

CHAPTER 13



Penelope

IT has been said of Penelope that she passes in and out of a scene “like a phrase of music or a gold thread in a woven texture.”¹ From her first appearance in the Hall in Ithaca in Book One, as “exceedingly wise Penelope, the bright of women,”² to the final reunion at the end of the epic, we are deeply engaged by her. She is as rich, vital, and evocative a character as any in literature.

We know that she was married to Odysseus when she was very young. When the heroes sailed to Troy, she was still a teenager, left alone with in-laws and a baby in a large, strange household. She raised her child and developed her considerable skills in weaving and needlework, but remained terribly alone, with no one to talk to or challenge her. All her relatives, including her cousins Helen and Clytemnestra, lived far away. She emerges in the poem as the archetypal single parent. And yet she is described throughout as a woman of extraordinary skills and immense intellectual power. She must also be singularly attractive, for the suitors, many of whom are younger than she, want her almost as much as they want Odysseus’ palace and lands.

When the suitors begin to pour in from all over Ithaca and the neighboring areas, treating her house as their own, emptying her larders

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and slaughtering her cattle for their daily feasts, making free with her maids, she has no one to champion her. Her mother-in-law has died of grief over her missing son, while her father-in-law, Laertes, has retired to a simple life of tending his vineyards up in the hills and wants no part of the disaster at the palace. Only a few old stalwart servants who had been devoted to Odysseus remain loyal to her. All the other war widows have either remarried or passed on their inheritance to their children. Penelope alone remains in an ambiguous state, the last one to hope for her husband's return in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

The ambiguity of her state is furthered by the fact that she is the queen of an island that, until the time of Odysseus, had always been ruled by queens in matrilineal succession. Laertes, we gather, was never king of Ithaca, only the consort of Queen Anticleia and the respected father of the new patriarchal king. The fact that Penelope and Odysseus had no daughter further empowered the growing patriarchal inclinations of the region. But Odysseus simply wasn't around long enough to establish his position or the succession of his son.

In a world where, for time out of mind, the queen had been the principal ruler, Penelope was still viewed as the source of wealth and authority in Ithaca, as well as having the right to choose her next designated consort. She, however, "behaving as a good patrilineal wife (who nonetheless, by Odysseus' absence, has been handed all the trappings of matrilineal householder power), stands against them, wavering, and waits for the return of the husband she loves."³ Thus, she neither marries nor hands on to Telemachus the kingdom she insists on keeping for his absent father. Sympathy for her has vanished. She is as alone as anyone could be.

On top of this, she is saddled with the old Greek laws of hospitality, which generally required that no guests be turned away, regardless of how disagreeable they might be or how much they might have outworn their welcome. And she has 108 of them—108 men who came to dinner—all taking advantage of her weakening position, all hoping

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to be the matrilineal king-designate. On the one hand, she manages to ward them off with her wit and cunning, but on the other, she is driven more and more into herself, into silence and brooding. But whenever she is kindled out of dull misery, her intellect rises, and she speaks a poetic language of extraordinary beauty:

Artemis, goddess and queen, daughter of Zeus, how I wish that with the
cast of your arrow you could take the life from inside
my heart, this moment, or that soon the storm wind would snatch me
away, and be gone, carrying me down misty pathways,
and set me down where the recurrent Ocean empties his stream...⁴

It is no wonder that she prays to Artemis, for the lonely goddess of the hunt and of wild things shares with Penelope a brooding solitude. Also, of all the Greek pantheon, Artemis is the goddess most devoted to chastity. Penelope, twenty years chaste, undoubtedly has a special introspective relationship to this goddess in her loneliness, although not the activating partnership and protection she has with Athena. Penelope broods with Artemis and acts with Athena.

There is tension between Penelope and her son in spite of their deep affection for each other. On the one hand, he strongly resembles his father, for whom she pines, and on the other, Telemachus is disappointed in her compromise policy with the suitors. When we meet them, the chill in their relationship is only too apparent. This friction is illustrated in almost the first words Telemachus speaks when Athena-Mentes asks him, "Are you really Odysseus' son?" He answers, "My mother says I am."

One thing seems clear: She has been trying to keep the place of master of the household open for Odysseus, and in so doing, she has perhaps allowed her son to be caught in immaturity or lost in the passivity of daydreaming. While the war with Troy continued, most of these things could be borne. But now as the postwar years drag

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on, and Odysseus is still gone, Penelope's life-deferred condition has resulted in a household filled with despair and frustration.

I once discussed the plight of Penelope with a group of working mothers, many of whom, it turned out, were single parents—either divorced or widowed. I was struck by their apparent empathy with Penelope. As they spoke of the pain and frustration of raising half-parented children, and the responsibilities of supporting and keeping their households together with little or no help, it seemed as if the chasm of three thousand years separating them from Penelope had vanished. For them, she became a living presence, radically present and contemporaneous in her problems and predicaments. They appreciated her intelligence and cunning as well as her brooding nature, and seemed to know more about her “inside story” than all the classical scholars who have written of her. After the meeting, a number of them formed a group called Penelope's Women, which continues to meet on a regular basis to sustain and support its members.

When we first see Penelope in the beginning of Book One, her position is worse than Odysseus'. He at least is caught between adventures, stuck on a beautiful island with a lovely, nurturing goddess. Penelope, however, is trapped in stagnation and hopelessness, with virtually no allies or sources of comfort. It is therefore necessary for Athena to reach her in a way that she can accept and understand. Given as she is to much grieving and quiet weeping in her room, she is naturally also given to much sleeping. And so, in Book Four, Athena comes to her in a dream, looking and speaking like her sister. In the dream the goddess tells her that her son is safe and under the guardianship of Pallas Athena. However, the goddess refuses to answer her questions about Odysseus, leading us to believe that a special grace is waiting for her, if only she can keep the faith.

Athena has a special relationship to Penelope, who, like the goddess, is a mistress of both weaving and cunning. With cunning Penelope weaves and unweaves to preserve her marriage. On the practical level

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she persuaded her suitors not to force her to choose a husband from among them until she could finish the shroud she was weaving for Laertes, Odysseus' father. They agreed. After all, they could play and feast and waste the kingdom while they waited. For the next three years she unraveled at night the work she had woven during the day, until some of her serving maids betrayed her secret and she was forced to complete the shroud. However, the metaphor is clear: It was not for Laertes but for Odysseus that the shroud was being woven. As Norman Austin suggests:

“In weaving and unraveling the shroud Penelope lays her husband in his grave by day and raises him, Lazarus-like, from the dead by night.”⁵

On the intellectual level she is indeed the brightest of women, and outclasses and outthinks the suitors on every possible occasion. (At the end of the poem, in the test of the bed, she will even outsmart Odysseus.) Morally, she is the most steadfast and loyal of women, ever near Odysseus in her mind and heart, as Athena is ever near him in spirit. In these qualities Penelope is, like her husband, an avatar as well as a deserving protégé of like-minded Athena.

The nearness of Odysseus in the palace in his disguise as a beggar excites some unconscious knowing in Penelope. After hearing about the beggar from Eumaeus, she cannot stop thinking about him. Odysseus, as the beggar, is now ruling both upstairs and downstairs—he has established territorial rights in the court of the suitors and in the mind of Penelope. But Odysseus cannot yet reveal his identity to Penelope, for early disclosure with its inevitable shock and unconstrained rapture might endanger all of them. This is evidently in keeping with Athena's master plan. The goddess is weaving a careful web both to protect her charges against unnecessary dangers and to prepare their minds for a proper meeting once the suitors have been vanquished.

Penelope suddenly receives an Athena-given insight: She is to appear before the suitors in the fullness of her beauty to fan their ardor and

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enhance her value to her husband and son. For the second time in the story we hear her laugh. The notion seems outrageous; she has never before wanted to appear desirable to the suitors. Quite the opposite. Even odder is the notion that filling the suitors with desire would please her angry son and her absent, if not dead, husband. The peculiarity of the idea belongs to the logic and candor of a god; a human would censor and revise and “make sense” of the plan.

Also, we could surmise that the goddess, maiden though she may be, knows perfectly well that any woman would want to look her very best if her husband were coming home from a journey—especially one that lasted twenty years! She would want to eradicate any signs of aging, and to look as much like the woman he last saw as she possibly could. This insight is a woman-to-woman gift from Athena to Penelope, who will remain unaware, on the conscious level at least, that Odysseus is present and viewing her for the first time with enormous pleasure.

Penelope obeys, telling her maid, “The spirit moves me, as it never has before, to pay these lovers of mine a visit—much as I detest them. I should also like to have a word with my son for his own benefit and warn him not to spend his whole time with these unruly young men, who may speak with him fair but whose intentions are evil.”⁶

Athena enhances the scheme by making Penelope fall immediately into a deep sleep on the couch where she is sitting. With Penelope in this relaxed state, the goddess is able to endow her with superhuman beauty. When she descends the stairs, her appearance staggers the suitors: “Their hearts were melted by desire, and every man among them prayed that he might hold her in his arms.”⁷ Ignoring them, Penelope turns to Telemachus and scolds him in the way that mothers have been speaking to their adolescent children for millennia:

Telemachus, your wits have deserted you. As a boy you used to have much more sense, but now that you are grown up and have entered on manhood . . . you no longer show the same judgment and tact. I am