

Penelope's Test

Penelope tests Odysseus to prove he really is her husband.

1540 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
1545 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
Hephaestus²⁰ taught him, or Athena: one
1550 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:

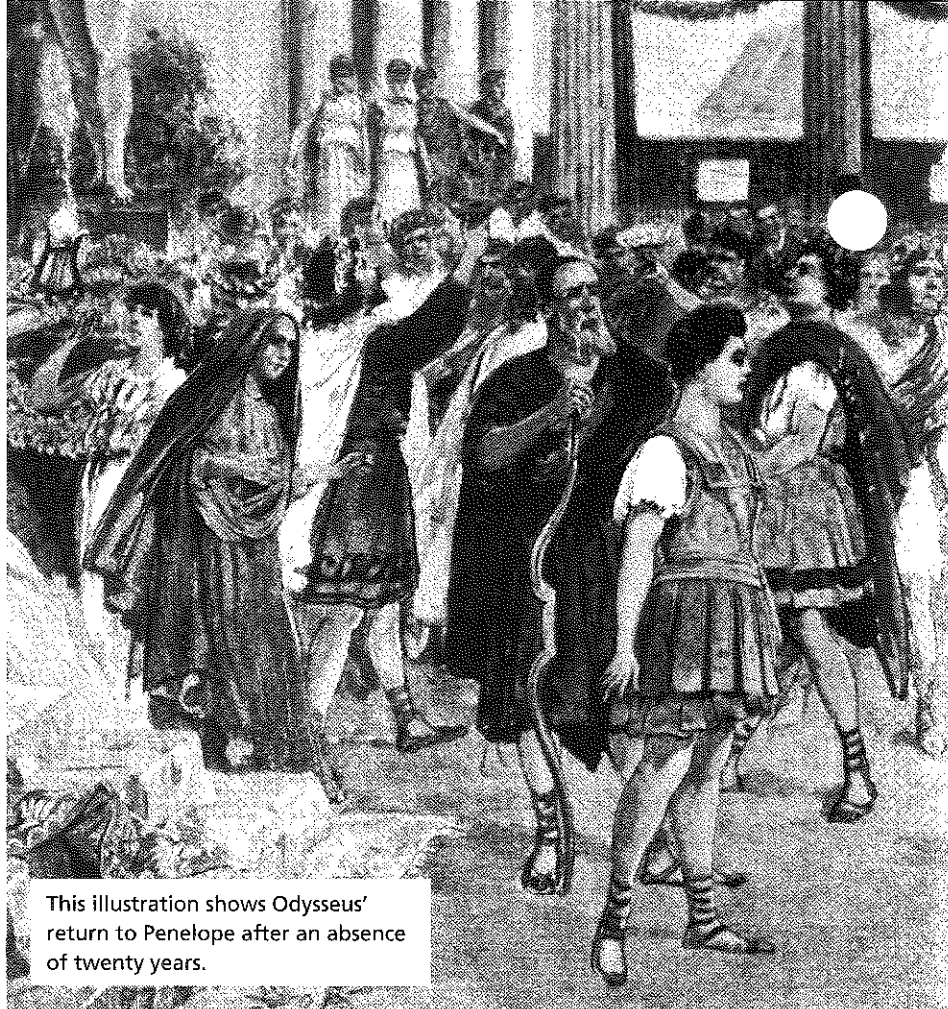
“Strange woman,
the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
1555 harder than any. Who else in the world
would keep aloof as you do from her husband
if he returned to her from years of trouble,
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
1560 Her heart is iron in her breast.”

Penelope

spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

20. **Hephaestus** (hee FEHS tuhs) god of fire and metalworking.



This illustration shows Odysseus' return to Penelope after an absence of twenty years.

“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
1565 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.”

1570 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
1575 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!



NOTES

An old trunk of olive

1580 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,
1585 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,
inlaid them all with silver, gold, and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
1590 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.
1595 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
 1600 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,
 1605 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—
 1610 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,
 1615 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
 1620 to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
 in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss²¹ behind:
 and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
 her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

21. **abyss** (uh BIHS) *n.*
 ocean depths.