In a famous scene from the *Odyssey*, the nurse Eurycleia is bathing Odysseus’ feet when she discovers a scar on his leg (19.386–507). At this moment, she realizes that the man whom she and everyone else except the gods and Telemachus (and the audience) thought was a wandering beggar is in reality her master, returned home after an absence of twenty years. The discovery of the scar in this scene carries much meaning, and not only for Eurycleia, but for modern readers of the *Odyssey* as well. In his well-known essay “Odysseus’ Scar,” Auerbach (1953) uses the bathing scene as the basis for his argument that Homer’s narrative lacks complexity and depth. Nothing that appears in the poem, Auerbach asserts, may be left “half in darkness and unexternalized” (1953: 5). That is to say, no character has thoughts that are not expressed, and events said to have taken place in the past are narrated in the foreground as though they were happening in the present. This foregrounding of all narrative action is, for Auerbach, fundamental to Homeric style. And so when Homer comes to relating Eurycleia’s discovery of the scar as she begins to wash Odysseus’ feet, poetic style dictates that the scar itself “must be set in full light, and with it a portion of the hero’s boyhood” (1953: 6). In this way, Auerbach accounts for the rather long “interruption” of the main narrative, during which the narrator recounts Odysseus’ birth and his boyhood visit to his maternal grandfather, where he went hunting, was charged and wounded by a boar, and earned his identifying mark (*Od*. 19.390–466). For a moment, the past becomes the present and “fills both the stage and the reader’s mind completely” (1953: 4–5) until Homer returns to the narrative’s actual present and resumes the bathing scene.

In a reassessment of Auerbach’s article, Bakker (1999) rejects the conclusion that Homer’s poetry, because of the simplicity of its narrative, allows for analysis but not literary interpretation. He does, nonetheless, acknowledge the correctness of Auerbach’s emphasis on the foregrounding of narrative detail. He attributes this trait not to a stylistic choice, however, but to a necessity imposed by oral performance, which depends on memorization as much as on recitation. Homeric poetry, he explains, is presented in units that are reproduced by the performer as an act of remembering. Central to Bakker’s explanation is the argument that a performer must visualize a scene in order to remember it, and that while reciting his poem he recreates his visions for his listeners. All narrative detail, then,
whether from the past or the present, must be held in the light (to use Auerbach’s phrase) and externalized so that the poet can “see” it, and therefore memorize and later recall it.

Bakker thus gives a new foundation to Auerbach’s observations about the foregrounding of narrative detail, but this foundation depends primarily on the technical requirements of oral poetry. He is silent, therefore, about how the foregrounded scenes contribute to the development of the poem’s overall story. In considering the particular case of the scar, we may observe that the narrator’s “interruption” recounts events that belong to the past of both characters in the scene. This has led others to argue that the story of the scar reflects the characters’ memories. De Jong (1985), for instance, reads the scene from a narratological perspective, arguing that the account of the scar is an example of embedded focalization, told from Eurycleia’s perspective, and so based on her memory, even though the narrator describes the events. Scodel (2002) invokes the phenomenon of “flashbulb memories,” which are “particularly vivid and strongly visual” memories of specific events that individuals carry with them for a long time. She argues that in Homer’s poetry, recognitions based on signs, as with the scar in this scene, always rely on vivid, personal memories that are shared between two people. This scene, in fact, one of three scenes featuring very personal recollections that Odysseus shares with Eurycleia, Penelope, and Laertes, though Odysseus himself recounts his memory only on the latter two occasions. Scodel shows, however, that on all three occasions the recalled events give substance to the signs used to recognize the returned hero.

The foregrounded story of how Odysseus earned his scar, therefore, may indeed be an act of memory, not only for the poet or storyteller, but for the characters as well. We must acknowledge, however, that in this scene (unlike those with Penelope and Laertes), the narrator recounts the past and does not indicate that either Odysseus or Eurycleia has recalled anything. If we are to interpret the story as reflecting the unarticulated memories of the characters, we have to rely on inference and analogy with other scenes. In this essay, I argue that Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus despite his disguise not simply because she sees the scar but because she has shared with Odysseus a meaningful experience in the past. The recollection of this experience does indeed substantiate the sign of the scar, as Scodel argues, but it also (like the articulated memories that Odysseus shares with Penelope and Laertes) plays a central role in the larger scheme of disguise and recognition that is fundamental to the second half of the Odyssey, serving especially to re-establish the master-servant relationship that is necessary for the recovery of Odysseus’ identity. This connection to the larger plot and to other recognition scenes is important for interpreting the vivid but unspoken recollection shared between Odysseus and Eurycleia in this scene.

To set the context for the discussion, I would like first to look briefly at how disguise and recognition are essential to the plot in the second half of the Odyssey. Having learned from Agamemnon’s fatal mistake, Odysseus wishes to test the loyalty of his household and the mood of Penelope’s suitors before he reveals that he has returned to Ithaca. He therefore avoids contact with anyone on the island.
until Athena has transformed his physical appearance, both his body and his clothing, so that he looks like an old, wandering beggar. In addition to giving him tattered clothing, she withers his lovely skin, destroys his fair hair, and dims his eyes, so that, as she explains to him, “you will appear unseemly to all the suitors, to your wife, and to your son, whom you left behind in your halls” (13.397–403). In sum, Odysseus no longer has the noble look that he had when he left for Troy. This change of appearance and adoption of a beggar’s persona allow him to enter his own house and to operate unrecognized by anyone (except his dog, Argus, and perhaps Penelope) until he himself chooses to make his presence known. Prior to the climactic battle with the suitors in book 22, Odysseus reveals his true identity only to his son (16) and to a pair of servants (21), while Eurycleia discovers who he is by accident (19). The rest of the characters, however, do not recognize him, and so the fact of his disguise is essential to nearly every scene in books 14–21. Following the battle with the suitors, when Odysseus’ identity becomes known generally, there still remain two important revelation-recognition scenes, those with his wife (23) and father (24).

Taken as a whole, these revelation-recognition scenes demonstrate that Odysseus’ disguise is more than a device for allowing him to move about his house incognito. It also allows him to reveal his identity gradually and selectively as he attempts to accomplish a successful homecoming. As the narrative advances, we are presented with a series of scenes in which Odysseus reveals himself to, and is in turn recognized by, characters with whom he has special relationships and from whom he has been separated during his absence. This series of scenes, then, contributes to a general process of reconnecting Odysseus’ past to his present, a process that is essential to the poem’s larger narrative of Odysseus’ return. All of these characters—his servants, son, wife, and father—are essential to the life that Odysseus seeks to re-establish and are partners in the relationships that give definition to Odysseus’ character. In Murnaghan’s words, it is the “reanimation” of these relationships that allows Odysseus to reclaim his position upon returning to Ithaca:

The permanence of Odysseus’ claim to his position may mimic the timeless power of the gods, but it actually rests on the durability of his domestic relationships, his capacity to recover a series of roles defined by his relations with others: father, son, husband, and master. (1987: 21)

That is to say, by putting these relationships back in order, Odysseus not only restores his former life but also regains his status as master of his household and, by extension, leading man on Ithaca. Revelation followed by recognition, therefore, leads to a reassertion of Odysseus’ identity. The disguise and adopted persona are fundamental to this process. Even so, at the critical moments when another character recognizes him, there is always more to the event than simply reversing his change of appearance and dropping his persona. In fact, his servants Eurycleia, Eumaeus, and Philoetius (19.392–3; 21.221–6) know him not by sight but by the scar on his thigh, even while he
retains his full physical disguise. Penelope, although she sees him restored to his pre-Trojan War form, nonetheless seeks further confirmation before acknowledging him as Odysseus (23.173–230). And his father Laertes calls him “stranger” when they meet for the first time in the poem, even though this meeting occurs after Odysseus’ disguise has been completely removed (24.281). Recognition is accomplished in each of these instances, but it is negotiated via a *sema* or *semata* (a sign or signs) rather than appearance. These *semata* are a common element in folktales and legends that narrate a hero’s separation from his home and eventual return. In the *Odyssey*, they function as signs known to both parties that validate Odysseus’ claim to his identity or, in the case of Eurycleia, reveal his identity contrary to his wishes.

A discussion of the nature of these *semata* in two scenes from the *Odyssey*, with Penelope and Laertes, will clarify how they function in the scene with Eurycleia, and it will lay the foundation for tackling our initial question about why Homer “interrupts” his narrative at length when Eurycleia discovers Odysseus’ scar. Penelope’s approach to Odysseus follows closely the generic pattern for recognizing someone who has returned after a long absence. Leaving aside their complicated conversation in book 19, which raises questions about Penelope’s motivations, instincts, and psychological state, I will focus on the scene in book 23 where the long-suffering wife negotiates with her husband to confirm his identity and finally to admit that he has returned. Penelope is the last of everyone in the house to acknowledge Odysseus. When she comes down from her chamber and into his presence, she alternates between knowing and not knowing her husband, as the narrator explains: “Now she would look upon him and see him clearly, but then she would fail to recognize him because he was wearing dreadful clothing” (23.94–5). Penelope’s hesitation in this scene continues Homer’s characterization of her as torn between hoping that Odysseus will return and refusing to believe that he will ever arrive. Equally important, however, is Telemachus’ reaction. The son chastises his mother for not accepting Odysseus more readily: she ought to approach him and ask him questions, he scolds (23.97–103). She replies, conditionally, that “if this really is Odysseus and he has returned home,” then the two of them (expressed in the dual for emphasis) will certainly recognize each other, and they can do “better” than questioning, for they share *semata* that are hidden from others but which they alone know (23.104–10). Odysseus then intervenes: picking up both Penelope’s mention of *semata* and the narrator’s description of his still-shabby appearance, he tells Telemachus to back off. “Let your mother test me in the hall,” he says. “Soon she will perceive things more clearly. But now, since I am filthy and wearing dreadful clothing, she has little regard for me and will not yet say that I am her husband” (23.113–16). The stage is set for a recognition that will be based partly on appearance but primarily on mutually recognizable signs known only to the couple.

Once Athena has restored Odysseus to his former self (23.152–63), he expects his wife to accept him. When she remains distant, he asks for a bed to lie on alone (23.166–72), which prompts Penelope to perform her famous test. She tells Odysseus that she does indeed remember how he looked when he left for Troy,
and she seems to acknowledge that he has regained his former appearance. Then she adds that he may lie on her bed, which Eurycleia will move outside the bed-chamber. Odysseus’ angry reaction is the final proof of his identity, for he knows that the bed was built from a tree trunk rooted in the ground, a secret shared only by the couple and by Penelope’s personal maid, the daughter of Actor who accompanied Penelope from her father’s house to Odysseus (23.173–230).\(^{13}\) This is the essence of the semata that Penelope mentioned to Telemachus: in an echo of her earlier speech, the words sema and semata appear several times in this passage (23.188, 202, 206, 225), spoken by Odysseus, by the narrator, and by Penelope herself.

If we consider the construction of the bed from the perspective of Scodel’s argument for flashbulb memories, we can see that Odysseus’ memory, articulated here for his wife, does indeed give meaning to the sema, which in turn allows for full recognition of the returned husband.\(^{14}\) It is important to note, however, that Penelope probably would not have had first-hand knowledge of the bed’s creation, something that Odysseus represents as having been done by him alone. Not only is it logical that Odysseus would have built his house and bedchamber before bringing Penelope to Ithaca, but his articulated memory is also phrased in the form of a description of how it was constructed. This is the story that Penelope might have heard after arriving in her new home and being introduced into the bedroom, and so in that sense it would serve as a memory for her as well, perhaps a strong and persistent one that could be called a flashbulb memory.

What is equally important, however, is that the bed represents a fundamental element of the couple’s past life together: their union in marriage and the physical intimacy that this union entails. This is the element of the past that they are seeking to restore in the present through recognition via signs. It is no coincidence that Penelope’s personal maid—the only one in the household who has known Penelope both as an unmarried girl and as wife to Odysseus—is the only other person who shares the details of the bed. Homer implies that no one else was granted access to that space, where the private life of the husband and wife, and especially their marital intimacy, took place.\(^{15}\) And the personal nature of that space extends beyond the physical union that occurred there. When Penelope first mentions the bed, she is commanding Eurycleia to make it ready: “But come, Eurycleia, spread the stout bed outside the well-built bridal chamber which he himself made” (23.177–8). With this brief clarifying clause, Penelope explicitly connects the bed and the chamber to the couple’s past, specifically to the time when Odysseus himself constructed them for his new bride.

And so, when Homer makes Odysseus express his anger at the suggestion that the bed has been moved, he also has his hero recount in direct speech how he built the bridal chamber around an olive tree, and then crafted the bed from the tree’s trunk (23.183–204). This account is a relatively brief 22 lines, as opposed to the 74 lines in book 19 that retell the story of how Odysseus earned his scar. Thus the narrator is not intruding on the narrative to foreground an event from the past as he does when Eurycleia discovers the scar; instead, a character is recalling the past and his account is presented overtly as a recollection told from his
own perspective. We can see, nonetheless, how this recollection is essential to the story. The suggestion that the bed has been moved plays on the importance of the bridal chamber in uniting the married couple, and what Odysseus recounts in those 22 lines is his memory of creating the space where he and Penelope first became husband and wife. In fact, it is Odysseus’ recollection of the past—the creation of the room and the implication of the intimacy shared there—and not the bed or the space itself that is most significant. The past recalled here represents the foundation of the life that was suspended while Odysseus was away, even as the chamber and bed remained intact, and of the life that Penelope protected as she kept the suitors at bay for several years. And this is the life that the couple aims to restore. There may indeed be poetic and performative reasons that led Homer to set Odysseus’ memory in full light, but in terms of the narrative, the recollection of the past at this critical moment in the story communicates clearly to the audience what was at stake during Odysseus’ absence and what is being restored through acknowledgment of his return.

With Penelope’s scene in mind, I would like to consider the scene in the final book where Odysseus is reunited with his father Laertes (24.205–360). As he draws near to the old, broken man, Odysseus wavers between simply announcing his return and testing his father, finally deciding to impersonate a stranger who met “Odysseus” some years before and wishes to see him again on Ithaca. He manages to conceal his true identity despite having been transformed back to his original appearance by Athena. As Laertes begins to grieve at the recollection of his lost son, Odysseus is pained and can no longer sustain the ruse. He then declares to his father who he really is. Like Penelope, Laertes does not accept the declaration at face value but asks for a sema. He does not seem to recognize Odysseus when he asks for confirmation of his son’s claim, unlike Penelope, who admits that she recognizes Odysseus’ appearance but tests him anyway.16

Odysseus, in fact, provides his father with two semata. First, he points to the scar on his leg and recounts in brief his journey to his grandfather’s house and how he received his wound. Significantly, he remarks that “you sent me” (24.333), making clear, as happened with the marriage bed, that he is recalling a past that both characters have shared. Second, and with the same emphasis on a shared past, Odysseus describes the contents of the orchard where he and his father are presently standing. He indicates the trees, calling them the ones “that you once gave to me” and reminding his father how “while still a child I was asking you for each of them while following you through the garden; we walked through these very trees” (24.337–9). He goes on to recall in detail the types and quantities of the trees and the vines that his father gave to him. Thus the essence of the sema is not the contents of the fields, but it is the past that Odysseus and his father once shared there. As with husband and wife, so with father and son: the continuity of their relationship was threatened by Odysseus’ absence but is now restored by his return, and this return is authenticated by Odysseus’ knowledge of an event from the distant past that he and his father experienced together. But equally important, the recollection of the past allows the poet to introduce into the story a fundamental element of the father-son relationship. By setting this
transfer of patrimony before the audience, he emphasizes that an essential part of Odysseus’ identity—son of Laertes and heir to his estate—has been restored through this revelation-recognition scene.17

As these scenes show, the semata that lead to recognition need not be things that belong to Odysseus alone. When Odysseus is negotiating with Penelope and Laertes, the semata (except for the scar) have in fact been in the possession of his wife and father during his entire absence. What occurs in both recognition scenes is the acknowledgment of a certain item or place as a sema. This acknowledgment leads to a voiced recollection of an event from each pair’s shared past, which in turn leads to an unequivocal recognition of Odysseus himself.18 That is to say, the semata work not simply because they carry significance in their own right, but because they trigger recollections of past experiences that reveal the essence of the relationship between the two characters.

Recollection, in fact, constitutes one of the primary means for accomplishing literary recognitions in the catalogue of Aristotle (Poetics 1455a), who cites the example of Odysseus among the Phaeacians. In that episode, the as yet unrecognized hero unwittingly reveals to Alcinous that he fought at Troy by weeping as he listens to a song about the war; Alcinous notices the tears and inquires about the stranger’s background; this inquiry in turn compels Odysseus to reveal his identity (Od. 8.521–86; 9.19–20). In this instance, the singer voices Odysseus’ “memory” and Alcinous has not shared—either directly or indirectly—Odysseus’ experience, and so this recognition is different from those involving his wife and father. But the critical components are the same: Odysseus’ identity (in this case, as a hero) is tied to his recollection of the past, and his memory is revealed to the poem’s audience. The literary form requires that the narrator or a character express these memories as part of the story; as Cave (1988: 22) puts it, in epic poetry “recognition always reaches back analeptically to earlier narratives.” In the particular cases of Penelope and Laertes, which I believe are most similar to the case of Eurycleia, the characters accept Odysseus’ identity when they hear Odysseus himself narrate a memory that they also share. Moreover, they are able to resume their own identities, as wife and father, now that Odysseus has become husband and son once again.19

The recollection of a shared past also appears to be at the heart of a brief, but poignant, episode in book 17, when the old dog Argus recognizes his disguised master just as he enters the house (290–327). This episode, in fact, foreshadows the more critical recognitions made by the servants and family members. As in the recognition scenes considered above, which involve negotiation through semata, the narrator emphasizes the pair’s shared experience: “a dog . . . Argus, belonging to stout-hearted Odysseus, whom he himself once raised . . .” (291–3). So this scene, too, joins past to present, although the sema involved is not a physical token but, most likely, the master’s scent or his voice. And even if the character Odysseus does not realize the significance of the event—he is only made to shed a tear—the audience can understand the symbolism, realizing that the dog’s instinctive recognition of his master reveals that, despite a long absence and physical changes, Odysseus can still reclaim his identity.20
We can also understand the importance of recollection to establishing one’s identity through a negative example, the case of Telemachus, who has not seen his father since infancy and admits that he never knew him (1.213–20). When the two meet at Eumaeus’ outpost, Athena temporarily transforms Odysseus back to his original, younger form, and he proclaims his identity to his son. Telemachus’ reaction demonstrates why others are more wary of trusting in appearances alone. “You are not Odysseus, my father,” he says, “but a god is beguiling me” (16.194–5). If a man of heroic stature can impersonate a ragged beggar, then it is certainly possible that someone else, perhaps also with the aid of a god, could impersonate Odysseus. Penelope and Laertes seem to understand this and so proceed with caution, even after Odysseus’ artificial aging has been reversed. In this instance, however, Odysseus simply explains to Telemachus that Athena is responsible for the transformation and asserts once more that he is indeed the young man’s father. Telemachus accepts this explanation “with rather surprising facility,” as Stanford (1958: 271) puts it, and demands no additional proof. Katz (1994: 54) explains, however, that Telemachus’ uncritical recognition of Odysseus is confirmed through their collaboration in the events of the subsequent books, although at this moment in the narrative, “parental authority” is the primary impetus that compels the son to accept his father’s identity. Although ultimately correct, this recognition relies on Telemachus’ credulity and a bit of circular reasoning.

Nonetheless, of the essential family relationships which comprise Odysseus’ identity (father, son, and husband), only one, that of father to Telemachus, is not re-established through a sema that depends upon a recollection of the past. In light of the other two, however, this makes perfect sense: no such sema exists because the pair has no shared past to recall. This is partially because they have been separated for nearly all of Telemachus’ life, but in general the poem demonstrates that initially a son must accept the identity of his father on faith, not by knowledge. Telemachus himself instructs Athena in this regard: “For no one has ever on his own account recognized his own parent” (1.216). It is more important, however, for the son to seek his identity through his father. Thus Telemachus begins to build his identity in books 1–2, with the help of Athena, and in books 3–4, when Nestor, Menelaus, and Helen assert his resemblance to his father. The process continues with his obedient acknowledgement of Odysseus’ return in book 16, but it is finally accomplished through other types of semata, in particular through Telemachus’ demonstration that he is able to string Odysseus’ bow (21.124–9) and his ability to act as a partner while the pair fight together to defeat the suitors and restore order to the household (22–4). The two men, therefore, construct what will become their shared past in the course of the narrative, and in the process Telemachus comes to trust in his identity as Odysseus’ son.

Having considered the recognitions made by Odysseus’ wife, father, and son, I turn now to the scene with Eurycleia. A principal difference between this scene and those with Penelope and Laertes is that the narrator, rather than a character in direct speech, gives meaning to the sema by recalling the past at the critical moment. For Auerbach, this intrusion of the narrator, who thus vividly
foregrounds a past event, was a requirement of Homeric style. To understand his point more completely, and to set up my own interpretation, I include below both the verses from book 19 that launch the story of Odysseus’ wound and Auerbach’s characterization of their effect (19.388–96):

But Odysseus sat at the hearth, and quickly turned himself towards the darkness; for a foreboding came quickly to his heart, that as she touched him she might notice the scar and his deeds would be revealed. Coming near, then, she began to wash her master. And suddenly she recognized the scar, which once a boar had inflicted on him with its white tusk, when he had gone to Parnassus to visit Autolycus, his mother’s noble father who surpassed others in thievery and oath-making, and his sons . . .

The ellipsis stands for the narration of why Odysseus went to Parnassus, how he received his scar, and what happened when he returned to Ithaca. I will return to that below. Following is Auerbach’s comment about the interruption of the narrative at this point:

To be sure, in the case of such long episodes as the one we are considering, a purely syntactical connection with the principal theme would hardly have been possible; but a connection with it through perspective would have been all the easier had the content been arranged with that end in view; if, that is, the entire story of the scar had been presented as a recollection which awakens in Odysseus’ mind at this particular moment. It would have been perfectly easy to do; the story of the scar had only to be inserted two verses earlier, at the first mention of the word scar [l. 391], where the motifs “Odysseus” and “recollection” were already at hand. But any subjectivistic perspectivistic procedure, creating a foreground and background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past, is entirely foreign to the Homeric style; the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present. And so the excursus does not begin until two lines later [l. 393], when Euryclea has discovered the scar—the possibility for a perspectivistic connection no longer exists, and the story of the wound becomes an independent and exclusive present. (Auerbach 1953: 7)
Auerbach’s point is that, if not for a stylistic impediment, Homer could have phrased the long story of Odysseus’ wound as a personal memory by tying it to the first mention of the scar, where the narrator expresses Odysseus’ fear that this identifying mark might be discovered. That is, the story of the scar could have been expressed as Odysseus’ own thoughts. This would have been similar to the phrasing we find in the scenes with Penelope and Laertes, where Odysseus recalls the past in direct speech. Others have taken up the argument against Auerbach’s reading and have shown that Homeric poetry does in fact allow for perspective, even in passages related by the narrator.24 In considering the _semata_ employed by Penelope and Laertes, however, we have also seen that a perspectivistic connection exists particularly in the negotiation of Odysseus’ identity. Moreover, a single character’s perspective can be shared—even must be shared—between both interlocutors when it is used to validate these _semata_, since they are based on past events that constitute a common experience.

A close reading of the bathing scene shows that we encounter a perspectivistic account of the scar as well, even though the narrator rather than the characters is describing the past. We perhaps should not go so far as to claim that this account reflects the actual memories of Odysseus and Eurycleia, as Scodel does, because the narrator does not indicate that the characters themselves call the past to mind.25 Even so, we can see that what the narrator relates does indeed reflect the experiences of both characters and amounts to something like a composite memory. It is this “memory” that establishes the scar as a _sema_.26 After Homer says that Odysseus went to Parnassus to visit his maternal grandfather and his uncles (19.393–8), he relates why that trip took place. Autolycus came to Ithaca to visit the newly born Odysseus, and, significantly, he interacts with his nurse. Eurycleia is not a generic household servant: as Penelope makes clear when she assigns her the task of washing Odysseus’ feet, she has known her master from the moment he was born (19.353–6). Thus she is similar to the daughter of Actor in that she uniquely possesses personal knowledge of one of the leading characters. In the story of the scar, she places the child upon his grandfather’s knees and instructs him to give the boy a name. Autolycus responds by telling his daughter and son-in-law to name the boy Odysseus, and to send him to Parnassus when he has reached adolescence so that he may receive gifts (19.399–412). This is a part of the story that Odysseus could not have remembered directly because, although he was present, he was merely an infant. Yet Eurycleia was there and took a leading role in what occurred. Thus, this part of the story could represent her direct memory of events, one that she (or someone else) could have later relayed in whole or part to Odysseus. Moreover, she was the one who motivated Autolycus to name the baby, extend the invitation to Parnassus, and promise gifts. These gifts, in turn, are crucial to explaining why Odysseus received the scar: the next line begins, “for the sake of these Odysseus had come [to visit Autolycus], to carry off splendid gifts.” And so we see that the full story of the scar begins with Eurycleia.

The central part of the story, which would have occurred a dozen or more years later, concerns events on Parnassus and, with regard to the characters that live on Ithaca, would belong to the direct memory of Odysseus alone. The narrator
relates how Odysseus was welcomed by his mother’s family, enjoyed a feast, went hunting and received his wound from the boar, and in the end was cared for by his relatives and sent home (19.413–62). Now the roles are reversed: Odysseus has the experience apart from everyone else, and Eurycleia knows of the events only second hand, as does the rest of the household. Homer, in fact, makes the sharing of Odysseus’ adventure explicit in the third part of the story, where his parents welcome him home. After receiving him, they “asked him all the details about how he got the scar, and he fully explained to them how a boar wounded him with his white tusk while he was hunting” (19.462–6). We are probably meant to imagine that Odysseus’ adventure captivated the whole household for a time, which is why the loyal servants, Eumaeus and Philoetius in addition to Eurycleia, could all utilize the scar as a *sema*. Finally, as Homer transitions from the past back to the present in the bathing scene, he describes how Eurycleia took the scar into her hands and immediately identified Odysseus.

If the story of the scar serves as a shared memory that gives substance to the *sema* of the scar, we should ask why the story is told by the narrator and not by one or both of the characters as in the scenes with Penelope and Laertes. De Jong (1985: 518) suggests that the story is a memory belonging to Eurycleia, but that the narrator relates it as a “mental flash-back” because Homer did not want Penelope to hear the memory articulated, and thus he cast the recollection as an embedded focalization representing the nurse’s perspective. But this suggestion discounts the variance in perspective and overstates the need for silence. There is no good reason to focalize the passage through a character that does not possess a direct memory of many of the story’s core events. Moreover, the argument is further weakened by the continuation of the scene, where Homer does explicitly shift the focalization to Eurycleia by making her speak aloud when she identifies Odysseus. At that moment, Athena intervenes to distract Penelope and Odysseus forcibly silences his nurse (19.473–98).

De Jong is correct, however, in acknowledging the need to explain why the narrator relates the “memory.” This problem is ignored by Scodel, who nonetheless draws parallels to the other recognition scenes and makes a strong argument for reading the story as a combination of the flashbulb memories of both characters. The narrator’s intrusion is significant, however, since it diminishes the personal nature of the recollection, making it appear less vivid and blurring the line between the characters’ thoughts and the narrator’s own omniscient knowledge of the past. One way to get at the narrator’s role is to notice that despite the strong parallels, there are important differences between this scene and the other two recognition scenes, with Laertes and Penelope. As we have seen, the “memory” that constitutes the story of the scar does not represent a single experience shared by two characters, either at first or second hand, but rather it comprises two related but in fact quite separate experiences. In this way, it differs fundamentally from the memory shared with Laertes, which is the recollection of a specific conversation between father and son, and which is therefore easy to interpret as a memory that is vivid and significant for both characters. The story of the scar is more similar to the recollection of the creation of the bed and bridal chamber, where Odysseus
acted alone but Penelope learned of his actions afterward, either by hearing the story or simply inferring what Odysseus had done, as she shared the space that her husband had created. But even in this case, Penelope is not represented as having her own, independent experience of the bed in the way that Eurycleia has her own experience with the infant Odysseus and his grandfather. It seems to me important, then, to question why Odysseus or Eurycleia does not speak the memory and give meaning to the *sema* in the same fashion as in the other scenes.

What accounts for the narrator’s role here, I suggest, is that the shared past itself, not the memory of the past per se, is most important to the plot of the poem. The narrator’s “interruption” does indeed transform the scar into an actual *sema*, but as in the other scenes, the substantiation of the *sema* also reveals to the audience a relationship-defining experience shared by the two characters. In this instance, the experience includes Odysseus’ birth and naming, and so the narrator’s story establishes that the servant sitting before her master has first-hand knowledge of his origins and therefore can validate not only his identity but also his birthright. The only other character who has similar knowledge is Odysseus’ mother, but she has died and resides in Hades (11.150–224). The other half of the shared experience—the trip to Parnassus and the acquisition of the scar—serves to validate the mark itself and to underscore why its bearer must be the returned hero. Had Eurycleia recounted the past, the story of the scar would have been told at second hand and thus would not have proved that Odysseus had knowledge of that past; had Odysseus been given the speech, he could not have verified his own birth. If Homer’s concern is both to give substance to the *sema* and to advance the plot by restoring a critical element of Odysseus’ identity, then it seems to be a logical choice to have the narrator relate this complex shared history.

To understand the significance of the scene with Eurycleia, we need only consider the recognition scene with Eumaeus and Philoetius. There, Odysseus simply shows his scar to the servants, who upon examining it recognize their master (21.217–24). Missing is any meaningful description of the boar hunt, and there is no recollection of anything like a shared past. Eumaeus, in fact, has already made a speech that reveals his history with Odysseus (15.351–79), and this is unconnected to recognition or a sign. In this instance, the scar functions as a simple token of recognition (it might have been earned through, say, a slip while cutting something with a knife) and does not serve to reconnect the characters’ shared past to their shared present.

By revealing a complex shared history at the moment when Eurycleia discovers the scar, therefore, the narrator’s account functions like the directly related memories found in the scenes with Penelope and Laertes. Taken as a group, these three scenes serve to re-establish Odysseus’ birth, marriage, and patrimony by linking him directly to characters who share unique knowledge of how those aspects of his identity were created, and who in fact are intimately connected to him in his roles as master, husband, and heir. The accounts of the past that are recalled in each case, either by Odysseus or by the narrator, set these significant events into the foreground, presenting them to the audience not only as vivid components of the narrative but also as essential elements of the hero’s present identity.
Acknowledgments

It is my honor to dedicate this chapter to Peter Smith, with whom I first read Homer. I am also grateful to Craig Gibson, Silvia Montiglio, and Arum Park for their helpful criticism.

Notes

1 Auerbach (1953: 13) claims that “Homer can be analyzed . . . but he cannot be interpreted.”
3 On the importance of Odysseus’ change of clothing, in addition to the change in his physical appearance, see Block 1985.
4 On the question of whether Penelope recognizes Odysseus before book 23, see n. 11 below.
6 Similarly, Stewart (1976: 80) says that Odysseus is seeking “to reclaim his place as king, husband, and father.”
7 Following Murnaghan (1987: 56–8), I do not include the suitors in the series of revelations. Their relationship to Odysseus is very different from that of the members of his family and household, and their (grudging) recognition of Odysseus does not in the end contribute to the re-establishment of his essential identity.
9 I take up Telemachus’ recognition of his father below.
10 See Emlyn-Jones (1984: 6–7) on how Homer satisfies but also manipulates the expectations of his audience.
11 Some argue that Penelope recognizes Odysseus in the course of their conversation in book 19, or at least struggles with a subconscious impression that the beggar is her husband; for bibliography, see Zerba 2009: 308 n. 25.
12 On the interpretation of these lines, see Russo et al. 1992.
14 It is worth quoting Scodel’s summation of how memories give meaning to semata: “The Odyssey allows a recognition through signs only where the sign can evoke an intense autobiographical memory that two characters share, although their memories may not be identical. No other form of memory is effective” (2002: 114–15).
17 Cf. Katz (1994: 68), who argues that Odysseus’ recollection of the orchard reconfigures the moment when he became his father’s legitimate heir. She connects this scene to the recognition scene with Penelope as follows: “The reckoning of the trees, then, through which Odysseus reacquires his patrimony, functions, like the account of the bed’s construction, not only to recall an earlier episode which belongs to the past history of a relationship, but also to instantiate anew the relationship to which it refers.”
18 On the process of noticing or recognizing a sema qua sema as a necessary step to recognizing its significance, see Nagy 1983.
20 This scene has been interpreted in numerous ways; for an overview, see Beck 1991: 163 n. 23, Köhnken 2003: 387 n. 8, and Scodel 2005. Recognition of a hero by one of his animals is also part of the motif of the return; see Hansen 1997: 447.
At 23.215–17, Penelope explains that she resisted acknowledging Odysseus out of fear that he was an imposter; on the danger of the imposter, see also Cave 1988: 10–17.

See also Murnaghan (1987: 37), who characterizes Odysseus as impressing his identity upon Telemachus, and Scodel 2002: 114.


See especially de Jong 1999 and Köhnken 2003. For general criticism, see Cave 1988: 22 n. 28.

The closest we get is the narrator telling us that Odysseus is thinking about the scar (19.391) before Eurycleia discovers it. For Scodel (2002: 109–11), this confirms that the scar is on the characters’ minds, and she argues that “the physical sign, the scar itself, prompts an intense visual memory for each of them.”

Both de Jong 1985 and Scodel 2002 make arguments that depend on the narrator taking the characters’ perspectives. I return to their arguments below.

The male servants view the scar as a simple sign, a point made by Aristotle in the Poetics; see Richardson 1983: 223, and below.

For “embedded focalization” see de Jong 2001: 477. She labels the focalization explicit, with ἐγνώ (“she recognized,” Od. 19.392) acting as the verb that shifts the focus.

De Jong (2001: 477) acknowledges possible objections to her analysis: reference within the story to Eurycleia as a third party and the fact that Eurycleia lacked a direct memory of events. See also de Jong 1999: 158.

Nor is this sort of intrusion essential to Homer’s style. Cf. Od. 4.235–95, where Helen and Menelaus tell tales from Troy, each from their own perspective. In that instance, Homer gives each character direct speech.

Two lines (219–20) that have Odysseus make the briefest of explanations, saying that he received the scar from a boar while visiting Autolycus on Parnassus, are missing from two manuscripts and sometimes bracketed by editors; see Russo et al. 1992: 172.

References


