background

The Greek concept of hospitality, xenia, was very important in Greek culture and plays a role in Odysseus' tale. Some scholars believe that this value is based on Greek religious belief. Since the Greek gods could take multiple earthly forms, there was always the possibility that the stranger at the door was a god in disguise. Thus, Greeks opened their homes to strangers. In Part 2, as Odysseus returns home, it is clear that this cultural practice has created some problems.

"Twenty years gone, and I am back again . . ."

Odysseus has finished telling his story to the Phaeacians. The next day, young Phaeacian noblemen conduct him home by ship. He arrives in Ithaca after an absence of twenty years. The goddess Athena appears and informs him of the situation at home. Numerous suitors, believing Odysseus to be dead, have been continually seeking the hand of his wife, Penelope, in marriage, while overrunning Odysseus' palace and enjoying themselves at Penelope's expense. Moreover, they are plotting to
murder Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, before he can inherit his father’s lands. Telemachus, who, like Penelope, still hopes for his father’s return, has journeyed to Pylos and Sparta to learn what he can about his father’s fate. Athena disguises Odysseus as a beggar and directs him to the hut of Eumaeus, his old and faithful swineherd. While Odysseus and Eumaeus are eating breakfast, Telemachus arrives. Athena then appears to Odysseus.

... From the air she walked, taking the form of a tall woman, handsome and clever at her craft, and stood beyond the gate in plain sight of Odysseus, unseen, though, by Telemachus, unguessed, for not to everyone will gods appear. Odysseus noticed her; so did the dogs, who cowered whimpering away from her. She only nodded, signing to him with her brows, a sign he recognized. Crossing the yard, he passed out through the gate in the stockade to face the goddess. There she said to him: “Son of Laertes and the gods of old, Odysseus, master of landways and seaways, dissemble to your son no longer now. The time has come: tell him how you together will bring doom on the suitors in the town. I shall not be far distant then, for I myself desire battle.”

Saying no more, she tipped her golden wand upon the man, making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him, ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard no longer gray upon his chin. And she withdrew when she had done.

Then Lord Odysseus reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck. Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away As though it were a god, and whispered:

you are no longer what you were just now! Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven! Be kind to us, we’ll make you fair oblation and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!”
The noble and enduring man replied:

“No god. Why take me for a god? No, no. I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks as he embraced his son.

Only Telemachus, uncomprehending, wild with incredulity cried out:

“You cannot be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits conceived this trick to twist the knife in me! No man of woman born could work these wonders by his own craft, unless a god came into it with ease to turn him young or old at will. I swear you were in rags and old, and here you stand like one of the immortals!”

Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear and said:

“This is not princely, to be swept away by wonder at your father’s presence. No other Odysseus will ever come, for he and I are one, the same; his bitter fortune and his wanderings are mine. Twenty years gone, and I am back again on my own island.

As for my change of skin, that is a charm Athena, Hope of Soldiers, uses as she will; she has the knack to make me seem a beggar man sometimes and sometimes young, with finer clothes about me. It is no hard things for the gods of heaven to glorify a man or bring him low.”

When he had spoken, down he sat. Then, throwing his arms around this marvel of a father Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears rose from the wells of longing in both men, and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering as those of the great taloned hawk, whose nestlings farmers take before they fly. So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears, and might have gone on weeping so till sundown, had not Telemachus said:
“Dear father! Tell me what kind of vessel put you here ashore on Ithaca? Your sailors, who were they? I doubt you made it, walking on the sea!”

Then said Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea:

“Only plain truth shall I tell you, child. Great seafarers, the Phaeacians, gave me passage as they give other wanderers. By night over the open ocean, while I slept, they brought me in their cutter, set me down on Ithaca, with gifts of bronze and gold and stores of woven things. By the gods’ will these lie all hidden in a cave. I came to this wild place, directed by Athena, so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies. Count up the suitors for me, let me know what men at arms are there, how many men. I must put all my mind to it, to see if we two by ourselves can take them on or if we should look round for help.”

Telemachus replied:

“O father, all my life your fame as a fighting man has echoed in my ears—your skill with weapons and the tricks of war—but what you speak of is a staggering thing, beyond imagining, for me. How can two men do battle with a houseful in their prime? For I must tell you this is no affair of ten or even twice ten men, but scores, throngs of them. You shall see, here and now. The number from Dulichium alone is fifty-two picked men, with armorer, a half dozen; twenty-four came from Same, twenty from Zacynthus; our own island accounts for twelve, high-ranked, and their retainers, Medon the crier, and the Master Harper, besides a pair of handymen at feasts. If we go in against all these I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance. You must think hard if you would conjure up the fighting strength to take us through.”

Odysseus who had endured the long war and the sea answered:

3. cutter n. small, swift ship or boat carried aboard a large ship to transport personnel or supplies.

4. in their prime in the best or most vigorous stage of their lives.
‘I’ll tell you now.

Suppose Athena’s arm is over us, and Zeus her father’s, must I rack my brains for more?’

Clearheaded Telemachus looked hard and said:

‘Those two are great defenders, no one doubts it, but throned in the serene clouds overhead; other affairs of men and gods they have to rule over.’

And the hero answered:

‘Before long they will stand to right and left of us in combat, in the shouting, when the test comes—our nerve against the suitors’ in my hall.

Here is your part: at break of day tomorrow home with you, go mingle with our princes. The swineherd later on will take me down the port-side trail—a beggar, by my looks, hangdog and old. If they make fun of me in my own courtyard, let your ribs cage up your springing heart, no matter what I suffer, no matter if they pull me by the heels or practice shots at me, to drive me out. Look on, hold down your anger. You may even plead with them, by heaven! in gentle terms to quit their horseplay—not that they will heed you, rash as they are, facing their day of wrath. Now fix the next step in your mind.

Athena, counseling me, will give me word, and I shall signal to you, nodding: at that point round up all armor, lances, gear of war left in our hall, and stow the lot away back in the vaulted storeroom. When the suitors miss those arms and question you, be soft in what you say: answer:

‘I thought I’d move them out of the smoke. They seemed no longer those bright arms Odysseus left us years ago when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire’s hot breath came, they had grown black and drear. One better reason, too, I had from Zeus: suppose a brawl starts up when you are drunk,'
you might be crazed and bloody one another,
and that would stain your feast, your courtship.

   Tempered
   iron can magnetize a man.’

Say that.

But put aside two broadswords and two spears
for our own use, two oxhide shields nearby
when we go into action. Pallas Athena
and Zeus All-Provident will see you through,

bemusing
our young friends.

Now one thing more.

If son of mine you are and blood of mine,
let no one hear Odysseus is about.
Neither Laertes, nor the swineherd here,
nor any slave, nor even Penelope.

But you and I alone must learn how far
the women are corrupted; we should know
how to locate good men among our hands
the loyal and respectful, and the shirkers\(^5\)
who take you lightly, as alone and young.”

Argus

_**Odysseus heads for town with Eumaeus. Outside the palace,**_  
_**Odysseus’s old dog, Argus, is lying at rest as his long-absent master approaches.**_

While he spoke

an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears

and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argus,
trained as a puppy by Odysseus,
but never taken on a hunt before
his master sailed for Troy. The young men, afterward,
hunted wild goats with him, and hare, and deer,

but he had grown old in his master’s absence.
Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last
upon a mass of dung before the gates—
manure of mules and cows, piled there until
fieldhands could spread it on the king’s estate.

Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,
old Argus lay.

But when he knew he heard
Odysseus’s voice nearby, he did his best

[5. **shirkers** (SHURK uhrz) _n._ people who get out of doing what needs to be done.]
to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears, having no strength to move nearer his master.

And the man looked away, wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he hid this from Eumaeus. Then he said:

“I marvel that they leave this hound to lie here on the dung pile; he would have been a fine dog, from the look of him, though I can’t say as to his power and speed when he was young. You find the same good build in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep all for style.”

And you replied, Eumaeus:

“A hunter owned him—but the man is dead in some far place. If this old hound could show the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him, going to Troy, you’d see him swift and strong. He never shrank from any savage thing he’d brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent no other dog kept up with him. Now misery has him in leash. His owner died abroad, and here the women slaves will take no care of him. You know how servants are: without a master they have no will to labor, or excel. For Zeus who views the wide world takes away half the manhood of a man, that day he goes into captivity and slavery.”

Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward into the megaron among the suitors: but death and darkness in that instant closed the eyes of Argus, who had seen his master, Odysseus, after twenty years.
Penelope, Odysseus’ wife, in her home overrun with suitors.
The Suitors

Still disguised as a beggar, Odysseus enters his home. He is confronted by the haughty suitor Antinous.

But here Antinous broke in, shouting:

1210 What evil wind blew in this pest?

stand in the passage! Nudge my table, will you?
Egyptian whips are sweet
to what you’ll come to here, you nosing rat,
making your pitch to everyone!

1215 These men have bread to throw away on you because it is not theirs. Who cares? Who spares another’s food, when he has more than plenty?"

With guile Odysseus drew away, then said:

“A pity that you have more looks than heart.

You’d grudge a pinch of salt from your own larder
to your own handyman. You sit here, fat
on others’ meat, and cannot bring yourself
to rummage out a crust of bread for me!”

Then anger made Antinous’ heart beat hard,

and, glowing under his brows, he answered:

1225 “Now!

You think you’ll shuffle off and get away after that impudence? Oh, no you don’t!”

The stool he let fly hit the man’s right shoulder

1230 on the packed muscle under the shoulder blade—
like solid rock, for all the effect one saw.
Odysseus only shook his head, containing
thoughts of bloody work, as he walked on,
then sat, and dropped his loaded bag again
upon the door sill. Facing the whole crowd

he said, and eyed them all:

1235 “One word only,

my lords, and suitors of the famous queen.

One thing I have to say.

There is no pain, no burden for the heart

1240 when blows come to a man, and he defending
his own cattle—his own cows and lambs.
Here it was otherwise. Antinous hit me for being driven on by hunger—how many bitter seas men cross for hunger! If beggars interest the gods, if there are Furies \(^{10}\) pent in the dark to avenge a poor man’s wrong, then may Antinous meet his death before his wedding day!”

Then said Eupeithes’s son, Antinous: “Enough.

Eat and be quiet where you are, or shamble elsewhere, unless you want these lads to stop your mouth pulling you by the heels, or hands and feet, over the whole floor, till your back is peeled!”

But now the rest were mortified, and someone spoke from the crowd of young bucks to rebuke him:

“A poor show, that—hitting this famished tramp—bad business, if he happened to be a god.

You know they go in foreign \textit{guise}, the gods do, looking like strangers, turning up in towns and settlements to keep an eye on manners, good or bad.”

But at this notion Antinous only shrugged. Telemachus, after the blow his father bore, sat still without a tear, though his heart felt the blow. Slowly he shook his head from side to side, containing murderous thoughts.

Penelope on the higher level of her room had heard the blow, and knew who gave it. Now she murmured:

“Would god you could be hit yourself, Antinous—hit by Apollo’s bowshot!”

And Eurynome\(^{11}\) her housekeeper, put in:

“He and no other?

If all we pray for came to pass, not one would live till dawn!”

Her gentle mistress said:

“Oh, Nan, they are a bad lot; they intend ruin for all of us; but Antinous

\textbf{CLOSE READ}

\textbf{ANNOTATE:} In lines 1261–1270, mark the noun that appears three times. Then, mark its synonym, which appears twice.

\textbf{QUESTION:} What does this repetition emphasize?

\textbf{CONCLUDE:} How does deliberate use of repetition help reveal the feelings of Odysseus’ son and wife?

\textbf{11. Eurynome (yoo RIN uhm ee)}
appears a blacker-hearted hound than any.

Here is a poor man come, a wanderer,
driven by want to beg his bread, and everyone
in hall gave bits, to cram his bag—only
Antinous threw a stool, and banged his shoulder!”

So she described it, sitting in her chamber
among her maids—while her true lord was eating.
Then she called in the forester and said:

“Go to that man on my behalf, Eumaeus,
and send him here, so I can greet and question him.
Abroad in the great world, he may have heard
rumors about Odysseus—may have known him!”

Penelope

In the evening, Penelope interrogates the old beggar.

“Friend, let me ask you first of all:
who are you, where do you come from, of what nation
and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

“My lady, never a man in the wide world
should have a fault to find with you. Your name
has gone out under heaven like the sweet
honor of some god-fearing king, who rules
in equity over the strong: his black lands bear
both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright,
new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea
gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy,
so that his folk fare well.

O my dear lady,

this being so, let it suffice to ask me
of other matters—not my blood, my homeland.

Do not enforce me to recall my pain.
My heart is sore; but I must not be found
sitting in tears here, in another’s house:
it is not well forever to be grieving.
One of the maids might say—or you might think—
I had got maudlin over cups of wine.”
And Penelope replied:

“Stranger, my looks, my face, my carriage, were soon lost or faded when the Achaeans crossed the sea to Troy, Odysseus my lord among the rest. If he returned, if he were here to care for me, I might be happily renowned! But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain. Sons of the noblest families on the islands, Dulichium, Same, wooded Zacynthus, with native Ithacans, are here to court me, against my wish; and they consume this house. Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant or herald on the realm’s affairs? How could I? wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here they press for marriage. Ruses served my turn to draw the time out—first a close-grained web I had the happy thought to set up weaving on my big loom in hall. I said, that day: ‘Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead, let me finish my weaving before I marry, or else my thread will have been spun in vain. It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes When cold Death comes to lay him on his bier. The country wives would hold me in dishonor if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’ I reached their hearts that way, and they agreed. So every day I wove on the great loom, but every night by torchlight I unwove it; and so for three years I deceived the Achaeans.

But when the seasons brought a fourth year on, as long months waned, and the long days were spent, through impudent folly in the slinking maids they caught me—clamored up to me at night; I had no choice then but to finish it.

And now, as matters stand at last, I have no strength left to evade a marriage, cannot find any further way; my parents urge it upon me, and my son will not stand by while they eat up his property. He comprehends it, being a man full-grown, able to oversee the kind of house Zeus would endow with honor.
confide in me, tell me your ancestry.
You were not born of mythic oak or stone.”

Penelope again asks the beggar to tell about himself. He makes up a tale in which Odysseus is mentioned and declares that Penelope’s husband will soon be home.

“You see, then, he is alive and well, and headed homeward now, no more to be abroad far from his island, his dear wife and son. Here is my sworn word for it. Witness this, god of the zenith, noblest of the gods, and Lord Odysseus’s hearthfire, now before me: I swear these things shall turn out as I say. Between this present dark and one day’s ebb, after the wane, before the crescent moon, Odysseus will come.”

The Challenge

Pressed by the suitors to choose a husband from among them, Penelope says she will marry the man who can string Odysseus’s bow and shoot an arrow through twelve ax handle sockets. The suitors try and fail. Still in disguise, Odysseus asks for a turn and gets it.

And Odysseus took his time,

turning the bow, tapping it, every inch, for borings that termites might have made while the master of the weapon was abroad. The suitors were now watching him, and some jested among themselves:

“A bow lover!”

“Dealer in old bows!”

“Maybe he has one like it at home!”

“Or has an itch to make one for himself.”

“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”

And one disdainful suitor added this:

“May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends it!”

15. god of the zenith, noblest of the gods Zeus.
But the man skilled in all ways of contending,

satisfied by the great bow’s look and heft,

like a musician, like a harper, when

with quiet hand upon his instrument

he draws between his thumb and forefinger

a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly

Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.

Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,

so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang

a swallow’s note.

In the hushed hall it smote the suitors

and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered

overhead, one loud crack for a sign.

And Odysseus laughed within him that the son

of crooked-minded Cronus had flung that omen down.

He picked one ready arrow from his table

where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still

in the quiver for young men’s turn to come.

He nocked \(^{16}\) it, let it rest across the handgrip,

And drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,

Aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

Now flashed

arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle

through every socket ring, and grazed not one,

to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.

Then quietly

Odysseus said:

“Telemachus, the stranger

you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.

I did not miss, neither did I take all day

stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,

not so contemptible as the young men say.

The hour has come to cook their lordships’ mutton—

supper by daylight. Other amusements later,

with song and harping that adorn a feast.”

He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince

Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,

belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,

and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze

stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.
Odysseus’ Revenge

Now shrugging off his rags the wiliest fighter of the islands leapt and stood on the broad doorsill, his own bow in his hand.

He poured out at his feet a rain of arrows from the quiver and spoke to the crowd:

“So much for that. Your clean-cut game is over.

Now watch me hit a target that no man has hit before, if I can make this shot. Help me, Apollo.”

He drew to his fist the cruel head of an arrow for Antinous just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking cup,

embossed, two-handled, golden: the cup was in his fingers: the wine was even at his lips: and did he dream of death? How could he? In that revelry amid his throng of friends who would imagine a single foe—though a strong foe indeed—could dare to bring death’s pain on him and darkness on his eyes?

Odysseus’s arrow hit him under the chin and punched up to the feathers through his throat.
Backward and down he went, letting the winecup fall from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils jetted crimson runnels, a river of mortal red, and one last kick upset his table knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty blood.

Now as they craned to see their champion where he lay the suitors jostled in uproar down the hall, everyone on his feet. Wildly they turned and scanned the walls in the long room for arms; but not a shield, not a good ashen spear was there for a man to take and throw.

All they could do was yell in outrage at Odysseus:

“Foul! to shoot at a man! That was your last shot!”
“Your own throat will be slit for this!”
“Our finest lad is down!”
“Buzzards will tear your eyes out!”

For they imagined as they wished—that it was a wild shot, an unintended killing—fools, not to comprehend they were already in the grip of death.

But glaring under his brows Odysseus answered:

“You yellow dogs, you thought I’d never make it home from the land of Troy. You took my house to plunder . . .
You dared bid for my wife while I was still alive. Contempt was all you had for the gods who rule wide heaven, contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
Your last hour has come. You die in blood.”

As they all took this in, sickly green fear pulled at their entrails, and their eyes flickered looking for some hatch or hideaway from death.

Eurymachus19 alone could speak. He said:

“If you are Odysseus of Ithaca come back, all that you say these men have done is true. Rash actions, many here, more in the countryside. But here he lies, the man who cause them all.
Antinous was the ringleader, he whipped us on to do these things. He cared less for a marriage than for the power Cronion has denied him As king of Ithaca. For that he tried to trap your son and would have killed him.
He is dead now and has his portion. Spare
your own people. As for ourselves, we’ll make
restitution of wine and meat consumed,
and add, each one, a tithe of twenty oxen
with gifts of bronze and gold to warm your heart.
Meanwhile we cannot blame you for your anger.”

Odysseus glowered under his black brows
and said:

“Not for the whole treasure of your fathers,
all you enjoy, lands, flocks, or any gold
put up by others, would I hold my hand.
There will be killing till the score is paid.
You forced yourselves upon this house. Fight your way out,
or run it, if you think you’ll escape death.
I doubt one man of you skins by.”

They felt their knees fail, and their hearts—but heard
Eurymachus for the last time rallying them.
“Friends,” he said, “the man is implacable.
Now that he’s got his hands on bow and quiver
he’ll shoot from the big doorstone there
until he kills us to the last man.

Fight, I say,
let’s remember the joy of it. Swords out!
Hold up your tables to deflect his arrows.

After me, everyone: rush him where he stands.
If we can budge him from the door, if we can pass
into the town, we’ll call out men to chase him.
This fellow with his bow will shoot no more.”

He drew his own sword as he spoke, a broadsword of fine
bronze,
honed like a razor on either edge. Then crying hoarse and
loud
he hurled himself at Odysseus. But the kingly man let fly
an arrow at that instant, and the quivering feathered butt
sprang to the nipple of his breast as the barb stuck in his
liver.
The bright broadsword clanged down. He lurched and fell
aside,
pitching across his table. His cup, his bread and meat,
were spilt and scattered far and wide, and his head slammed
on the ground.
Revulsion, anguish in his heart, with both feet kicking out,
he downed his chair, while the shrouding wave of mist closed
on his eyes.
Amphinomus now came running at Odysseus,
broadsword naked in his hand. He thought to make
the great soldier give way at the door.  
But with a spear throw from behind Telemachus hit him  
between the shoulders, and the lancehead drove  
clear through his chest. He left his feet and fell  
forward, thudding, forehead against the ground.  
Telemachus swerved around him, leaving the long dark  
spear  
planted in Amphinomus. If he paused to yank it out  
someone might jump him from behind or cut him down with  
a sword  
at the moment he bent over. So he ran—ran from the tables  
to his father’s side and halted, panting, saying:  

“Father let me bring you a shield and spear,  
a pair of spears, a helmet.  
I can arm on the run myself: I’ll give  
outfits to Eumaeus and this cowherd.  
Better to have equipment.”

Said Odysseus:  

“Run then, while I hold them off with arrows  
as long as the arrows last. When all are gone  
if I’m alone they can dislodge me.”

Quick  
on his father’s word Telemachus  
ran to the room where spears and armor lay.  
He caught up four light shields, four pairs of spears,  
four helms of war high-plumed with flowing manes,  
and ran back, loaded down to his father’s side.  
He was the first to pull a helmet on  
and slide his bare arm in a buckler strap.  
The servants armed themselves, and all three took their  
stand  
beside the master of battle.  

While he had arrows  
he aimed and shot, and every shot brought down  
one of his huddling enemies.  

But when all barbs had flown from the bowman’s fist,  
he leaned his bow in the bright entryway  
beside the door, and armed: a four-ply shield  
hard on his shoulder, and a crested helm,  
horsetailed, nodding stormy upon his head,  
then took his tough and bronze-shod spears. . . .

Aided by Athena, Odysseus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and other faithful herdsmen kill all the suitors.
And Odysseus looked around him, narrow-eyed, for any others who had lain hidden while death’s black fury passed.

In blood and dust he saw that crowd all fallen, many and many slain.

Think of a catch that fishermen haul in to a half-moon bay in a fine-meshed net from the whitecaps of the sea: how all are poured out on the sand, in throes for the salt sea, twitching their cold lives away in Helios’ fiery air: so lay the suitors heaped on one another.

**Penelope’s Test**

*Penelope tests Odysseus to prove he really is her husband.*

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 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 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, 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.”

Penelope spoke to Odysseus now. She said:
“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 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.”

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

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.
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
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,
impostors who might come—and all those many
whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
But here and now, what sign could be so clear
as this of our own bed?
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.”

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 sunwarmed 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
to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss\(^{21}\) behind:
and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

The Ending

Odysseus is reunited with his father. Athena commands that peace
prevail between Odysseus and the relatives of the slain suitors.
Odysseus has regained his family and his kingdom.