

## 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

1310 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.  
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  
from wars and wandering, after twenty years?  
Your heart is hard as flint and never changes!”

Penelope answered:

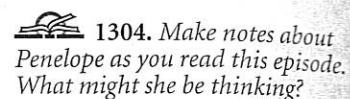
“I am stunned, child.

1325 I cannot speak to him. I cannot question him.  
I cannot keep my eyes upon his face.  
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,  
the immortals of Olympus made you hard,  
1350 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 spoke to Odysseus now. She said: Penelope

“Strange man,  
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  
1360 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’ish) v.: gave generously. .

**aloof** (ə·lōōf’) 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?

1370 No builder had the skill for that—unless  
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.

There’s our sign!

1385 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!

1395 No one ever matched your caution! Think  
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us  
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.


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?

 **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?



Penelope and Her Suitors (1912) by J. W. Waterhouse.

City of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Collection, Scotland.