

## THE STORY OF PENELOPE

The *Odyssey* begins at the point where the eponymous hero is about to return to Ithaca, twenty years after leaving it to fight at Troy. Back in Ithaca his wife Penelope is first described by Homer in domestic terms as wife, daughter (of Icarius) and mother (of Telemachus). So far, so expected.

But she is being harassed by the suitors – lords from neighbouring islands competing for her hand in marriage, presuming Odysseus to be dead – who praise her for her beauty, intelligence and skills but just want to get their hands on her power; and also by Telemachus, now twenty years old (he had never known his father) and aware that, in the absence of his father, it is his duty as the adult male to protect the household against intruders.

So on both fronts she is a woman under pressure to 'know her place' and act as she 'ought' to in a male world. No wonder she cries herself to sleep.

But there is another side to this woman, such that Agamemnon (in the underworld) is moved to praise her pre-eminent loyalty and faithfulness, in contrast with Clytaemnestra, 'who has destroyed the reputation of her whole sex, virtuous women and all'.

The fact is that Penelope will not be shifted from her purpose. She is endlessly patient with Telemachus. Determined to maintain possession of Odysseus' kingdom, she keeps the suitors at bay and outwits them by her famous weaving trick. She is not deceived by tricksters who claim to know what has happened to Odysseus, nor is she going to be deceived by this man who has killed the suitors: she enrages him by testing him – him, the great tester of men! – about the secret of their marriage bed. Only when he passes that test, on *her* terms, does she fall into his arms.

In her final scene, as the couple lie in bed together, Odysseus tells her that he will have to leave again. When that day comes, we feel sure that in her own post-*Odyssey* story, Penelope will continue to do far more than wait and weep.

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