this episode perfectly complements the other sign given to Laertes, the orchard.¹¹ A.

355. For von der Mühl, all the recognition scenes involving the scar are modeled (that is, they are late) after that in Book 19, in which Eurycleia is the protagonist.

¹¹ J. Henderson, "The Name of the Tree: Recounting *Odyssey* XXIV 340–2," *JHS* 117 (1997) 87–116, at 91–92, follows P. Vidal-Naquet, "The Black Hunter and the Origin of the Athenian *ephebeia*," in R. L. Gordon (ed.), *Myth, Religion, and Society* (Cambridge 1981) 147–162, who argues that the scar represents the expression of a public 'ephebic' ritual of maturation whereas the orchard would rather point to Odysseus' childhood; see also B. E. Goff, "The Sign of the Fall: The Scars of Orestes and Odysseus," *CLAnt*

Heubeck notes that the scar represents an “essential feature of the recognition topos in the poem” and that the mention of the scar in the last recognition scene is not gratuitous: whoever composed this scene must have had in mind the previous ones, especially the first one in Book 19.¹² With respect to the history of the scar, A. Köhnken shows that “the scar narrative in Book 19 is vital for a basic understanding of the recognition plot” and that the episode in Book 19 is the only one in which the story of the scar is told in its entirety; all the other episodes presuppose the familiarity of the audience with the story told in Book 19.¹³ The most interesting hypothesis, however, is that of Murnaghan, who argues that the recognition signs in the *Odyssey* point up the way the characters are connected to one another; thus the scar may be just a literary device through which some characters are shown to be faithful to Odysseus.¹⁴

All these opinions imply that the mention of the scar in the scenes described above is not a mechanical or random process but belongs to a wider narrative perspective. Fernández-Galiano, however, has argued that the recognition scene between Odysseus and his servants in Book 21 is a late and unnecessary addition to the poem. This last point, which can certainly affect our understanding of the other recognition

¹⁰ (1991) 259–267, at 262–263.

¹² *Commentary* III 398.

¹³ Köhnken, in *Oxford Readings* 53. The boar is mentioned in all the episodes; Autolykos and his sons as well as Parnassus, the scene of the hunt, are mentioned in two episodes (with the servants and with Laertes); thus in order to understand the basic elements told in the last three episodes, the audience had to be familiar with the whole story, that is, with the one given in Book 19; see also I. J. F. de Jong, “Eurykleia and Odysseus’ Scar: *Odyssey* 19.393–466,” *CQ* 35 (1985) 517–518.

¹⁴ S. M. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton 1987) 23 n.7, 39–41; cf. Köhnken, in *Oxford Readings* 54 n.30. In this respect, the second signs shown to Penelope and Laertes may simply underscore the fact that these characters (the family) are even closer to Odysseus than Eurykleia and the servants. See also S. Goldhill, *The Poet’s Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature* (Cambridge 1991) 19; Henderson, *JHS* 117 (1997) 93 n.28.

scenes in the *Odyssey*, deserves discussion.¹⁵

The issue at stake here is whether or how the servants could know of Odysseus' scar. The digression story about how he got the scar mentions his parents and Eurycleia, but none of his servants. As Odysseus' wife, Penelope must also have known about the scar.¹⁶ It seems then reasonable to assume that Penelope, Eurycleia, and Odysseus' parents know about the scar because they are the persons closest to Odysseus. One cannot, however, say the same of the servants. Homer does not tell his audience how they got their knowledge of the scar. Does this imply that the recognition scene in Book 21 is a late addition to the poem?

The excessively rationalistic discussion on how the servants could know of the scar is a futile one, and can lead to false analytical conclusions. A well-known principle of Homeric narrative technique, which was discovered in the last century, is 'motivation-by-the-audience' or 'transference'.¹⁷ According to this principle, what the listener knows, because the poet has told him in the preceding narrative, the character may be assumed to know as well.¹⁸ A more developed use of this principle is found where the characters display knowledge which

¹⁵ Obviously, the fact that the first recognition scene is followed by others does not necessarily imply that the latter scenes are 'later' additions to the poem; there is no logical connection between the time of the composition of these scenes and the 'internal' time of the narration.

¹⁶ This is clearly shown in 19.506–507, when, just before he starts talking to Penelope, Odysseus hides his scar so that she cannot see it (*pace* Woodhouse, *Composition* 75, who argues that she had no way of knowing about the scar). It is important to note that Odysseus was not married to Penelope at the time of his visit to Autolykos.

¹⁷ S. E. Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* (Berkeley 1938) 130–140; I. J. F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge 2001) xviii.

¹⁸ One of the commonest situations is when two opponents face off on the battlefield; such characters know facts about each other only because the poet has just described them in a preceding passage; see Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* 131–132, for examples.

they could not possibly have.¹⁹

The transference principle shows that it is not absolutely necessary to look for the origin of the servants' knowledge of the scar, although possible and even plausible explanations exist (cf. n.14). In fact, the same conclusion can also be applied in Penelope's case. The characters' knowledge of the scar ultimately points to their being faithful to Odysseus.

All these considerations show that the recognition scene in Book 21 cannot be said to be necessarily a late addition. The arguments presented below show that not only is this scene unlikely to be interpolated but in fact it belongs to the original plan of the *Odyssey*. For this, I bring into discussion the episode of the fight between the beggar Iros and Odysseus in Book 18, for which Odysseus is preparing himself (18.66–70):

ἀντάρ Ὀδυσσεύς
ζώσατο μὲν ῥάκεσιν περὶ μῆδεα, φαῖνε δὲ μηρὸς
καλοῦς τε μεγάλους τε, φάνεν δὲ οἱ εὐρέες ὄμοι
στήθεά τε στιβαροί τε βραχίονες· ἀντάρ Ἀθήνη
ἄγχι παρισταμένη μέλε' ἤλδανε ποιμένι λαῶν.

Thus, just before the fight Odysseus reveals his powerful body to Iros and the suitors by taking off the rags that clothe him; Athena, who invisibly stands beside him, magnifies his limbs in such a way that the suitors are astonished at their sight (71) whereas Iros starts to tremble in fear (75–77). Unfortunately for them, the suitors do not take seriously Odysseus' display of power, and that will eventually contribute to their doom.

At first, there seems no connection between this passage and our topic, Odysseus' scar. His stripping, however, raises a simple and natural question, which inevitably links this passage to the scar: when Odysseus disrobes and can display his “splendid and large thighs,” why is it that nobody in the hall can recognize his scar, which was big (μεγάλη, 21.221)? During the

¹⁹ E.g., Achilles could not have known that Chryses prayed to Apollo (*Il.* 1.380); Eupheithes could not have known that Odysseus had gone to the farm of Laertes (*Od.* 24.437); for these and other examples see Bassett, *The Poetry of Homer* 132–134.

fight Odysseus is in fact concerned to conceal his heroic identity (18.93–94).

The simplest answer is that the poet did not think of the scar when he composed this scene.²⁰ As we shall see, the way in which Homer planned this episode makes this hypothesis unlikely. One could also say that Athena, who in this episode is said to magnify his limbs, transforms him in such a way that the scar does not exist or is not visible. There is, however, no indication whatever for such an assumption. Lines 23.153–165, in which Athena transforms Odysseus in a similar way for the recognition scene between the hero and his wife, show that such an assumption is groundless. Indeed, in this latter case, it is hard to believe that Athena could remove the scar since Penelope already knew about it (Eurycleia had told her about it, 23.73–77). Is it then possible to find an explanation for why nobody could notice Odysseus' scar during his fight against Iros?

As already noted, there are five characters in Ithaca who know about the scar—Eurycleia, Penelope, Laertes, and the servants Eumaios and Philoitios.²¹ To answer the question we need to determine why these particular characters fail to react to Odysseus' scar.

I begin with Penelope. At the end of Book 17 she is upstairs in her chamber (ἐν θαλάμῳ) conversing with her serving women (17.505–506);²² she summons Eumaios to go downstairs to Odysseus, who has just arrived at the palace, and invite him to her chamber so that she can ask him about her husband (544–550); she is still upstairs in her chamber when

²⁰ So Wilamowitz, *Die Heimkehr* 28, on this passage: “An die Narbe ... denkt der Dichter nicht.”

²¹ Others are said to know about the scar: Autolykos, his mother's father, and his sons obviously did as they treated the wound; also Odysseus' mother Anticleia, as Odysseus had told her (19.455–466). None of these characters is present in Ithaca.

²² See Stanford, *The Odyssey* II 296. At 17.101, Penelope had clearly expressed her wish to go to her room.

the fight between Iros and Odysseus ends (18.158–162). Thus she is not present at the fight.

Eurycleia appears at the beginning of Book 17 (17.31–35). It is early morning, and the suitors have not yet arrived at the palace. Eurycleia is the first in the palace to greet Telemachus upon his return from the trip to Pylos and Sparta. From that moment on she vanishes from the story until the beginning of Book 19, just before the episode of the scar.²³ Homer does not tell us where she went, but it is reasonable to assume that, since Penelope is in her chamber with her servants, Eurycleia, who is their mistress, is there as well.²⁴ This is consistent with the fact that Telemachus has to summon her from an inner place in the palace.²⁵ So Eurycleia too is not present at the fight between Iros and Odysseus. As with Penelope, Homer seems to arrange Eurycleia's absence in that scene.

A third character who knows about the scar is Odysseus' father. Obviously, Laertes cannot be present at the fight in Book 18, as he lives at his estate, at a remove from the palace.

There remains Eumaios.²⁶ The swineherd offers the most interesting case. At the end of Book 17, so just before Odysseus' fight with Iros, Eumaios informs Penelope in her chamber (17.575, cf. 589–590) that Odysseus prefers to meet with her not immediately (579–584)—as she initially requested through the same swineherd (542–550)—but later, after sunset. Then Eumaios goes to Telemachus and tells him that he wants to go home to watch over the pigs and the farm.²⁷ Telemachus does

²³ Von der Mühl, *RE Suppl.* VII (1940) 749, holds that the character Eurycleia was deliberately created for the recognition scene.

²⁴ Eurycleia gives orders to the maidservants: 20.148–156.

²⁵ 19.14–15: Τηλέμαχος δὲ φίλῳ ἐπεπέιθετο πατρί, / ἐκ δὲ καλεσσάμενος προσέφη τρόφον Εὐρύκλειαν.

²⁶ Telemachus is present at the fight but he does not seem to be aware of the scar. This would not be surprising, since he could never have seen it, being an infant when Odysseus departed. As for Philoitios, the cowherd, he shows up in the story only later, at 20.185.

²⁷ 17.593: σύας καὶ κείνα φυλάζων. κείνα most likely refers to the farm

not object and tells him to come back the next morning. The book closes with Eumaios leaving and the suitors feasting.²⁸ Books 18 and 19 say no word about Eumaios, who reappears at 20.162–163; it is morning, and Eumaios comes to the palace as Telemachus had requested the day before. This is the day of the bow contest.

Eumaios, therefore, is not present at the fight between Iros and Odysseus. It is worthwhile to underscore that, while it is natural for Eumaios to want to go back to the farm and take care of the pigs, the moment of his departure is apparently arbitrary. Telemachus himself tells him to leave sometime during the afternoon: σὺ δ' ἔρχεο δειελήσας “go after you have spent the afternoon here” (17.599).²⁹ Eumaios eats something (602–603) and leaves. There is no indication of the time of his departure aside from the fact that, as Lattimore translates, “the later part of the day had come on.”

To conclude: at the fight between Odysseus and Iros, the absence of the three main characters who in one way or another knew about the scar seems to be more than a mere coincidence. Nor does Eumaios' departure from the palace just

in general; see Russo, *Commentary* III 45. The conversation between Eumaios and Telemachus occurs downstairs, where the suitors are (17.589–591).

²⁸ See 17.604–606 on Eumaios: βῆ ῥ' ἕμεναι μεθ' ὕας, λίπε δ' ἔρκεά τε μέγαρόν τε / πλεῖον δαιτυμόνων· οἱ δ' ὀρχηστὺ καὶ ἀοιδῆ / τέρποντ'· ἤδη γὰρ καὶ ἐπήλυθε δείελον ἡμαρ. Russo, *Commentary* III 45, argues that the obscure δείελον refers to late afternoon or early evening, the time near sunset. The many events that follow, however, show that the word refers only to afternoon in general as Stanford, *The Odyssey* II 299, assumed. After Eumaios' departure, sunset (18.304–306) occurs only after Odysseus' fight with Iros (75–107), Penelope's nap caused by Athena (187–205), and Penelope beguiling gifts from the suitors (290–303); it is unlikely that all these events could take place around sunset.

²⁹ Russo, *Commentary* III 45 takes this as meaning a late-afternoon (“close-to-sunset”) meal; the translation of R. Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York 1965), “Go, when you have had your supper,” reflects the same interpretation; Stanford, *The Odyssey* II 299, is against this, cf. n.28 above.

before the fight seem to be randomly conceived.³⁰ The reason is that no one must exclaim in recognition on seeing Odysseus' scar. These observations have an important consequence. One cannot say that the episode of the revealing of the scar in the recognition scene between Eumaios and Odysseus is late and unnecessary. The knowledge of the scar represents one of the essential and deliberately created traits of the character Eumaios; put differently, Eumaios' knowledge of the scar appears to be an important part of the general plan of the *Odyssey* as it stands.³¹

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³⁰ A similar situation occurs at 16.146–155: Telemachus, who has just arrived at the swineherd's hut from his voyage to Pylos, sends Eumaios to the palace to inform Penelope of his arrival; Eumaios' departure is followed immediately by the recognition scene between Odysseus and Telemachus.

³¹ It is also not possible to accept the analytical theory of von der Mühl, *RE* Suppl. VII (1940) 753–754, that in a previous poem ('Homer's *Odyssey*' or '*Odyssey A*') Odysseus and Telemachus would have fought the suitors alone after Eumaios had left the palace to go to the farm. Thus, that the recognition scene in Book 21 is a genuine part of the poem entails that Eumaios *must* return to the palace. At the same time, it is hard to imagine that Odysseus could show the scar to Eumaios without doing so for his father Laertes in Book 24; this may mean that Book 24 also belongs organically to the general plan of our *Odyssey* and so is not a later addition to the poem as the Alexandrians believed.

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