Eumaeus, clothes, and the *Odyssey*

Robert Fowler

The return of the hero in disguise is the heart of the *Odyssey*’s folk tale. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the poet is particularly attentive to clothes in the poem. The many references to clothing buttress the poem’s central concerns: the contrast of appearance and reality, human insecurity, and the unpleasant consequences of neglecting Zeus’ laws of hospitality.

**New clothes for every episode**

Gifts of clothes actually seem to mark stages in the story’s progress. When Odysseus leaves Circe, and again when he leaves Calypso, he is on both occasions equipped with new garments. During the storm which overtakes Odysseus, the goddess Leucothea appears and advises Odysseus to shed his clothes as he swims for shore, protected by her magic veil. By this means Odysseus will arrive naked in Phaeacia, once more in need of clothes; the stage is set for the piquant scene between him and the modest Nausicaa, who makes a further gift of clothes from the laundry she just happens to have to hand. Upon his arrival at the palace, these clothes are the first thing Queen Arete notices; in response to his supplication, she is silent for some time, and when she finally speaks, she asks him suspiciously where he got his clothes. Odysseus’ answer mollifies her to the extent that she sees to his proper care for the night, but her wholehearted support is withheld until he has revealed his true identity.

Before leaving Phaeacia Odysseus receives yet another set of clothes, from Arete herself. Upon arrival in Ithaca, the second part of the *Odyssey* begins with the hero’s memorable transformation into a beggar. Henceforth, Odysseus’ discarding the beggar’s rags will be equivalent to revealing his identity, as happens twice in the poem, first to Telemachus in Eumaeus’ hut, and then at the climax of the epic in the slaughter of the suitors. In this light the repeated references to giving ‘a cloak and tunic’ in connection with the news of Odysseus’ return become significant.

In response to the disguised Odysseus’ claim that his master will soon return, Eumaeus says that he, too, would be quick to make up a story if he thought he could get a cloak and a tunic from Penelope for it. Odysseus twice says that he deserves the reward, and swears an oath by the most solemn authorities that the lord of Ithaca will return; he adds only that he will wait for the event to claim the prize. This is, of course, only too true.
A cloak-and-tunic affair

Odysseus is warned that he will receive rough treatment at the palace from the well-dressed, well-fed suitors. Eurymachus couples their fancy ‘cloaks and tunics’ with their ignorance of the laws of hospitality, a link to which we shall return. Telemachus, says Eumaeus, will give Odysseus a cloak and a tunic when he returns. Telemachus proves as good as Eumaeus’ word, and makes the same point about the suitors’ likely reception of Odysseus.

This gift Odysseus obviously cannot accept; to do so would justify his hosts’ scepticism. He proceeds therefore to the palace, where news of his presence reaches Penelope. She too says that if the stranger speaks the truth about Odysseus, she will give him a cloak and tunic. Now he does speak the truth in the essential point that Odysseus will return, although the long yarn about his travels is fictitious. Penelope is not to know that he has spoken the truth, but she must have an opinion; will she then give him the cloak and tunic? The answer is evasive:

May what you say prove true, stranger; then you would know my friendship and the gifts of my hospitality, and would be the envy of all who meet you. Yet I cannot believe in my heart that it will prove true, and that Odysseus will come home... but, you servants, wash his feet, make him a bed with blankets and shining sheets... at dawn, give him a bath and anoint him, so that he can take his place beside Telemachus to eat in the hall.

In that she does not give him a cloak and tunic, it seems she does not believe him; yet she gives instructions for other forms of hospitality, and the bath in the morning implies new clothes. To give him a cloak and tunic outright would be to reveal his identity, which cannot happen yet. Perhaps then she already realizes who he is. Her cagery response seems of a piece with the rest of her behaviour, which has always raised the question to readers of just how much she knows.

More tantalizing than ever, then, is the promise she makes to the beggar that she will give him a cloak and tunic, and other gifts, should he succeed in stringing the bow of Odysseus— as only the real Odysseus can do. Does she know? If so, why doesn’t she say so? Isn’t this plan rather risky— how could she know that the beggar would get a chance at the bow? But if she doesn’t know, isn’t it a disappointment that she finally yields to the suitors’ pressure after all these years? Perhaps she knows that none of them can string the bow, and this is another trick like the shroud of Laertes to postpone the wedding. What a good thing in any event that Odysseus is here in the nick of time; but how will he handle this new situation? He and Telemachus had quite different plans. All these unanswered (and unanswerable) questions add to the thrill of the story; the poet is willing to risk the charge of playing cat and mouse with his audience for the sake of the suspense thus produced.
The final twist comes after the revenge. Odysseus is still in his rags when he first proclaims himself to Penelope, so that she does not recognise him; he proposes, therefore, a bath and a new set of clothes. The whole logic of the narrative suggests that Penelope ought to recognise him after he changes; but were she to conform to such easy expectations, she would hardly deserve her epithet of "wise". Instead she springs the famous trick of the bed.

Each mention of a cloak and tunic is a foreshadowing of the poem's climax, and the possibility that the hero may don them creates a narrative frisson. The continual play on the theme creates a sense of conspiracy between narrator and audience as they work together to get Odysseus out of his rags. But the poet does more than this. Gifts of clothes were part of the rituals of hospitality, which the well-dressed suitors grossly abuse. Not only do they filch Odysseus' property, their own hospitality towards others is a poor thing. Contrast the humble Eumaeus, who takes in the wandering stranger and treats him with all courtesy. At the end of book xiv Odysseus tests the swineherd's hospitality by telling him a tale of a cold night in Troy, when Odysseus arranged for a cloak to keep him warm. Eumaeus gets the point, and does the same. Eumaeus knows from experience the hard lesson of human insecurity, and so responds sympathetically to another person's plight.

**Beggars and beggars' clothing**

At the inhospitable palace, the disguised Odysseus finds that another beggar has already laid claim to the suitors' limited generosity. This man's surly insolence shows that, in spite of his misfortunes, he has not learned the wisdom of Eumaeus. His delicious defeat at the hands of Odysseus is only too deserved. During the fight, Athena causes a glimpse of Odysseus' real strength to appear through his rags, and he must be careful not to give too much away. This pathetic mismatch anticipates the real fight to come, when Odysseus will cast his rags completely aside and proclaim his identity to the world. Directly after the fight with the beggar, Odysseus delivers this memorable speech:

> Of all the things that breathe and crawl upon the earth, none is feebleler than man. For he believes that he will never come to grief, so long as the gods give him valour and his knees are light. But when the blessed gods bring sorrows to pass, these too he bears unwillingly with a steadfast heart. The mind of groundling mortals is such as the day brought on by the father of gods and men. I too was once like to be prosperous among men, and many reckless deeds did I do with my strong right arm, confident also of my father and brothers. Therefore let no one be altogether unjust: let him rather accept in silence whatever gifts the gods might give.

All is not as it seems; good fortune may turn to bad. This passage finds parallels throughout the whole of Greek literature, and
would have struck a responsive chord in the audience. Odysseus speaks these words to Amphimachus in response to a gift of food. Like the other warnings to the suitors, this one is ignored. When Odysseus finally strings his bow and throws off his disguise, it will be too late to heed warnings; the suitors will then have only themselves to blame for their miserable fate, as Zeus had already declared in the proem of the epic.

Robert Fowler is H. O. Wills Professor of Greek at the University of Bristol, and when not worrying about his clothes has particular interests in Greek genealogy and the early writing of history.