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PENELOPE'S FOOT

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> ἀσκοῦ με τὸν προύχοντα μὴ λῦσαι πόδα.
> That I should not release the out-jutting foot of the wineskin…
> Euripides *Medea* 679

> Readers of the *Odyssey* will remember the well-prepared and touching scene in Book 19, when Odysseus has at last come home, the scene in which the old housekeeper Eurycleia, who had been his nurse, recognizes him by a scar on his thigh. The stranger has won Penelope's good will; at his request she tells the housekeeper to wash his feet, which, in all old stories, is the first duty of hospitality toward a tired traveler.
> Erich Auerbach[1]

There are dangers and pleasures in reducing stories to universal themes. The *Odyssey* seems all too aware of this. Part of its appeal comes from whether this tale of a single man returning home can stand for far greater questions of what it means to be human. Our pleasure as we recognize these familiar stories mirrors the delight of the poem's characters as they recognize Odysseus. We want such events to be universal, because the pleasure of the familiar helps us on our own journey through the dangers and uncertainties of life. But, as an increasingly vast scholarly bibliography reminds us, recognition in this poem is far from simple. The poem's delight in riddles and trickery means that the joy of any delight in recognition conflicts with its rhetoric of suspicion and the almost paranoid need of its hero for self-preservation. This to and fro is also part of the poem's wider economy of thrift, as if we must pay for any pleasure we gain in recognition with the pain of belated reflection.[2]

Erich Auerbach's summary of the recognition scene between Odysseus and Eurycleia, quoted above, and from one of the most influential pieces of writing on the *Odyssey*, has become so well known that we almost take its truth for granted. But I would like to reflect on one highly dubious detail. We do not need to have read 'all stories' to question the assertion that foot washing is the 'first duty' of hospitality to a traveler. We can first pay attention to the anomaly of foot washing in the *Odyssey* itself.

1. Auerbach (2003), 3.
2. Some of the most sophisticated include Goldhill (1988) and Murnaghan (1987).

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There are plenty of tired travelers in the *Odyssey*, plenty of baths, plenty of washing of clothes and bodies.[3] But this is the first scene where feet are washed. When Athena, disguised as Mentor, enters Odysseus' palace in the opening book, she is offered a seat, food, entertainment, but only her hands are washed (1.130-43), in clear preparation for eating. When Telemachus arrives at Nestor's palace, water is poured over his hands before libations are poured and a final evening meal eaten (3.338-44), but Telemachus' feet are never mentioned. Later, while at Menelaus' palace, there is time for a bath before dinner, and hand washing (4.47-50) before the meal. But though we might suppose that the hand-maidens wash Telemachus' feet, the text makes no mention of it. Odysseus' bathing habits seem to be no different. When he washes himself in the streams of the river, after meeting Nausicaa, he pays no attention to his feet (6.225-29). When he enters Alcinous' palace, there is once more the ritual hand washing before the pouring of libations (7.170-74), and later a bath from maidservants who seem to care little about his extremities (8.454f.). Circe's bath seems to get a little closer to his feet, for the warm water at least removes the 'soul-consuming tiredness from his limbs' (10.363), but there's no hint of a pedicure. To make things stranger, the foot washing in *Odyssey* 19 is not just mentioned in passing, but revealed to us in a particularly careful and significant way. The bathing theme begins innocently enough; Penelope conforms to the general pattern by offering her stranger a bath. But Odysseus clearly has other things on his mind:

> ἀλλά μιν, ἀμφίπολοι, ἀπονίψατε, κάτθετε δ' εὐνήν,
> δέμνια καὶ χλαίνας καὶ ῥήγεα σιγαλόεντα,
> ὥς κ' εὖ θαλπιόων χρυσόθρονον Ἠῶ ἵκηται.
>
> (*Od.* 19.317-19)

> But come, handmaidens, give him a wash and spread a couch for him
> here, with bedding and coverlets and with shining blankets,
> so that he can keep warm as he waits for Dawn of the golden throne.

> οὐδέ τί μοι ποδάνιπτρα ποδῶν ἐπιήρανα θυμῷ
> γίγνεται· οὐδὲ γυνὴ ποδὸς ἅψεται ἡμετέροιο
> τάων αἵ τοι δῶμα κάτα δρήστειραι ἔασιν,
> εἰ μή τις γρηῢς ἐστι παλαιή, κεδνὰ ἰδυῖα,
> ἥ τις δὴ τέτληκε τόσα φρεσὶν ὅσσα τ' ἐγώ περ·
> τῇ δ' οὐκ ἂν φθονέοιμι ποδῶν ἅψασθαι ἐμεῖο.
>
> (*Od.* 19.343-48)

> Nor is there any desire in my heart for foot basins, to wash
> my feet, nor shall any woman lay hold of my feet, not one

3. On hospitality in general in the poem, Reece (1993).

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> of those such as do your work for you in your palace;
> not unless there is some aged and virtuous woman
> whose heart has had to endure as many troubles as mine has.
> If such a one were to touch my feet, I should not be angry.[4]

This 'type-scene' begins as normal. But in response to Penelope's quite general offer, Odysseus rejects not any kind of bath, but a footbath in particular. Indeed, he mentions some variation of the word 'foot' four times, though the need for clean feet is not immediately obvious, and the request has no parallel in Homer. Further, he is adamant that none of the maidservants be allowed to touch his feet, although he does make a significant exception: unless there is an ancient and trustworthy one. In the *Odyssey*, therefore, foot washing begins to look less like a normal detail of 'all old stories' of weary travelers, and instead something that sticks out as much any out-jutting foot of any proverbial wineskin.

There is a second problem in this episode. For Odysseus' desire to have an old woman wash his feet will very nearly be his downfall. Penelope suggests his old nurse, Eurycleia. This will soon backfire, as he seems to have forgotten the scar on his thigh, the sign that will allow her to recognize him. This is how John Peradotto summarizes the problem, while offering his own solution:

> If we insist on importing a conventional sense of psychological coherence or character consistency to our reading of this passage, then we shall be obliged to press our criticism of it still further. Otherwise, how could we fail to be troubled by the way in which Odysseus, the master of intelligence and cunning, is made to request an older maidservant in place of a younger one to wash his feet, without realizing who is likely to get the job![5]

Peradotto suggests that our modern presumptions about the consistency of character and psychological coherence could be the problem, as if the *Odyssey* comes from a world of story-telling whose generic assumptions could tolerate a crafty hero who makes ridiculous mistakes. But what if we instead lean on a more humbling aspect of the human condition that is so important to the poem? Anyone, even a trickster, can be caught up in tangles of his own ruses. The text poses a riddle we might do better to linger over. Why does he make such a stupid mistake?

Christine Mitchell Havelock, in an article on the ancient artistic representations of this scene, points toward an answer. Havelock refers to the 'intimate

4. I make use the text of the *OCT* and the translation of Richmond Lattimore throughout. As will soon become clear, I believe imprecisions in Lattimore's translation make the episode far harder to make sense of, but they are all the more instructive because of this.

5. Peradotto (1990), 122.

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act' of foot washing, and suggests that Eurycleia washes Odysseus' feet to avoid any sexual innuendo: 'Eurycleia's function and status in the *Odyssey* are inextricably bound to her old age. She is now beyond sex and erotic innuendo.'[6] Whether this is true of Eurycleia is a complicated question, and one to which I will return. But for now, let me emphasize that the text, as Odysseus insists on his need for an old woman to wash his feet, already acknowledges the sexual innuendo. He needs an old woman, and not one of the younger maidservants, precisely to avoid the kind of sexual embarrassment that lurks in the 'intimate act' that he imagines.[7]

We can now return to Odysseus' fears, and note one other detail. He begins by saying he has had no baths for his *feet*, then demands that no woman wash 'our *foot*', qualifies the term 'woman' with a relative clause, 'of those who do your work', then imagines an old woman washing both *feet*. Lattimore's translation, which collapses singular into plural, is itself part of the general carelessness with which this episode has been routinely read.[8] Because it is the *feet-washing* scene, then Odysseus must surely be talking about his feet, even when he says 'our foot'.

So why does Odysseus shift from plural to singular? Behind Eurycleia's recognition of the scar lurks a very different recognition scene, one that the text so scrupulously avoids that it is all the more present. For when Odysseus fears that the maidservants will be touching not his 'feet', but rather his 'foot', I suggest he is worried about a quite different out-jutting limb.

The sexual innuendo of 'foot' doubling for penis was well known in archaic and classical Greece.[9] But it is already at work in the *Odyssey* itself. In the tale of Ares and Aphrodite, the lame Hephaestus is contrasted with the ἀρτίπος ('strong of foot') Ares, and this in response to his recent cuckolding:

> αἰὲν ἀτιμάζει, φιλέει δ' ἀΐδηλον Ἄρηα,
> οὕνεχ' ὁ μὲν καλός τε καὶ ἀρτίπος, αὐτὰρ ἐγώ γε
> ἠπεδανὸς γενόμην…
>
> (*Od*. 8.309-11)

6. Havelock (1995), 193.

7. The hint of critical squeamishness here replays a better known critical embarrassment at the traditions that undermine Penelope's sexual purity. In both this scene and the later bed scene, the *Odyssey* maintains its decorum only by constantly hinting at the prohibited sexuality that helps define it. For an attempt to keep the text free of Penelope's sexuality, see Fredricksmeyer (1997) with Henderson (1986) as antidote.

8. Consider also Peradotto's brief summary of the scene: 'She [Penelope] orders the stranger's feet bathed and, when he expresses reluctance to risk a young maiden's ridicule, it is his old nurse Eurycleia who is called to the task' (Peradotto [1990], 120). There are so many imprecisions in this seemingly innocuous paraphrase as to make the episode almost impossible to understand, and this in one of the most insightful commentaries on the scene.

9. As the oracular riddle from Euripides' *Medea*, quoted at the top of this essay, shows. On this riddle in particular, Buchan (2008). On confusions between feet and penis in Greece's most famous riddle, Katz (2006), Oikonimides (1988).

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> [She] holds me in little favor, but she loves ruinous Ares
> because he is handsome, and goes sound on his feet, while I am
> misshapen from birth…

If Hephaestus here refers, with a nudge and a wink, to Ares' sexual potency in the adjective 'ἀρτίπος', then the joke might seem to be on him. Or is it? After all, he has just engineered the kind of trick that freezes his prey, rendering them immobile in the bedroom. The very indefiniteness of the phrase applied to the trick's victims, that they are unable to raise 'any of their limbs', perhaps already suggests Hephaestus' answer to the problem of Ares' potency.[10]

We can also now see why Odysseus only remembers the scar when it is too late. Quite simply, his mind was elsewhere, intent on avoiding another kind of recognition scene that, though it never occurs, is gestured toward by the poem's innuendo. But what kind of scene would this be?

There are at least two possibilities. In the first, we can imagine the maidservants mocking him, either for his inability to sexually control himself when they touch his foot, or perhaps simply for the thing itself. This seems to be the scenario later imagined by Eurycleia, as the thought of the unfortunate stranger makes her fantasize about the situation of Odysseus:

> οὕτω που καὶ κείνῳ ἐφεψιόωντο γυναῖκες
> ξείνων τηλεδαπῶν, ὅτε τευ κλυτὰ δώμαθ' ἵκοιτο,
> ὡς σέθεν αἱ κύνες αἵδε καθεψιόωνται ἅπασαι,
> τάων νῦν λώβην τε καὶ αἴσχεα πόλλ' ἀλεείνων
> οὐκ ἐάᾳς νίζειν· ἐμὲ δ' οὐκ ἀέκουσαν ἄνωγε
> κούρη Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφρων Πηνελόπεια.
> τῷ σε πόδας νίψω ἅμα τ' αὐτῆς Πηνελοπείης
> καὶ σέθεν εἵνεκ', ἐπεί μοι ὀρώρεται ἔνδοθι θυμὸς
> κήδεσιν.
>
> (*Od.* 19.370-78)

> So it must be for him also that in the houses of far-off
> friends, whose famous homes he enters, the women tease him,
> as now these sluts are all teasing you, stranger, and it is
> to avoid their abuse and shameful speaking you will not let them
> wash your feet. But circumspect Penelope, daughter
> of Ikarios told me to do it, nor am I unwilling.
> So I shall wash your feet, both for the sake of Penelope
> but also for yourself, since the heart is stirred within me
> by sorrows.

10. I am indebted here to an unpublished paper by Richard Hunter delivered in April 2009 at Columbia University, on the sexual innuendo of this scene.

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The mockery of the maidservants, whose open display of sexuality is a near obsession with their disguised master, now takes an overtly sexual turn. Indeed the imaginary scene of the washing by the maidservants begins to look like a comic exercise in demonstrating the hero's other most famous quality, his endurance—πολύτλας Ὀδυσσεύς. Odysseus preempts in advance a situation in which he recognizes his inability to endure, to control less himself than a particularly unreliable organ. Here it is worth emphasizing that an out-jutting penis, far from a sign of the hero's potency, is far more likely to signify an embarrassing and un-aristocratic lack of self-control, a return to the bestial.[11]

In this speech too, we should pay attention to the detailed description of the respective acts so as to appreciate the limits of the innuendo. She will be washing Odysseus' *feet*, not his foot—πόδας νίψω—whereas she refuses to specify exactly what the maidservants might be washing: οὐκ ἐάᾳς νίζειν, 'you don't allow them to wash'. The vagueness is surely deliberate. In not saying what *they* will wash, she is very firm about what *she* will wash, feet and only feet. She thus becomes exactly the kind of foot-washer Odysseus asked for, and Eurycleia's, and the poem's, sense of surface decorum is maintained.[12] A similar strategy is at work when she reveals her motivation for the washing of his feet. She washes him because 'her heart within is stirred up', and the first word of the next line makes the reason for her unrest clear: 'by sorrows', κήδεσιν. For a moment, before we move on to the next line, we can imagine a scene where there is a very different kind of internal excitement.

So why is this scene avoided? In part, because we identify with Odysseus, and his desire to cling to the pretense of his fidelity to Penelope, and style himself as the maintainer of sexual decorum on Ithaca. But the *Odyssey* also derives much of its narrative power from *indirect* sexual competition. The bathing scene is framed by two other contests where the sexual implications remain veiled. In the bow contest, the stringer of the bow will prove to be sexually worthy of Penelope, which makes the bow rather more than a bow.[13] But even in the previous book, when Odysseus nearly gives himself away in the fight with the beggar Iros, sexual implications lurk. With hindsight, we can see how this tale sets up the innuendo of Book 19:

11. On this in general, see Griffith (2006) on the symbolic differences between comic, low-class donkeys and tragic, upper-class horses in the Greek imagination. The male donkey is unable to constrain his sexual appetite, and this is comic, whereas there is a well-preserved taboo on depicting the aristocratic horse as sexually aroused. The aristocratic Greek preference for small and thin penises is well established by Dover (1987).

12. I find it interesting that several responses to this paper have reduced it to the obvious bathetic ridiculousness of 'Eurycleia washes Odysseus' penis'. Perhaps this misunderstanding of my argument points at something interesting. The sexual innuendo in this scene is not quite normal. It is a kind of ongoing plea for tact, a desire to keep bathing free from innuendo, and it fails for very specific narrative reasons. At any rate, Eurycleia and Odysseus have a tacit understanding that they will make the footbath innocent, and in doing so they align themselves against the sexually uncouth suitors and maidservants.

13. DeSmidt (2006), *passim*.

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ὣς ἔφαθ', οἱ δ' ἄρα πάντες ἐπήνεον. αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
ζώσατο μὲν ῥάκεσιν περὶ μήδεα, φαῖνε δὲ μηροὺς
καλούς τε μεγάλους τε, φάνεν δέ οἱ εὐρέες ὦμοι
στήθεά τε στιβαροί τε βραχίονες…

(*Od*. 18.66-69)

So he spoke, and they all applauded him. But Odysseus
girded up his rags about his body, displaying
his thighs, splendid and large, and one could see the wide shoulders;
his chest showed, and his ponderous arms…

What Odysseus reveals are his four limbs, what he conceals with rags are his μήδεα—not his 'body', as Lattimore's euphemism would have it, but his genitals. What is 'hidden' will be the very thing he is afraid of revealing in the imagined bath with the maidservants, and also the thing that will be implicitly revealed as a consequence of the mass deaths of the suitors, since their deaths give him direct sexual access to Penelope. The *Odyssey* has much fun with these games of concealment and revelation.

But if Lattimore's translation suggests a prudish vagueness, the suitors' reaction to the beggar's anatomy is almost the exact reverse:

…αὐτὰρ Ἀθήνη
ἄγχι παρισταμένη μέλε' ἤλδανε ποιμένι λαῶν.
μνηστῆρες δ' ἄρα πάντες ὑπερφιάλως ἀγάσαντο·
ὧδε δέ τις εἴπεσκεν ἰδὼν ἐς πλησίον ἄλλον·
"ἦ τάχα Ἶρος Ἄϊρος ἐπίσπαστον κακὸν ἕξει,
οἵην ἐκ ῥακέων ὁ γέρων ἐπιγουνίδα φαίνει."

(*Od*. 18.69-74)

…and also Athene
standing close beside the shepherd of the people magnified
his limbs, and the suitors all in their insolence were astonished,
and thus would one of them speak, looking over at his next neighbor:
'Iros will soon be Iros no more, with himself to thank for
the evil. See what limbs the old man's rags have uncovered.'

Note how Athene's magical enlargement of the limbs that do not lie behind the rags hint at the rather less magical enlargement of the limb behind the rags that Odysseus avoids in the next book. The suitors seem to see the funny side, as their amazement at what Athene does reveal is not so easily divorced from what is concealed. For what exactly does having enlarged *limbs* signify? The suitors say that what pops out from the rags is the beggar's ἐπιγουνίδα. Translated by Lattimore as 'limbs', LSJ quote the word from the same passage, but offer a rather more detailed rendition: 'part above the knee, great muscle of the

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thigh'. One wonders how far above the knee one should be looking, and whether LSJ's belated recognition of this 'great muscle' by their last word, 'thigh', itself picks up on the *Odyssey*'s game of innuendo. We might even linger over the significance of the present tense, φαίνει. The old man gradually reveals himself, first from out the rags, but the revelation will continue in the next book.[14]

It is well-known that this episode is mock-heroic. But the sexual aspect of the comedy is worth emphasizing. Odysseus' transformation makes him akin to the old men of Old Comedy who surprise us by their continuing sexual prowess in their dotage, beneficiaries of the imaginary comic world where time has stood still. But the poem stops just short of this, and we await the bow scene and the ensuing night of passion with Penelope for the final release of sex and violence. In a sense, the suitors make the same mistake that Odysseus will later make with Eurycleia. Odysseus' disguise as an old man takes away the sexual threat posed by him, and they will pay for not seeing this with their lives. The comfort Odysseus takes in Eurycleia's asexual old age blinds him to a more significant attachment she has to him. So let us turn to this moment:

αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἷζεν ἐπ᾽ ἐσχαρόφιν, ποτὶ δὲ σκότον ἐτράπετ᾽ αἶψα·
αὐτίκα γὰρ κατὰ θυμὸν ὀΐσατο, μή ἑ λαβοῦσα
οὐλὴν ἀμφράσσαιτο καὶ ἀμφαδὰ ἔργα γένοιτο.

(*Od*. 19.388-91)

Now Odysseus
was sitting close to the fire, but suddenly turned to the dark side;
for presently he thought in his heart that, as she handled him,
she might be aware of his scar, and all his story might come out.

What he fears will 'come out into the open', ἀμφαδά, is *prima facie* his identity, which would bring the story of his return to a premature close. But in speaking of deeds that come prematurely 'out into the open', his language refers to the other possible narratives that he has successfully tried to keep hidden. He may have hidden what was behind the rags, he may even have avoided the dangerous touch of an attractive and sexually teasing maidservant which might have produced something from nothing. But it is the story of his disguise of the self that nearly pops out.

14. As Professor J.T. Katz points out to me, drawing on the work of Calvert Watkins, Iros' name is the one place in Greek literature where we have the cognate of the Latin word for man, *uir*. So when the suitors play on his name, Ἶρος Ἄϊρος, they comment on the quite literal un-manning that will characterize the episode. Odysseus' emergence as *uir*/*aner* coincides with the disappearance of Iros. The suitors thus unwittingly come close to answering, by this pun on Iros' name, the riddle that opens the *Odyssey*. Who is the un-named *andra* of the first line? The revelation of this limb would thus form a narrative closure, giving the game away. So when Odysseus later, in Book 19, worries that the bath will make everything clear, the scene remembers this one.

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But a second and far more straightforward sexual recognition also lurks. For what if the maidservants were not only to laugh at 'it', but also to recognize 'it'? The *Odyssey* remains deliberately vague about the age of the maidservants, but surely some must have been sexually available to their master 20 years before, a presumption later confirmed when Odysseus recognizes all the remaining 'virtuous' maidservants not killed by Telemachus, in the very last line of Book 22. This possibility might explain the curious anomaly in Odysseus' description of his foot we mentioned at the beginning of our inquiry:

> …οὐδὲ γυνὴ ποδὸς ἅψεται ἡμετέροιο.
>
> (*Od.* 19.344)

> …nor shall any woman lay hold of *our foot.*

He wants the maidservants to avoid 'our foot', but a woman to wash 'my feet'. Of course, 'our' could mean no more than 'my'. But the context suggests a different possibility. What Odysseus avoids by having a maidservant bathe him is the unraveling of his pretense of fidelity to Penelope.[15] Were he to have an unwittingly erotic bath in her presence with one of them, then 'his' foot would no longer belong to them both, be 'our foot'. The term γυνή, used of both woman and wife, thus previews a later, understated recognition scene, when Odysseus and Penelope will remember their old ritual of love-making:

> τόφρα δ᾽ ἄρ᾽ Εὐρυνόμη τε ἰδὲ τροφὸς ἔντυον εὐνὴν
> ἐσθῆτος μαλακῆς, δαΐδων ὕπο λαμπομενάων.
> αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ στόρεσαν πυκινὸν λέχος ἐγκονέουσαι,
> γρηῢς μὲν κείουσα πάλιν οἶκόνδε βεβήκει,
> τοῖσιν δ᾽ Εὐρυνόμη θαλαμηπόλος ἡγεμόνευεν
> ἐρχομένοισι λέχοσδε, δάος μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχουσα·
> ἐς θάλαμον δ᾽ ἀγαγοῦσα πάλιν κίεν. οἱ μὲν ἔπειτα
> ἀσπάσιοι λέκτροιο παλαιοῦ θεσμὸν ἴκοντο.
> αὐτὰρ Τηλέμαχος καὶ βουκόλος ἠδὲ συβώτης
> παῦσαν ἄρ᾽ ὀρχηθμοῖο πόδας, παῦσαν δὲ γυναῖκας,
> αὐτοὶ δ᾽ εὐνάζοντο κατὰ μέγαρα σκιόεντα.
> τὼ δ᾽ ἐπεὶ οὖν φιλότητος ἐταρπήτην ἐρατεινῆς…
>
> (*Od.* 23.289-300)

15. As Professor Katz has again pointed out to me, the reverse of Odysseus' obsession with recognition of his foot lurks behind a witticism in an anecdote about the classicist Maurice Bowra, recently retold by Bevis Hillier of his autobiography (*Spectator*, 17 December 2005). 'He liked to sun himself at Parsons' Pleasure, the (since abolished) nude bathing place for men on the river Cherwell. The story was much told of how, when an illicit punt-load of women floated past, all the other men covered their genitals, but Bowra threw a towel over his face with the words, "I don't know about you chaps, but I am known in the streets of Oxford by my face".'

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> [M]eanwhile the nurse and Eurynome were making the bed up
> with soft coverings, under the light of their flaring torches.
> Then when they had worked and presently had a firm bed made,
> the old woman went away back to bed in her own place,
> while Eurynome, as mistress of the chamber, guided them
> on their way to the bed, and her hands held the torch for them.
> When she had brought them to the chamber she went back. They then
> gladly went together to bed, and their old ritual.
> At this time Telemachos and the oxherd and swineherd
> stopped the beat of their feet in the dance, and stopped the women,
> and they themselves went to bed in the shadowy palace.
> When Penelope and Odysseus had enjoyed their lovemaking…

Odysseus will indeed preserve his 'foot' for a single 'woman/wife', and the poem suggests this in two ways. First, there is the tactful withdrawal of Eurycleia, who is not even named here. Second, we can linger over the strange temporal balance between the acts of the other male cohorts of Odysseus, Telemachus, the oxherd and the swineherd, and the acts of Odysseus and Penelope. It is strangely fitting that Homer silences the noise of the dance in order to give the couple some peace for their lovemaking. But in the *way* Homer expresses the end of the dance—he stops the male feet, then the women—he also foreshadows the beating of another foot, and the beginnings of the lovemaking of another wife/woman.[16]

This strange overlap of tact and innuendo has been at work throughout the poem. We know all too well of Odysseus' shenanigans on his voyages; but the poem tries to keep them from the inhabitants of Ithaca. When, for example, Athena tells Telemachus about Odysseus' whereabouts in the opening of the poem, she tactfully avoids mentioning his seven-year tryst with Calpyso:

> οὐ γάρ πω τέθνηκεν ἐπὶ χθονὶ δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,
> ἀλλ᾽ ἔτι που ζωὸς κατερύκεται εὐρέϊ πόντῳ,
> νήσῳ ἐν ἀμφιρύτῃ, χαλεποὶ δέ μιν ἄνδρες ἔχουσιν
> ἄγριοι, οἵ που κεῖνον ἐρυκανόωσ᾽ ἀέκοντα.
>
> (*Od*. 1.196-99)

> For no death on the land has befallen the great Odysseus,
> but somewhere, alive on the wide sea, he is held captive,
> on a sea-washed island, and savage men have him in their keeping,
> rough men, who somehow keep him back, though he is unwilling.

16. Unsurprisingly, the *Odyssey* tends to connect dancing with feet. See, for example, *Od.* 8.250-53. But, as Professor Katz also points out to me, dancing is probably etymologically linked to the *orkhis*, the testicle, making the sexual connotations of the *Odyssey*'s final two 'dances' more likely.

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In part, her reference to 'men keeping him down against his will' is intended to remind Telemachus of his own situation, hemmed in by the suitors. But her silence about Calypso also allows Odysseus to maintain his sexual double standards. It is one thing to cheat on one's wife, quite another to have this be publicly recognized. This motif allows us to return to Eurycleia, and a curious piece of narrative information given about her in the opening book:

> Εὐρύκλει', Ὦπος θυγάτηρ Πεισηνορίδαο,
> τήν ποτε Λαέρτης πρίατο κτεάτεσσιν ἑοῖσι
> πρωθήβην ἔτ' ἐοῦσαν, ἐεικοσάβοια δ' ἔδωκεν,
> ἶσα δέ μιν κεδνῇ ἀλόχῳ τίεν ἐν μεγάροισιν,
> εὐνῇ δ' οὔ ποτ' ἔμικτο, χόλον δ' ἀλέεινε γυναικός.
>
> (*Od.* 1.429-33)

> She was the daughter of Ops the son of Peisenor,
> and Laertes had bought her long ago with his own possessions
> when she was still in her first youth, and gave twenty oxen for her,
> and he favored her in his house as much as his own devoted
> wife, but never slept with her, for fear of his wife's anger.

Regardless of whether it was a master's right to have sexual access to his maidservants, the *Odyssey* chooses to emphasize another possibility, the anger that such acts of sexual betrayal can unleash in the woman scorned. For all that Eurycleia is 'old', she was once a source of sexual tension within the household. In the bath scene, the sexual tension recurs a generation later, although it carefully avoids a scene that could make the current lady of the house jealous. Penelope is left with the fiction that Odysseus' foot belongs to her alone, a fiction that Odysseus himself has done so much to try to preserve. Like father, like son.

So if we now have answered why Odysseus was so obsessed with a foot-bath, we can now turn to the second problem, and look in greater detail at his error in nearly giving himself away. Let us look at when he becomes frightened. If he is obsessed with his foot, then there should be a certain relief when Eurycleia, old as she is, really does wash his feet. But when one anxiety is removed, a second appears: what if she sees the scar? There is a perfect symmetry to Odysseus' error. He is at first worried that something, an extended foot, will appear from nothing in the bath, and thus give him away. But Eurycleia, primed to turn a blind eye to anything that sticks out, alights upon the exact reverse: the sign of something that was once hollowed out, a sign of a healed over absence of flesh. Odysseus is fooled, not for the first time, because he has the wrong idea of what recognition means to Eurycleia.[17]

17. Odysseus is worried about something appearing from nothing, whereas what he forgets is that an *absence* can in and of itself be a sign. Critics routinely refer to the scar as a 'recognition token', but

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But the text tricks us too. Or at the very least shows us how, retroactively, the suitors have been tricked. For where exactly is this scar? The long 'digression' on the boar-hunt gives us the answer:

> …ὁ δέ μιν φθάμενος ἔλασεν σῦς
> γουνὸς ὕπερ, πολλὸν δὲ διήφυσε σαρκὸς ὀδόντι
> λικριφὶς ἀΐξας, οὐδ᾽ ὀστέον ἵκετο φωτός.
>
> (*Od*. 19.449-51)

> …but too quick for him the boar drove
> over the knee, and with his tusk gashed much of the flesh,
> tearing sidewise, and did not reach the bone of the man.

The scar is 'above the knee', and, as we can now reasonably add, below the genitals.[18] But do we not now know that this scar was earlier on parade, in front of all the suitors, and indeed in front of us, all through the fight with Iros? The narrative thus plays a belated joke on the significance of the sexual innuendo that the suitors were so hooked on. When they were so concerned with what was 'above the knee', and whatever was escaping from 'out of his rags' might signify, what they missed was a sign that was under their very noses. In full display was the sign of Odysseus' identity. Or perhaps Odysseus, in hiding his genitals at the expense of his scar, pre-emptively makes the same mistake in Book 18 that he will make in Book 19: he pays more attention to keeping a foot occluded than his open wound. At any rate, the *Odyssey* is attuned to the way that what we see depends on the particular sets of desires and expectations that frame how we look at what is, and is not, there.

I began this paper by pointing out that Eurycleia's bath is the first act of foot-washing in the *Odyssey*. However, it is not the last. When the suitors have been killed, Telemachus, Philoetius and Eumaeus deal with Melanthius:

> ἐκ δὲ Μελάνθιον ἦγον ἀνὰ πρόθυρόν τε καὶ αὐλὴν·
> τοῦ δ᾽ ἀπὸ μὲν ῥῖνάς τε καὶ οὔατα νηλέϊ χαλκῷ
> τάμνον, μήδεά τ᾽ ἐξέρυσαν, κυσὶν ὠμὰ δάσασθαι,
> χεῖράς τ᾽ ἠδὲ πόδας κόπτον κεκοτηότι θυμῷ.
> οἱ μὲν ἔπειτ᾽ ἀπονιψάμενοι χεῖράς τε πόδας τε…
>
> (*Od*. 22.474-77)

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surely both the scar, and the possible out-jutting foot, complicate the very idea of a 'token'. On a previous mistake of Odysseus on feet, see Buchan (2004b) on Odysseus' encounter with the Skylla's feet, an episode which also previews this scene. Freudians of course can easily spot castration anxieties in all such stories. Odysseus' coming of age story, when the boar hollows out a piece of his thigh but comes all too close to another organ, hints at what the assumption of manhood costs: the awareness that the penis itself is vulnerable, and can at any time be lost.

18. For the conceptual overlap between 'knees' and 'sex' in antiquity, Onians (1988), 174-86. Notice also further possible punning in the sideways movement of the boar. If the sideways gash doesn't reach 'the bone', it must come close to another organ, famously figured in the *Works and Days* as the 'boneless one' (*Erga* 524). The gashing out of the thing, in this rite of passage, comes close to another loss.

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> They took Melanthios along the porch and the courtyard.
> They cut off, with the pitiless bronze, his nose and his ears,
> tore off his private parts and gave them to the dogs to feed on
> raw, and lopped off his hands and feet, in fury of anger.
> Then, after they had washed their own hands and feet clean…

This bathing scene, alas, also has little to do with the universal rights of a traveler. Rather, it is motivated by the need to clean off the gore left behind by heroic combat. Melanthius' death is a symbolic one, deprived of the limbs that the aristocratic hero uses to fight, as well as the more obvious expression of his manhood. Odysseus' three helpers clean the limbs they used in the fight, recalling the image of Odysseus that Eurycleia sees after the slaughter, his hands and feet spattered with gore, as if a lion fresh from the slaughter of oxen (*Od.* 22.401-06). They all clean their feet because their feet are dirty, spattered in filth from their heroic display of manhood.

But if manhood is bound up with hands and feet, femininity, at least in its properly chaste version, seems not to be. For the punishment of Melanthius is sandwiched between the poem's final images of the two sets of maidservants, the virtuous ones who refrained from sleeping with the suitors, and the twelve others:

> αἱ δ' ἴσαν ἐκ μεγάροιο δάος μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχουσαι.
> αἱ μὲν ἄρ' ἀμφεχέοντο καὶ ἡσπάζοντ' Ὀδυσῆα,
> καὶ κύνεον ἀγαπαζόμεναι κεφαλήν τε καὶ ὤμους
> χεῖράς τ' αἰνύμεναι· τὸν δὲ γλυκὺς ἵμερος ᾕρει
> κλαυθμοῦ καὶ στοναχῆς, γίγνωσκε δ' ἄρα φρεσὶ πάσας.
> (*Od*. 22.497-501)

> They came from the main house, and in their hands held torches,
> and all the serving women clung to Odysseus, and greeted him,
> and made much of him, and kissed him on his head and shoulders
> and hands, admiring him, and sweet longing for lamentation
> and tears took hold of him. He recognized all these women.

> ὣς αἵ γ' ἐξείης κεφαλὰς ἔχον, ἀμφὶ δὲ πάσαις
> δειρῇσι βρόχοι ἦσαν, ὅπως οἴκτιστα θάνοιεν.
> ἤσπαιρον δὲ πόδεσσι μίνυνθά περ, οὔτι μάλα δήν.
> (*Od.* 22.471-73)

> [S]o their heads were all in a line, and each had her neck caught
> fast in a noose, so that their death would be most pitiful.
> They struggled with their feet for a little, not for very long.

The final image of the faithful maidservants is tellingly chaste, with the emphasis all on the upper body. Not only do they touch him, using the hands that are the

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embodiment of femininity, conventionally used to weave and sew, they do so above, and only above, his waist. Contrast this with the punishment dealt out to the unfaithful by Telemachus, who believed them unworthy of the sword. Their strangulation means that their last gasp is nothing but a gasp of their feet.

But we should linger over the closing line of this book. For Aristotle's dictum that the *Odyssey* is 'recognition throughout' has a fitting climax here. With the unfaithful safely dispatched, Odysseus is left with a recognition that is both violently manufactured and all the more pleasurable for it: 'He recognized all these women.' There is now nothing to complicate his loving gaze on his faithful household; those guilty of acts of shamelessness are no longer able to prick his qualities of endurance. He returns to a household just as he had left it. No longer, at least for a moment, does anything stick out. Sexual order is restored. The twenty years of his absence seem little more than the final spasms of a dozen dying maidservants' feet.

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