

ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE

Odysseus now calls forth the maids who have betrayed his household by associating with the suitors. He orders them to clean up the house and dispose of the dead. Telemachus then “pays” them by hanging them in the courtyard.

Eurycleia tells Penelope about the return of Odysseus and the defeat of the suitors. The faithful wife—the perfect mate for the wily Odysseus—suspects a trick from the gods. She decides to test the stranger who claims to be her husband.

1305 Crossing the doorsill she sat down at once
in firelight, against the nearest wall,
across the room from the lord Odysseus.

There

leaning against a pillar, sat the man
and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited
for what his wife would say when she had seen him.
1310 And she, for a long time, sat deathly still
in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed
she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband,
but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw.
Telemachus’s voice came to her ears:

“Mother,

1315 cruel mother, do you feel nothing,
drawing yourself apart this way from Father?
Will you not sit with him and talk and question him?
What other woman could remain so cold?
Who shuns her lord, and he come back to her
1320 from wars and wandering, after twenty years?
Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!”

Penelope answered:


“I am stunned, child.

I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him.
I cannot keep my eyes upon his face.
1325 If really he is Odysseus, truly home,
beyond all doubt we two shall know each other
better than you or anyone. There are
secret signs we know, we two.”

A smile

1330 came now to the lips of the patient hero, Odysseus,
who turned to Telemachus and said:

“Peace: let your mother test me at her leisure.
Before long she will see and know me best.

 1304. Make notes about Penelope as you read this episode. What might she be thinking?



Penelope (1878) by Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys. Colored chalk on paper. Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford, Bedfordshire, England.

These tatters, dirt—all that I'm caked with now—
make her look hard at me and doubt me still. . . .”

*Odysseus orders Telemachus, the swineherd, and the cowherd to
bathe and put on fresh clothing.*

1335 Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome
and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
1340 taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair
in curls like petals of wild hyacinth
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
Hephaestus taught him, or Athena: one
1345 whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders.
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

“Strange woman,

1350 the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
harder than any. Who else in the world
would keep aloof as you do from her husband
if he returned to her from years of trouble,
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
Her heart is iron in her breast.”

1355 Penelope
spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

“Strange man,

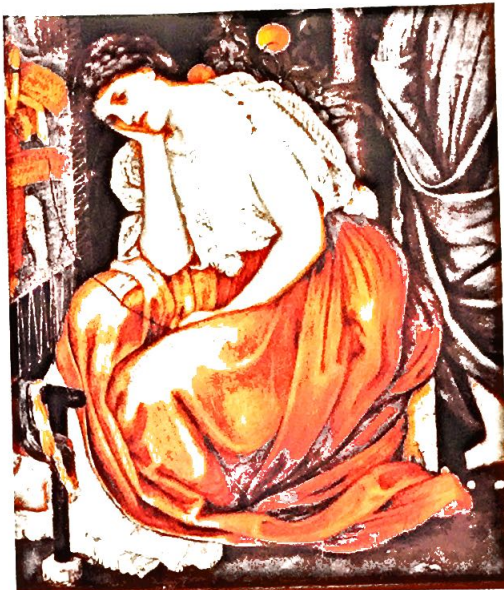
1360 if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.
I know so well how you—how he—appeared
boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia.
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed
with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen.”

Vocabulary

lavished (lav'isht) v.: gave generously.

aloof (ə·loo'f) adj.: at a distance; unfriendly.



Penelope by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope.

The De Morgan Foundation, London, UK.

1365 With this she tried him to the breaking point,
and he turned on her in a flash, raging:

“Woman, by heaven you’ve stung me now!

Who dared to move my bed?

No builder had the skill for that—unless

1370 a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.

There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork
and no one else’s!

An old trunk of olive

1375 grew like a pillar on the building plot,
and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.

Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
1380 hewed and shaped the stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest, I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold, and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

1385 There’s our sign!

I know no more. Could someone else’s hand
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?”

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.

1390 With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,
murmuring:

“Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
1395 life together in our prime and flowering years,
kept us from crossing into age together.


Forgive me, don’t be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
long ago against the frauds of men,

1400 impostors who might come—and all those many

Vocabulary

pliant (pli’ənt) *adj.*: flexible.

tremulous (trem’yōō·ləs) *adj.*: trembling; shaking.

 1374–1384. This description of Odysseus and Penelope’s bed is famous—and complex. **Paraphrase** Odysseus’s description of the bed. What characteristics of the bed suggest the strength and endurance of their love?


whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
But here and now, what sign could be so clear
as this of our own bed?

1405 No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
only my own slave, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours.”

1410 Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,
longed for

as the sun-warmed earth is longed for by a swimmer
spent in rough water where his ship went down
under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
Few men can keep alive through a big surf
1415 to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss behind:
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed, as though forever. . . .

(from Book 23)

 1408–1418. *The journey ends with an embrace. What simile helps you understand the joy Odysseus feels in the arms of his wife?*



City of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Collection, Scotland