

19

Eurycleia Recognizes Odysseus

Book Nineteen

By firelight a wife and a beggar talk long into the night – and she does not know him. He proves he once met her husband, and her tears fall like melting snow; he swears her lost lord is almost home. Then an old nurse, bathing his feet, closes her hand on a scar she has known since he was a boy, and nearly cries out his name. Between them hang a strange dream of eagle and geese, and the great bow that will settle everything tomorrow.

NAME

SET

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BOOK NINETEEN

Eurycleia Recognizes Odysseus

The hall by night. Penelope and the disguised Odysseus talk at last; the old nurse, washing his feet, knows him by his scar; and the queen resolves on the contest of the bow.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Odysseus and Telemachus clear the weapons from the hall, lit by an unearthly glow from Athene.
- Penelope questions the beggar; he tells a Cretan tale and proves he met Odysseus by describing his golden brooch.
- Washing his feet, Eurycleia recognises the scar from his boyhood boar-hunt, and is sworn to silence.
- Penelope tells her dream of the eagle and the geese, and wonders which gate of dreams it came through.
- She announces the contest of the bow and axes; the beggar urges her not to delay it.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

so close to Penelope, yet still hidden

Penelope

grieving, cunning, half-guessing the truth

Eurycleia

the nurse who knows him by his scar

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 19 is a masterpiece of tension and recognition. Note the great *homophrosyne* (like-mindedness) of husband and wife, both weavers of deceit; the flashback of the scar and the naming of Odysseus; and the omens – the dream, the gates of dreams – that point to the bow-contest and the slaughter. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

Eurycleia Recognizes Odysseus

— CLEARING THE HALL

So noble Odysseus was left in the hall plotting the destruction of the Suitors with Athene's aid. Straightaway he spoke to Telemachus, and his words were winged.

'Telemachus, we must hide every single weapon and piece of armour.

- 5 When the Suitors miss them and question you, you must lull their suspicions with some plausible tale. You can say: "I have rescued them from the smoke, since they look quite different from when Odysseus left them and sailed for Troy. The fire has got at them and damaged them badly. There's another reason too, a more serious one,
10 which a god put in my mind – you might start quarrelling in your cups and wound each other, thus spoiling your festivities and disgracing yourselves as Suitors: there's a force in iron that lures men on."

Acting on his father's orders, Telemachus called the nurse Eurycleia
15 to his side and said: 'Nurse dear, I want you to keep the women shut up in their quarters till I have stowed away my father's fine arms in the store-room. In my father's absence I have allowed them to lie about, uncared for, tarnished by the smoke. I was still a child when he went away, but now I want to store them where the heat from the
20 fire won't reach them.'

'My child,' his dear old nurse replied, 'I wish one day you would take the trouble to look after your house and protect all your possessions! But tell me, who is to go along with you and carry a light? The maids would have done it, but you won't allow them to come out.'

- 25 'This stranger will,' the thoughtful Telemachus replied. 'I keep no man idle who has eaten my bread, however far he may have journeyed.'

- Without saying a word in reply, the old woman locked the doors leading from the fine hall. Odysseus and his splendid son now sprang up and began stowing away the helmets, the bossed shields and the
30 pointed spears. Pallas Athene herself went in front, carrying a golden lamp, which shed a beautiful light. At this, Telemachus suddenly exclaimed, 'Father! This is a great marvel to behold! The walls of the hall, the beautiful alcoves, the pine-wood beams and the soaring pillars all seem to my eyes to be lit up by a blazing fire. One of the
35 gods who inhabit the wide heaven must be present here.'

— A LIGHT IN THE DARK

‘Hush!’ said the resourceful Odysseus. ‘**Keep your thoughts to yourself** and ask no questions. This is the way of the gods who live on Olympus. Go to your bed now and leave me here to stir up the maids a little more, and your mother also. In her distress she is sure
40 to question me about everything.’

So Telemachus went off through the hall to find his way by torchlight to the bedroom where he always slept. There he settled down to sleep till the coming of divine Dawn. The good Odysseus was left once more in the hall, plotting the destruction of the Suitors with
45 Athene’s help.

— PENELOPE AND THE BEGGAR

The wise Penelope now came down from her apartment, **looking like Artemis or golden Aphrodite**; and they drew up a chair for her in her usual place by the fire. It was adorned with curling inlays of ivory and silver, and was the work of a craftsman called Icmalius. To the
50 framework itself he had attached a foot-rest, over which a large fleece was spread. Wise Penelope took her seat, and the white-armed maids, issuing from their quarters, began to clear away the remains of the meal, and the tables and cups from which the arrogant men had drunk. They also raked out the fire from the braziers on to
55 the floor and heaped them high with more wood for light and warmth.

Melantho now renewed her abuse of Odysseus. ‘Ha! Still here,’ she cried, ‘to plague us all night long, prowling around the house and ogling the women! Off with you, wretch, and be glad of the supper you had, or you’ll find yourself pelted out of the house with lighted
60 brands.’

Odysseus of the nimble wits turned on her with a black look. ‘What’s got into you, woman?’ he said. ‘Why attack me with such spite? Is it because I’m dirty and dressed in rags and go round the country begging? But I have no choice; this is how it is for all beggars and
65 vagrants. There was a time when I too was one of the lucky ones with a rich house to live in, and I’ve often given alms to such a vagrant as myself, no matter who he was or what his needs were. I had hundreds of servants and plenty of all one needs to live in luxury and be counted rich. But Zeus – it must have been his will – wrecked
70 my life. So be careful, my girl, or one day you may lose the fine position that puts you above the other maids. Your mistress may turn against you in anger or Odysseus may come back. There’s still a chance of that; and, if he’s really dead and gone for ever, he has a son by the grace of Apollo as good as himself; he’s of an age when no bad
75 behaviour in the palace of any of you women escapes his notice.’

LINES 36–37

Keep your thoughts to yourself As they carry the arms out, an eerie golden light fills the hall. Telemachus is amazed, but Odysseus hushes him: it is **Athene** herself lighting their way. A god is plainly at work in the house tonight.

LINES 46–47

looking like Artemis or golden Aphrodite A **simile** of praise: Penelope comes down ‘looking like Artemis or golden Aphrodite’ – measured against the goddesses of the hunt and of love, the twin ideals of a woman’s beauty.

LINE 56

Melantho now renewed her abuse **Melantho**, the disloyal maid, jeers at the beggar again, and Penelope rebukes her sharply.

Wise Penelope, who had listened, rounded on the maid with a rebuke. 'You may be sure, you bold creature, you shameless bitch, that I am not unaware of your disgraceful behaviour and you shall pay dearly for it. For you knew perfectly well – you heard me say so
80 myself – that in my ever-present distress I meant to question this stranger here in my house for any news he might have of my husband.' And turning to Eurynome, the housekeeper, she said: 'Bring a chair here, with a rug on it, for my guest to sit on, so that he and I can talk to one another. There are questions I want to ask him.'

85 Eurynome hurried off and came back with a polished chair on which she spread a rug. Here the noble and stalwart Odysseus sat down, and thoughtful Penelope spoke first. 'Stranger, the first question I will ask you is: who are you and where do you come from? What is your city and who are your parents?'

90 'My lady,' answered the resourceful Odysseus, 'there is not a man in the wide world who could find fault with you. For your fame has reached broad heaven itself, like that of some illustrious king, ruling a populous and mighty country with the fear of the gods in his heart, and upholding justice. As a result of his good leadership the dark soil
95 yields its wheat and barley, the trees are laden with ripe fruit, the sheep never fail to bear their lambs, nor the sea to provide its fish; and his people prosper under him. So now that you have me in your house, ask me any other questions, but do not inquire about my ancestry and my country, or you will bring fresh sorrow to my heart
100 by making me recall the past. For I am a man of many sorrows. Yet there is no necessity for me to sit sobbing and sighing in someone else's house. Unremitting grief is tiresome and I'm afraid some of your maids here or you yourself might lose patience with me and conclude that it was the wine that had gone to my head and released
105 this flood of tears.'

'Sir,' said Penelope, 'my loveliness of face and form and my pre-eminence the gods destroyed when the Argives embarked for Ilium and my husband Odysseus went with them. If he could return and devote himself to me, my good name might indeed be embellished
110 and enhanced. But I am left to my misery: the powers above have heaped so many troubles on my head. For of all the island chieftains who rule in Dulichium, in Same and in wooded Zacynthus, or who live here in our own sunny Ithaca, there is not one who is not forcing his unwelcome suit upon me and plundering my house. As a
115 result I neglect my guests, I neglect the suppliants at my door, and even the messengers that come on public business. I eat my heart out in longing for Odysseus. Meanwhile they are pressing me to name my wedding-day and I have to devise tricks to deceive them.'

— THE WEB OF PENELOPE

‘First a god gave me the inspiration to **set up a great web on my**
 120 **loom** here and begin weaving a large and delicate piece of work,
 saying to my suitors: “My lords, my Suitors, now that noble Odysseus
 is dead, restrain your ardour, do not urge on this marriage till I have
 done this work, so that the threads I have spun may not be altogether
 wasted. It is a shroud for Lord Laertes. When he succumbs to the
 125 dread hand of remorseless Death that stretches all men out at last, I
 must not risk the scandal there would be among my countrywomen
 here if one who had amassed such wealth were laid to rest without a
 shroud.”

‘That is what I said, and they magnanimously consented. So by day I
 130 used to weave the great web, but every night I had torches set beside
 it and undid the work. For three years I took them in by this
 stratagem. A fourth began and the seasons were slipping by, when
 through the connivance of my shameless and irresponsible maids
 they caught me at my task. They reproached me angrily, and I was
 135 forced reluctantly to finish the work. And now I can neither evade
 marriage with one of them nor think of any means of escape. My
 parents are pressing me to marry and my son is exasperated at the
 drain on our estate. He realizes what is happening, being a man by
 now and well able to look after the house – the sort of man on whom
 140 Zeus showers glory. But do give me an account of your family, for you
 certainly did not spring from a tree or a rock like the one in tales of
 long ago.’

‘Honoured wife of Laertes’ son Odysseus,’ answered the inventive
 Odysseus,

145 ‘will you never stop asking me about my ancestry? Very well, I will
 tell you. Yet you will be making me more miserable than I already am
 – as is only to be expected when a man has spent as long a time as I
 have away from home, wandering through the world from town to
 town – a miserable existence. However, here is my tale and an
 150 answer to all your questions.

— A CRETAN TALE

‘Out in the wine-dark sea there lies **a land called Crete**, a rich and
 lovely sea-girt land, densely peopled, with ninety cities and several
 different languages. First there are the Achaeans; then the genuine
 Cretans, proud of their native stock; next the Cydonians; the
 155 Dorians, with their three clans; and finally the noble Pelasgians. One
 of the ninety towns is a great city called Cnossus, and there King
 Minos ruled and every nine years conversed with mighty Zeus. He
 was the father of my father, the great Deucalion, who had two sons,
 myself and Prince Idomeneus. Now Idomeneus had gone in his

LINES 119–120

set up a great web on my loom Penelope’s famous stratagem, the ‘web of Penelope’: she promised to choose a husband once she had finished weaving a shroud for old Laertes – then secretly unpicked each night what she had woven by day, holding the suitors off for three years until a maid betrayed her.

LINE 151

a land called Crete Another invented tale: the beggar claims to be a Cretan prince, brother of Idomeneus, who once hosted Odysseus. As always, the lie is stuffed with real detail – here a quick tour of Crete’s peoples – to make it ring true.

160 beaked ships to Ilium with the sons of Atreus; so it fell to me, the younger son, Aethon by name, and not so good a man as my elder brother, to meet Odysseus and exchange the gifts of friendship. He had been driven to Crete by a gale which had blown him off his course at Cape Malea when bound for Troy. He put in at Amnisus, 165 where the cave of Eileithyie is – a difficult harbour to make – only just escaping from the storm.

‘The first thing he did was to go up to the town and ask for Idomeneus, whom he described as a dear and honoured friend. But nine or ten days had already gone by since Idomeneus had sailed for 170 Ilium in his beaked ships. So I took Odysseus to the palace and made him warmly welcome. Our wealth enabled me to entertain him lavishly; and as for his comrades who were with him, by drawing on the public store I provided them with grain and sparkling wine and all the cattle to slaughter they could want. These fine Achaeans stayed 175 with me for twelve days, cooped up by that northerly gale stirred up by some hostile god, and so strong that even on land it was not possible to keep one’s feet. But on the thirteenth the wind dropped and they put out to sea.’

— TEARS LIKE MELTING SNOW

He made all these lies sound so convincing that, as she listened, the 180 tears poured from Penelope’s eyes and drenched her cheeks. *As the snow that the West Wind has brought melts* on the mountain-tops when the East Wind thaws it, and, melting, makes the rivers run in spate, so did the tears she shed drench her fair cheeks as she wept for the husband who was sitting at her side. But though Odysseus’ 185 heart was wrung by his wife’s distress, his eyes, as if made of horn or iron, remained zio steady between their lids, so guilefully did he repress his tears.

When Penelope had wept to her heart’s content she said in answer, ‘Now, stranger, I mean to test you and find out whether you really 190 entertained my husband and his godlike company in your palace as you say. Tell me what sort of clothes he was wearing and what he looked like; and describe the men who were with him.’

— THE BROOCH

‘My lady,’ replied the resourceful Odysseus, ‘it is difficult for me to speak after parting so long ago; and it is twenty years since he left 195 my country. However, I’ll give you the picture of him that I have in my mind’s eye. Noble Odysseus wore a thick, double, purple cloak, *displaying a golden brooch* with a pair of sheaths into which the pins fitted. There was a device on the face of it: a hound holding down a dappled fawn in his forepaws and ripping it as it scrabbled. Everyone 200 admired the workmanship, the hound ripping and throttling the

LINES 180–181

As the snow that the West Wind has brought melts A beautiful **simile**: Penelope’s tears run down ‘as the snow melts on the mountain-tops’ under the warm wind and swells the rivers. She is weeping for the husband sitting right in front of her.

LINE 197

displaying a golden brooch The clinching proof: the beggar describes a golden **brooch** Odysseus wore – a hound pinning a struggling fawn – and his fine tunic. Only someone who really met him could know these things, and Penelope is convinced, for she made and packed those very clothes herself.

fawn, the fawn scrab-bling with his feet in his efforts to escape – and the whole thing done in gold. I noticed his tunic too. It gleamed on his body like the skin of a dried onion, it was so smooth; and it shone like the Sun. I tell you, all the women were fascinated by it.

205 ‘I cannot say whether Odysseus wore these clothes at home, or whether they had been given him by one of his friends when he embarked, or by some acquaintance he visited. For Odysseus had friends everywhere; few Achaeans were like him. I myself gave him a bronze sword, a fine purple mantle, and a tunic with a fringe, and I
210 saw him off with all honours in his well-found ship. And here’s another thing. He had a squire in his retinue who was a little older than himself. I’ll tell you what he looked like too. He was round in the shoulders and had a dark complexion and curly hair. Eurybates was his name, and Odysseus thought more of him than of anyone else in
215 his company, for the squire saw eye to eye with his leader.’

Odysseus’ descriptions made Penelope even more disposed to weep, recognizing, as she did, the infallible signs that he had disclosed. She found relief in tears once more, then turned to him and said: ‘Friend, I pitied you before; but now you shall be a dear and honoured guest in
220 my house. For it was I who gave him those clothes, just as you describe them; I who took them from our store-room; I who folded them and pinned on the bright brooch as an ornament for him. And now I shall never welcome him home to the land he loved so well. It was an evil day when Odysseus sailed in his hollow ship to that city,
225 evil Ilium, which I loathe to name.’

‘My lady, honoured wife of Laertes’ son Odysseus,’ replied the subtle Odysseus,

‘do not ravage those fair cheeks any more nor wring your heart by weeping for your husband. Not that I would blame you. Any woman
230 mourns when she loses her husband with whom she makes love and whose children she has borne, even though he is a lesser man than Odysseus, whom people speak about as if he were a god. But dry your tears now and hear what I have to say. I am speaking the truth and am holding nothing back when I tell you that I have news of Odysseus’
235 return, that he’s alive and near, in the rich land of Thesprotia, and that he’s bringing home a large fortune which he has solicited from the people there. But he has lost all his faithful companions and his hollow ship on the high seas. On his way from the island of Thrinacie, Zeus and the Sun-god were at odds with Odysseus because his men
240 had killed the cattle of the Sun; and his whole crew were drowned in the tempestuous sea.

‘But he himself clung to the keel of his ship and was thrown up on shore by the waves in the country of the Phaeacians, who are close

to the gods. These people in the goodness of their hearts paid him
 245 divine honours, showered gifts upon him, and were anxious to see
 him safely home themselves. Indeed Odysseus would have been here
 long ago, had he not thought it the more profitable course to travel
 about in the pursuit of wealth – at accumulating wealth he is
 unsurpassed; in fact not a man alive can rival him. I had all this from
 250 Pheidon, the Thesprotian King, who moreover swore in my presence
 over a drink-offering in his palace that a ship with a crew standing
 by was waiting on the beach to convey Odysseus to his own
 country. But Pheidon sent me off before him as a Thesprotian ship
 happened to be starting for the corn island of Dulichium. He even
 255 showed me what wealth Odysseus had amassed. The amount of
 treasure stored up for your lord there in the King's house would keep
 a man and his heirs to the tenth generation.

— NEWS OF ODYSSEUS

'Odysseus himself, Pheidon said, **had gone to Dodona** to find out the
 will of Zeus from the great oak-tree that is sacred to the god, how he
 260 should approach his own native land after so long an absence, openly
 or in disguise. So he is safe and will soon be back. Indeed, he is very
 close. His exile from his friends and country will be ended soon; and
 you shall have my oath as well. I swear first by Zeus, the best and
 greatest of the gods, and then by the great Odysseus' hearth which I
 265 have come to, that everything will happen as I foretell. This very
 month Odysseus will be here, between the waning of the old moon
 and the waxing of the new.'

'Friend,' the wise Penelope replied to this, 'may what you say prove
 true! If it does, you will soon receive from me such friendship and
 270 generosity that anyone who meets you will call you a fortunate man.
 But what my heart forebodes is this, and this is how it will be.
 Odysseus will not come home nor will you secure your passage from
 here; for we have no leaders of men like Odysseus (if ever there was
 such a man), to receive strangers with proper respect and send them
 275 on their way.'

'But come, my maids, wash our guest and spread a bed for him, with
 mattress, blankets and glossy rugs, so that he may sleep warm till
 Dawn appears on her golden throne; and first thing in the morning
 you must give him a bath and rub him with oil so that he may feel
 280 ready to take his place beside Telemachus at breakfast in the hall.
 And if any one of those men plagues our guest out of spite, so much
 the worse for him. His chances of achieving his object here will
 vanish: he can rage and fume as he will. For how are you, stranger, to
 find out whether I really am more intelligent and resourceful than
 285 other women, if I leave you to sit down to meals ragged and dirty in
 my house? Man's life is short enough. The whole world prays that a

LINE 258

had gone to Dodona He reports that
 Odysseus is alive and near – gone to **Dodona**,
 the oak-oracle of Zeus, to ask whether to
 come home openly or in secret. It is a lie, and
 yet almost exactly the truth.

heartless man who behaves heartlessly will suffer misfortune in his life, and derides him after his death; whereas when a man behaves kindly because his heart is kind, his reputation is spread far and wide
290 by the guests he befriends, and he has no lack of people to sing his praises.'

'Honoured wife of Laertes' son Odysseus,' replied the astute Odysseus, 'I have a dislike of blankets and gleaming rugs ever since I sailed off in my long-oared ship and said farewell to the snow-capped
295 hills of Crete. So I will lie just as I have often lain through sleepless nights in the past. For many's the night I've spent in some wretched place, waiting for Dawn on her bright throne. Nor does the prospect of having my feet washed appeal to me. Nor shall any of your maidservants here touch my feet, unless there is some old and trusty
300 woman whose heart has suffered as much as mine. If there is such a one, I should not object to her touching my feet.'

To this the wise Penelope replied, 'My dear friend – as I cannot help calling the most understanding guest this house has ever welcomed from abroad, for you put everything so well and you talk with such
305 understanding – I have just such a maid, an old woman of great discretion who faithfully nursed my unhappy husband and brought him up and took him in her arms the moment he was born. She will wash your feet, although she is rather frail. Come, my dear kind Eurycleia, get up and wash the feet of someone who is of the same
310 age as your master. No doubt Odysseus' hands and feet are like our guest's by now, for people age quickly in misfortune.'

At this the old woman, covering her face with her hands, shed warm tears and gave voice to her grief: 'Alas, my child, how helpless I am to do anything for you! Zeus must indeed have hated you above all men,
315 god-fearing though you were. For no one ever burnt for the Thunderer so many fat pieces from the thigh and such choice sacrifices as you used to offer him when you prayed that you might reach a comfortable old age and bring up a splendid son. Yet you are the only one to whom Zeus has denied a home-coming. Perhaps the
320 women in a foreign land have mocked my master when he called at some great house, just as you, sir, have been mocked by all these bitches here. It was to avoid their insults and sneers that you refused to let them wash your feet. Well, my wise Penelope, daughter of Icarius, has given me the task, and I am most willing. I will bathe your
325 feet, both for Penelope's sake and for your own, since your unhappiness has touched my heart. But hear me out: there's something else I want to say. We have had plenty of travel-weary strangers here before, but not one that I have seen has reminded me so strongly of Odysseus – your looks and your voice and your very
330 feet – as you.'

‘Old woman,’ said the quick-witted Odysseus, ‘that is what everyone says who has set eyes on us both, that we are remarkably alike, as you yourself so shrewdly observe.’

The old woman fetched the gleaming basin which she always used
 335 for washing the feet of guests, poured in plenty of cold water and added warm. Odysseus was sitting by the fire, but now he swung abruptly round to face the dark, for it had struck him suddenly that in touching him she might notice a certain scar he had, and his secret would be out. Eurycleia then came up to her master and began to
 340 wash him. At once she recognized the scar, the one Odysseus had received years before from the white tusk of a boar when on a visit to Autolycus and his sons. This nobleman, his mother’s father, was the most accomplished thief and manipulator of oaths of his day. He owed to the god Hermes himself, whose favour he sought by
 345 sacrificing lambs and kids in his honour, and in whom he secured a willing accomplice. He once went over to the rich island of Ithaca, where he found that his daughter had just given birth to a son. Eurycleia put the baby on its grandfather’s knees as he finished supper, and said: ‘Autolycus, think of a name to give your daughter’s
 350 son: he has been much prayed for.’

— THE NAMING OF ODYSSEUS

By way of answer, Autolycus said: ‘My son-in-law, my daughter, **I will give you a name for him**. I have been at odds with many men and women up and down this bounteous earth, so let his name, Odysseus, signify this. And when he has grown up and comes to his
 355 mother’s old home at Parnassus, where I keep my worldly goods, I will give him a share of them and send him back a happy man.’

This led in due course to a visit from Odysseus, who went over to receive his grandfather’s generous gifts. Autolycus and his sons greeted him with open arms and welcoming words, and his
 360 grandmother, Amphithee, threw her arms round his neck and kissed his forehead and both his fine eyes. Autolycus told his splendid young sons to make preparations for a banquet, and they readily obeyed. They quickly brought in a five-year-old bull, which they flayed and prepared by cutting up the carcass and deftly chopping it
 365 into small pieces. These they pierced with spits, and carefully roasted, and served out helpings. And so they banqueted for the rest of the day till sunset, all sharing alike and all contented with their share. When the Sun sank and darkness fell, they went to their beds to accept the gift of sleep.

370 As soon as Dawn appeared, fresh and rosy-fingered, Autolycus’ sons, accompanied by the good Odysseus, set out for the chase with a pack of hounds. Climbing the steep and wooded heights of

LINES 351–352

I will give you a name for him A famous digression on Odysseus’ name. His grandfather **Autolycus** – a notorious thief and trickster, favoured by Hermes – named the baby ‘Odysseus’ from a Greek word for giving and suffering pain. The name marks him as a man of trouble, both dealt out and endured.

Parnassus, they soon reached the windswept glens of the mountain; and it was just as the Sun, fresh from the smooth-flowing, deep-running stream of Ocean, was touching the plough-lands with his first beams that the beaters reached a certain wooded hollow. Ahead of them ran the hounds, hot on a scent. Behind came Autolycus' sons, and with them the good Odysseus, close up on the pack and brandishing his long spear. It was in this spot that a mighty boar had his lair, in a thicket so dense that when the winds blew moist not a breath could penetrate, the Sun's rays never entered, the rain never soaked right through, and the ground was deep in dead leaves.

As the hunters came near, urging on the hounds, the sound of the feet of men and hounds reached the boar. He emerged from his lair and with bristling back and eyes aflame faced the hunt. Odysseus was the first to act. Poising his long spear in his great hand, he rushed forward, eager to strike. But the boar was too quick and caught him above the knee, where he gave him a long flesh-wound with a cross lunge of his tusk, but failed to reach the bone. Odysseus' thrust went home as well. He struck him on the right shoulder, and the point of his bright spear transfixed the boar, who sank to earth with a grunt and there gave up his life. Autolycus' sons took charge of the carcass. They also skilfully bandaged the handsome, godlike Odysseus' wound, staunching the dark blood with an incantation; and before long they were back at their father's palace.

Under the care of Autolycus and his sons, Odysseus recovered from his wound and in due course, loaded with presents, was given a happy send-off to his own home in Ithaca. His father and his gentle mother were delighted to see him back. They asked him all about his adventures, and how he had come by his scar, and Odysseus gave them a full account of how in the course of the chase he had been gashed by a boar's tusk on the expedition to Parnassus with Autolycus' sons.

— THE SCAR

It was this scar that the old woman felt and recognized as her hand passed over it. Abruptly she let go of her master's foot, which made the metal ring as it dropped against the basin, upsetting it and spilling all the water on the floor. Delight and anguish swept through her heart together; her eyes were filled with tears; her voice stuck in her throat. She lifted her hand to Odysseus' chin and said, 'Of course! You are Odysseus, my dear child. And I never knew till my hands passed all over my master!'

With this she turned her eyes in Penelope's direction, wishing to let her know that her own husband was in the room. But Penelope was not able to meet her glance or pay any attention because

LINE 404

It was this scar that the old woman felt The **scar** on his thigh, from a boar's tusk when he hunted on Mount Parnassus as a youth with Autolycus' sons, is the sign by which **Eurycleia** knows him. She drops his foot in shock, and the basin clatters over.

LINE 412

turned her eyes in Penelope's direction A neat piece of stage-management: **Athene** turns Penelope's mind aside so that she neither sees the nurse's reaction nor hears the clatter. The secret is kept by a hair's breadth.

415 Athene had distracted her. In the meantime Odysseus' right hand sought and gripped the old woman's throat, while with the other he pulled her closer to him.

'Nurse,' he said, '**do you want to ruin me**, you who suckled me at your own breast? I am indeed home after twenty years of grief and
420 trouble. But, since a god has revealed it to you, keep your mouth shut and let not a soul in the house learn the truth. Otherwise I tell you plainly – and you know I make no idle threats – that if the gods deliver these fine Suitors into my hands I won't spare you, though you're my own nurse, on the day when I put the rest of the maids in
425 my palace to death.'

'My child,' the sensible Eurycleia replied, 'what a thing to say! You know well enough how staunch and unyielding my spirit is. I'll keep silent as a block of stone or iron. Remember this too, that if a god delivers these fine Suitors into your hands, I will go through all the
430 women and pick out the disloyal from the innocent.'

'Why mention that?' said the resourceful Odysseus. 'There's no need. On my own account I will take note of each and mark them down. Meanwhile keep all this to yourself and leave the issue to the gods.'

At this the old woman went out of the hall to fetch water for his feet,
435 as the whole basinful was spilt. When she had washed and rubbed them with olive-oil, Odysseus drew his stool up to the fire once more to get warm, and covered the scar with his rags.

It was wise Penelope who reopened their talk. 'My friend,' she said, 'I have one more thing to ask you – just a small matter, as it will soon be
440 time for sweet sleep – at least for those whose grief allows them such a peaceful repose. But in my own case, heaven seems to have set no limit to my misery. By day my one relief is to weep and sigh as I go about my tasks and supervise the work of the maids in the house; but when night falls and brings sleep to everyone else, I lie on my bed,
445 and anxious cares come thronging into my restless, grieving heart and give me no peace.

'You know how **Pandareus' daughter, the tawny nightingale**, perched in the dense foliage of the trees, makes her sweet music when the spring is young, and with many turns and trills pours out
450 her full-throated song in sorrow for Itylus her beloved son, King Zethus' child, whom mistakenly she killed with her own hand. In the same way my inclination wavers this way and that. Am I to stay with my son and keep everything intact, my belongings, my servants, and this great high-roofed house of ours, in loyalty to my husband's bed
455 and deference to public opinion? Or shall I go away now with the one of my Suitors here in the palace who is the most distinguished and the most generous with wedding presents? While my son was young

LINE 418

do you want to ruin me Odysseus grips the old woman and swears her to silence – the danger is real, for a single word now would undo everything. Eurycleia promises to keep it, 'firm as rock or iron'.

LINE 447

Pandareus' daughter, the tawny nightingale Penelope likens her restless, grieving mind to the **nightingale** – in myth, Pandareus' daughter, who killed her own son and was turned into the bird whose song is an endless lament.

and dependent it was out of the question for me to leave my husband's house and marry again. But now that he has grown up and entered on manhood, he implores me to leave the house, so concerned is he for his estate, which he sees the Achaean lords squandering.

— THE EAGLE AND THE GEESE

'But enough. Listen to this dream of mine and interpret it. *I keep a flock of twenty geese* here. They come in from the pond to pick up their grain and I delight in watching them. In my dream I saw a great eagle with a crooked beak swoop down from the hills and break their necks, killing them all. There they lay in a heap on the floor while he soared up into the open sky. I wept and cried aloud, still in my dream, and beautifully dressed Achaean ladies gathering about me found me sobbing my heart out because the eagle had slaughtered my geese. But the bird came back. He perched on a jutting beam of the roof, and breaking into human speech he checked my tears. "Take heart," he said,

"daughter of the far-famed Icarius. This is not a dream but a happy reality which you shall see fulfilled. The geese were your Suitors, and I that was the eagle am now your husband, home again and ready to inflict a gruesome fate on every man among them." At this point I awoke. I looked around me and there I saw the geese in the yard pecking their grain at the trough in their usual place.'

'Lady,' replied the subtle Odysseus, 'it's not possible to interpret this dream in any other way; you have learnt from Odysseus himself how he will make it come true. Clearly, the Suitors are all of them doomed: there is not one who will escape his destined death.'

— GATES OF HORN AND IVORY

'Dreams, my friend,' said the thoughtful Penelope, 'are awkward and confusing things: not all that people see in them comes true. For there are two gates through which these insubstantial visions reach us; *one is of horn and the other of ivory*. Those that come through the carved ivory gate cheat us with empty promises that never see fulfilment; whereas those that issue from the gate of burnished horn inform the dreamer what will really happen. But I fear it was not from this source that my own strange dream came, much as I and my son would rejoice if it proved so.

— THE CONTEST OF THE BOW

'However, there is something else I want to tell you that will give you matter for thought. The hateful day is drawing very near which is to tear me from Odysseus' house. For I intend to propose a test using the very axes which he sometimes set up here at home, *twelve in a*

LINES 463–464

I keep a flock of twenty geese Penelope's dream: an eagle swoops and kills her twenty pet geese, then speaks in a human voice – he is Odysseus, and the geese are the suitors. A transparent forecast of the slaughter, which she still half-refuses to believe.

LINE 487

one is of horn and the other of ivory The famous image of the two gates of dreams: false dreams come through a gate of ivory, true ones through a gate of horn. (In Greek there is a pun – 'horn' chimes with 'fulfil', 'ivory' with 'deceive'.) Penelope fears hers came through the wrong gate.

LINES 496–497

twelve in a row like the props under a new keel Penelope announces the contest of the bow: she will marry whichever suitor can string Odysseus' great bow and shoot an arrow clean through twelve axe-heads set 'in a row like the props under a new keel' (a simile). This is the trap that springs in Book 21.

row like the props under a new keel. Standing a good way off, he could shoot an arrow through them all. And now I am going to make the Suitors compete in the same test of skill. Whoever proves the

500 handiest at stringing the bow and shoots an arrow through each of the twelve axes, with that man I will go, bidding goodbye to this house that welcomed me as a bride, this lovely house so full of all good things, this home which even in my dreams I never shall forget.'

'Honoured wife of Laertes' son Odysseus,' the resourceful Odysseus

505 answered,

'do not delay this contest in the palace, for the resourceful Odysseus himself will be here long before those fellows have finished their fumbling attempts to string the polished bow and shoot an arrow through the iron axes.'

510 'Ah, my friend,' said the wise Penelope, 'if you would only sit here at my side in the hall and give me the pleasure of your company my eyes would never close in drowsiness. But no one can do without sleep for ever. The gods have given it its allotted place in our daily lives, like everything else on this bounteous earth. So now I shall go

515 upstairs to lie down on what has always been for me a bed of sorrows, watered by my perpetual tears, since the day when Odysseus sailed away to that city, evil Ilium, which I loathe to name. There I will lie down. And as for you, lie down somewhere in the house – spread bedding on the floor or let them make you a proper bed.'

520 So Penelope went up to her bright room, not alone but escorted by her ladies. But as soon as they were all upstairs, she wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband, till Athene shed sweet sleep on her eyelids.

LINE 506

do not delay this contest in the palace

Odysseus urges her not to put the contest off, promising Odysseus will be home 'before they can even string the bow'. Rich **dramatic irony** – he is guaranteeing his own arrival.

