

Odyssey Report – Eumaeus the Swineherd

In this report, I shall be looking at the character of Eumaeus, Odysseus' loyal swineherd, who keeps watch over Odysseus' pigs, though his master has been away for almost twenty years. In the course of this paper, I shall be using the Latinate spelling of the swineherd's name, and the names of other characters, except when quoting directly from Edward McCrorie's translation. He uses a rather idiosyncratic spelling, for some names using the current method of transliterating Greek into English, for others using the Latinate spelling, and for still others using spelling that seems peculiar to McCrorie himself. Any strange spellings in direct quotations should be assumed to be the spelling used in the McCrorie translation. All line numbers are those given in the McCrorie translation.

First of all, though he is a somewhat important minor character, we get no physical description of Eumaeus. He is sometimes called "godlike" by Homer, but this term, which is used generically of heroes in Homer, says nothing specific about Eumaeus' appearance. It may point to a certain nobility in his character, or may simply be a formal touch, having no more significance than if he were called "Mr. Eumaeus." It may be that the use of the epithet "godlike" for a swineherd would be seen as striking, just as if someone said of Captain Kangaroo's companion, Mr. Greenjeans, "the right honorable Mr. Greenjeans."

This lack of description means very little. Very few characters in Homer get much in the way of description – in the Iliad, the common soldier Thersites, the only common soldier we see, is described in Iliad II, and a thumbnail sketch of Agamemnon, Odysseus and Ajax is given in Iliad III during the teichoscopia ("view from the wall"). In the Odyssey, I recall no instance of physical description being particular, except when Odysseus' appearance is described in some detail after Athena makes him ugly as a disguise (xiii, ll. 429-440). At any rate, physical description in any detail is the exception, rather than the rule in Homer, and so the absence of such description in the case of Eumaeus should not be seen as peculiar.

We can guess at Eumaeus' age from the back story he tells Odysseus in Book xv. He speaks of how he came to be a slave on Ithaca, kidnapped by a Phoenician slave woman and handed over to Phoenician pirates by her when he was a boy, and how he was treated well and valued by Anticleia, Odysseus' mom, as much as she valued her own daughter, Ctimene, her youngest child (xv, ll. 363-65). This would indicate that Eumaeus is a few years younger than Odysseus, certainly no older than him. It is peculiar that Eumaeus does not mention interacting with Odysseus as he was growing up, which may indicate a greater age differential. That would suggest a swineherd perhaps in his 40s.

Eumaeus tells us that his father, Ctesius, was king of an island called Syrie (xv, ll. 402-414), which indicates that Eumaeus is of royal blood, even if Ctesius' kingdom was quite a bit smaller than Odysseus' Ithaca. He does indicate a desire to return home (xiv, ll. 142f.), which struck me as peculiar. How is it that Laertes, no matter how well he treated Eumaeus, did not return him to his ancestral land, on learning he was a prince, especially as Eumaeus seems to still fancy a return home? Piracy was a problem in the ancient world, and slavery was widespread, but as the older Eumaeus knows he was of royal blood, so too would the boy Eumaeus know it, and hospitality would seem to require his return to his rightful father, perhaps in exchange for some sort of reward. Homer does not give us any explanation here.

Eumaeus is depicted as a loyal servant, affectionate towards Telemachus, dutifully concerned about Odysseus' family and hoping for the king's return, even though he feels such an eventuality is unlikely. He is also hard-working and shows some initiative in doing his job. He displays a strong sense of justice, and firmly believes in the concept of xenia – the observance of proper guest/host relations. He does send food to the suitors, though he is disdainful of them. It is clear, however, that he is not afraid to speak back to them, when insulted by them, indicating that his provision of food to the suitors is not because he is afraid of them, but for some other reason.

Eumaeus prays for Odysseus' return after preparing a meal for himself and the disguised Odysseus, whom he knows only as a beggar (xiv, l. 424). And later, when Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, tests Eumaeus and the cowherd, Philoetius, on the level of their loyalty, Eumaeus again prays for his master's return (xxi, l. 204). He shows great loyalty in these statements, and in his careful caretaking of Odysseus' stock during his master's long absence – something he is singled out by Homer as doing best of all: "He'd cared for Odysseus's/livestock most among slaves acquired by his master" (xiv, ll. 3-4).

Despite his earnest prayers for his master's return, he is also skeptical that such an event may happen. When Odysseus, disguised as a beggar from Crete, makes repeated statements about Odysseus' survival and likely return, Eumaeus does not believe him. "But dogs of fast-flying birds already have torn off/ flesh from my master's bones. The spirit has left him" (xiv, ll. 133-134). And when he speaks to the disguised Odysseus about his dog, Argus, he states that the dog's owner is now dead (xvii, ll. 312-313). His skepticism is due to at least one previous instance when a traveler gave false good news about Odysseus in hopes of getting some reward (xiv, ll. 378-389). And so, he remains skeptical of any stories that a plausible teller might spin regarding his master. Having been tricked once, he is reluctant to believe again, despite the fact that he earnestly prays for his master's return, and seems to still harbor hopes that such a return is possible.

It is clear that there is strong mutual affection between Eumaeus and Telemachus. When Telemachus returns from his trip to Pylos and Sparta, he goes first to Eumaeus' hut, and the swineherd welcomes him home as a father would his son: "A loving father welcomes his dear son in the same way,/ awaiting him in the tenth year from a far land, his only son, full-grown, for whom he's agonized often" (xvi, ll. 17-19). Such a statement would seem to make Eumaeus equal to Odysseus in affection for Telemachus, as Odysseus has been away for some time, just like the father in the simile. Telemachus responds in kind, calling him "uncle" in McCrorie's translation (xvi, l. 30 and many other places). Though the Greek may not be as personal as this – I think

“dear old man” might be closer to the sense of the Greek, it is clear that Eumaeus, childless, has looked after Telemachus as if he were his own son, and that Telemachus looks on him as he might look on a dad, as he’s never met his dad, who left Ithaca when he was still an infant. In addition, it is clear that Eumaeus very much misses Odysseus’ mom, Anticleia, with whom he often had conversations: “I often took some pleasure in asking her questions” (xv, l. 362). He also shows great concern for the aged Laertes, Odysseus’ dad, who is alone. Noting that Laertes has lived apart in mourning for his son’s long absence, he tells Telemachus that the old man has stopped eating out of concern for his grandson, following his departure for Pylos and Sparta, and offers to bring the old man the good news of Telemachus’ return (xvi, ll. 136-145). In this, he alone seems concerned about helping the old man as soon as possible. Telemachus, though concerned, suggests that any such news will have to wait, that a slave woman can bring that word to Laertes (xvi, ll. 147-153). He even is concerned for the disguised Odysseus, whom he knows only as a beggar, for, on visiting the palace, he checks in on the beggar he befriended, asking if the suitors are treating him o.k. (xx, ll. 166-167).

Eumaeus does have a strong sense of xenia, the obligations of a host towards a guest, and vice versa. He does this in welcoming the beggarly Odysseus and killing one of his best boars to serve the poor man (xiv, ll. 414-417). He has rather limited means because the suitors are taking the best animals for their own feasts. Still, he can find an excellent boar to feed a stranger who cannot help him at all. He also shows this strong sense of xenia in his disdain for the suitors, who do not understand this principle, being bad guests and wasteful as well (xiv, ll. 89-95). In treating the wandering beggar to his hospitality, he does so out of a strong sense of the justice of Zeus, noting that “every stranger and beggar/ comes from Zeus” (xiv, ll. 57-58) and that slaves need to follow that practice, even if their new lords (the suitors) do not (xiv, ll. 59-61).

Eumaeus also has a strong work ethic, not lingering at the palace after he’s escorted the disguised Odysseus there. He drops in to check on Penelope and leaves to return to the sties (xvii,

256-60). When he has fed the beggarly Odysseus, and provided him warm blankets and a soft place to sleep, Eumaeus goes out into the cold to guard the swine pens, something the younger swineherds do not do, staying inside (xiv, ll. 518-526). In addition, he shows some initiative, hiring his own slave, without any prodding from Penelope or Laertes (xiv, ll. 449-452), purchasing him with his own funds. And he took it upon himself to build better pens for the swine, again without prodding (xiv, ll. 7-10).

Though he sends good pigs for the suitors to eat, and does not refuse them the swine in his master's name – my guess is that such refusal Eumaeus sees as the responsibility of the rulers of the land, Laertes, Telemachus or Penelope, though the poet does not indicate Eumaeus' motivation, he is not cowed by them. Antinous taunts him and the disguised Odysseus in Book xvii, and he chastises the haughty suitor in reply (xvii, ll. 381-391). Though he has not had any experience in battle, so far as we can tell – Odysseus' war experience was at Troy, and Eumaeus has been on Ithaca since he was a boy – he is brave enough to join Odysseus, Telemachus and Philoetius, in standing against the suitors, who greatly outnumber them, and to deal with the treacherous goatherd Melantheus (xxii, ll. 178-202) and guard the storeroom against any further weapons thefts by the suitors.

Eumaeus may be no more loyal than the cowherd, Philoetius, or the aged nurse, Eurycleia, who also long for Odysseus' return and are willing to stand by their master when the battle is joined, but we learn more of him. We know he is of noble blood, and that he has a strong sense of justice and compassion for a poor traveler. We know nothing of Philoetius' background and little of Eurycleia's, and see very little of them, and so get a far less rounded view of them. And so, of the servants, it is Eumaeus who epitomizes what a good servant should be, unwaveringly loyal to his master, even if the master may be gone or dead. Learning of his noble background, we may find seeing him as a noble character that much easier, though Philoetius' goodness and Eurycleia's are shown by their willingness to hope for Odysseus' return and decision to help him

once they know his identity. Homer may have singled out Eumaeus because the position of swineherd is so lowly, less dignified than cowherd or perhaps even goatherd. Hence the character's nobility shines out even more. His royal pedigree may make that nobility more sensible, but his fall from royal privilege to slavery make his continued loyal service and concern for Odysseus and his family all the more striking.

And Homer singles Eumaeus out in one special way. He often refers directly to Eumaeus, speaking to the character, and breaking down the invisible wall between narrator and story. This use of apostrophe is limited to Eumaeus, and Homer uses the figure several times. This would seem to indicate a special fondness of the poet for the character of Odysseus' loyal swineherd. He may use apostrophe with other characters, but only once, unlike the repeated use with Eumaeus.

In conclusion, we can see that Homer uses Eumaeus as a character who can help further the plot, allowing Odysseus a means of getting necessary information about the situation in Ithaca; in addition, he provides a suitable contrast to servants like Melantheus and the faithless slave women – he is a good slave, doing what he ought to do, and they are not. Unlike a modern author, Homer does not provide us much detail about Eumaeus' appearance. Homer does tell us something about Eumaeus' character, that he is noble, despite his low circumstances, that he respects the gods and xenia. And here he contrasts favorably with those who fail this test of character, some of the monsters Odysseus met on his travels, and the suitors themselves. It is clear that Homer is fond of Eumaeus, singling him out for repeated apostrophe, as if the poem, in a sense were really about and for him.

Bibliography

Homer. Odyssey. Trans. Edward McCrorie. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2004.