

23

Odysseus and Penelope

Book Twenty-Three

The husband is home, and still his wife will not run to him. Penelope has been deceived too often to trust her eyes; she waits, and tests, and lays one last trap – a careless word about moving their bed. But that bed was carved from a living olive rooted in the earth, a secret shared by no one else alive, and his flash of anger tells her everything. They weep in each other's arms while a goddess holds back the dawn; and only one journey now remains.

NAME

SET

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BOOK TWENTY-THREE

Odysseus and Penelope

The reunion. Penelope, cautious to the last, tests the stranger with the secret of their marriage-bed – and husband and wife are one again.

WHAT HAPPENS

- Eurycleia wakes Penelope with the news, but she cannot believe Odysseus has really returned.
- Odysseus stages a mock wedding-feast to hide the slaughter, and Athene makes him godlike again.
- Penelope tests him with the secret of the immovable bed; his answer proves him, and they embrace at last.
- Athene lengthens the night; Odysseus recounts his wanderings and the one journey still ahead.
- At dawn he sets out with Telemachus and the herdsmen for the farm of old Laertes.

WHO WE MEET

Odysseus

home in truth at last

Penelope

who yields only to certain proof

Athene

gilding the hero and holding back the day

WHY IT MATTERS FOR ESSAYS

Book 23 is the reunion the whole poem has promised, and a portrait of a marriage founded on shared cunning (*homophrosyne*). Note Penelope's testing as the mirror of Odysseus' own, the bed as the ultimate recognition-token, the reverse simile of the shipwrecked sailor, and the reminder that one task still remains. **Prescribed:** examined in context – know it closely.

Odysseus And Penelope

Chuckling as she went, the old woman bustled upstairs to tell her mistress that her beloved husband was in the house. Her legs moved so fast that she almost tripped over her feet. She stood at the bedside and said: 'Wake up, Penelope, dear child, and see with your very own

5 eyes what you've longed for all these days. Odysseus has come and is home after all these years. And he's killed the arrogant Suitors who turned his whole house inside out, ate up his wealth, and bullied his son.'

— EURYCLEIA'S NEWS

'My dear nurse,' the sensible Penelope said, '**the gods have driven**

10 **you crazy**. They can, after all, rob the wisest of their wits and make stupid people wise. And now they've deranged you, who used to be so sensible. Why do you make fun of my distress by waking me when I had closed my eyes, and was deep in a happy sleep, only to tell me this nonsense? Never have I slept like this since Odysseus sailed

15 away to that city, evil Ilium, which I loathe to name. Now go downstairs and back to your own room! If any of the other maids had come and woken me up to listen to such a message, I'd soon have sent her packing to the servants' quarters in tears. Your age can at least save you from that.'

20 But the dear nurse, Eurycleia, persisted. 'I am not making fun of you, dear child,' she said, 'Odysseus really has come and is home, just as I told you. He's the stranger whom they all insulted in the hall. Telemachus has known for some time that he was back, but had the sense to keep his father's plans a secret till he'd made those upstarts

25 pay for their crimes.'

Penelope's heart leapt up. She sprang from the bed and clung to the old woman, with the tears streaming from her eyes, and spoke winged words. 'Dear nurse, I beg you for the truth! If he is really home, as you say, how on earth did he single-handed overcome those

30 shameless Suitors who were always hanging about the house in a pack?

'I didn't see anything and wasn't told anything,' said the dear nurse Eurycleia, 'but I heard the groans of dying men. We sat petrified in a corner of our quarters, with the doors shut tightly on us, till your son

35 Telemachus shouted to me to come out. His father had sent him to fetch me. And then I found Odysseus standing among the bodies of the dead. They lay round him in heaps all over the hard floor. It would have gladdened your heart to see him, spattered with blood and gore **like a lion**. By now all the corpses have been gathered in a pile at the

40 courtyard gate, while he has had a big fire made and is purifying the

LINES 9–10

the gods have driven you crazy Eurycleia brings the news that Odysseus is home and the suitors dead, but **Penelope** refuses to believe it – she thinks the old woman has lost her wits, or that a god has punished the suitors.

LINE 39

like a lion Eurycleia describes Odysseus standing among the corpses, blood-spattered 'like a lion'.

palace. He sent me to call you to him. So come with me now, so that you two may begin a time of happiness together after all your sufferings. The wish you cherished so long has today come true. Odysseus has come back to his own hearth alive; he has found both
45 you and his son at home, and in his own palace he has had his revenge on every one of the Suitors who wronged him.'

'Dear nurse, do not laugh and exult so soon,' said prudent Penelope. 'You know how everyone here would welcome the sight of him, and nobody more than myself and the son we brought into the world. But
50 this tale of yours does not ring true. One of the immortal gods has killed the young lords, enraged by their sickening insolence and wickedness. For they respected nobody they met – good men and bad were all the same to them. And now their offences have brought them to disaster. Meanwhile Odysseus in some distant land far from
55 Ithaca has lost his chance of ever returning, and with it lost his life.'

'My child,' her dear nurse Eurycleia exclaimed, 'how can you say such things! Here is your husband at his own fireside, and you declare he never will get home. You never trust anyone. But let me tell you something else as positive proof. The scar he had where he was
60 wounded long ago by the white tusk of a boar – I saw that very scar when I was washing him, and would have told you of it, if Odysseus, for his own crafty purposes, hadn't clapped his hand over my mouth and prevented me. Come with me now. I'll stake my life upon it. If I'm misleading you then kill me in the cruellest way you can.'

65 'Dear nurse,' the sensible Penelope replied, 'you are a very wise old woman, but even you cannot probe into the minds of the everlasting gods. However, let us go to my son, so that I can see the Suitors dead, and the man who killed them.'

As she spoke she left her room and made her way downstairs, a prey
70 to indecision. Should she remain aloof as she questioned her husband, or go straight up to him and kiss his head and hands? When she had crossed the stone threshold into the hall, she sat down in the firelight by the wall, on the opposite side to Odysseus. He was sitting by one of the great columns with his eyes on the ground,
75 waiting to see whether his good wife would say anything to him when she set eyes on him. For a long while Penelope sat there without a word, with bewilderment in her heart. As she gazed into his face, at times she saw a likeness to Odysseus, at others she failed to recognize him because of the vile clothes he was wearing. Then
80 Telemachus spoke out and rebuked her.

'Mother,' he said, 'my hard-hearted, unmotherly mother, why do you keep your distance from my father like this? Why aren't you sitting at his side, talking and asking questions? No other woman would

have had the perversity to hold out like this against a husband who
 85 had just returned to her in his native land after twenty wearisome
 years. But then your heart was always harder than flint.'

— PENELOPE'S DOUBT

'My child, the shock has numbed it,' she said. 'I cannot find a word to
 say to him; I cannot ask him anything at all; I cannot even look him in
 the face. But if it really is Odysseus home again, we two shall soon
 90 know each other more certainly; for **there are signs hidden from**
 others which only we two know.' no

Patient, good Odysseus smiled, and spoke winged words.
 "Telemachus, leave your mother to put me to the proof here in our
 home. She will soon come to look at me in a different light. At the
 95 moment, because I'm dirty and in rags, she undervalues me and
 won't admit that I'm Odysseus. But you and I must consider what is
 best to be done. In any community, when a man kills someone, even
 someone who has no friends at all to avenge him, he still goes into
 exile, abandoning his family and native land. But we have killed the
 100 best of Ithaca's young men, the mainstay of our state. Do consider
 this.'

'It's for you to consider it, dear father,' the shrewd Telemachus
 rejoined. 'You are held to be the best man in the world for
 stratagems; no one else can compare with you. We will follow your
 105 lead wholeheartedly, and whatever our strength may be, our courage
 will not be lacking.'

'Very well,' Odysseus the great strategist replied, 'I'll tell you what I
 think is the best plan. First wash yourselves, put on your tunics, and
 tell the maids in the house to put on fresh clothes. Then let our
 110 divine minstrel strike up lively dance music for us with his clear-
 toned lyre so that, if the music is heard outside by anyone passing in
 the road or by one of our neighbours, they may imagine there is a
 wedding-feast. That will prevent the news of the Suitors' death from
 spreading through the town before we have visited our farm among
 115 the orchards. Once there, we shall weigh up whatever opportunity
 the Olympian sends us.'

They carried out his instructions. The men washed themselves and
 put on their tunics, and the women decked themselves out. The
 divine bard took up his hollow lyre and soon aroused their desire for
 120 sweet music and the pleasures of dance. The great hall echoed to the
 sound of the dancing feet of the men and the elegantly gowned
 women.

— A MOCK WEDDING

'Ah!' said the passers-by as the sounds reached their ears. '**Somebody**

LINE 90

there are signs hidden from Penelope will not
 be rushed: she means to know her husband
 for certain by **secret signs** that only the two
 of them share.

LINES 123–124

Somebody has married our much-courted A
 clever stratagem: to keep news of the
 slaughter from reaching the town too soon,
 Odysseus has the house strike up music and
 dancing, so that passers-by assume Penelope
 has simply married at last.

has married our much-courted Queen. The heartless creature! Not
 125 strong-willed enough to keep watch over the great house till her
 lawful husband comes back!' That was what they said. They little
 knew what had really happened.

— ATHENE'S GIFT OF BEAUTY

Meanwhile the lion-hearted Odysseus, in his own home again, was
 bathed and rubbed with oil by the housekeeper Eurynome, and
 130 clothed by her in a beautiful cloak and tunic. Then Athene enhanced
 his comeliness from head to foot. She made him look taller and
 sturdier, and she caused the bushy locks to hang from his head thick
 as the petals of a hyacinth in bloom. Just as a craftsman trained by
 Hephaestus and herself in the secrets of his art takes pains to put a
 135 graceful finish to his work by overlaying silver-ware with gold, she
 endowed his head and shoulders with an added beauty. He came out
 from the bath looking like one of the everlasting gods, and went and
 sat down once more in the chair opposite his wife.

'What a strange woman you are!' he exclaimed. 'The gods of Olympus
 140 gave you a harder heart than any other woman. No other wife could
 have steeled herself to keep so long out of the arms of a husband who
 had just returned to her in his native land after twenty wearisome
 years. Well, nurse, make a bed for me to sleep in alone. For my wife's
 heart is as hard as iron.'

'What a strange man you are,' said the cautious Penelope. 'I am not
 being haughty or contemptuous of you, though I'm not surprised that
 you think I am. But I have too clear a picture of you in my mind as
 you were when you sailed from Ithaca in your long-oared ship. Come,
 Eurycleia, move the great bed outside the bedroom that he himself
 150 built and make it up with fleeces and blankets and brightly coloured
 rugs.'

— THE TEST OF THE BED

This was her way of putting her husband to the test. But Odysseus
 flared up at once and rounded on his loyal wife. 'Lady,' he cried, 'your
 words are a knife in my heart! Who has moved my bed? That would
 155 be hard even for a skilled workman, though for a god who took it into
 his head to come and move it somewhere else it would be quite easy.
 No man alive, not even one in his prime, would find it easy to shift. A
 great secret went into the making of that complicated bed; and it
 was my work and mine alone. Inside the court there was a long-
 160 leaved olive-tree, which had grown to full height with a trunk as thick
 as a pillar. Round this I built my room of compact stonework, and
 when that was finished, I roofed it over carefully, and put in a solid,
 neatly fitted, double door. Next I lopped all the branches off the olive,
 trimmed the trunk from the root up, rounded it smoothly and

LINES 133–134

as a craftsman trained by Hephaestus Bathed and dressed, Odysseus is made taller and handsomer by Athene, his hair falling in curls 'like the hyacinth flower'. A simile compares her work to a craftsman overlaying silver with gold – the goddess gilding the man.

LINE 152

putting her husband to the test This is Penelope's final test: she hints that the bed can be moved, and waits to see how the stranger reacts.

LINE 154

Who has moved my bed The great recognition-token: their marriage-bed was built by Odysseus around a living olive-tree, rooted in the earth and impossible to move. Only the two of them (and one maid) ever knew.

165 carefully with my adze and trued it to the line, to be my bedpost. I drilled holes in it, and using it as the first bedpost I constructed the rest of the bed. Then I finished it off with an inlay of gold, silver and ivory, and fixed a set of gleaming purple straps across the frame. So I have shown you the secret. What I don't know, lady, is whether my
170 bedstead stands where it did, cut the tree-trunk through and moved it.'

At his words her knees began to tremble and her heart melted as she realized that he had given her infallible proof. Bursting into tears she ran up to Odysseus, threw her arms round his neck and kissed his
175 head. 'Odysseus,' she cried, 'do not be angry with me, you who were always the most understanding of men. All our unhappiness is due to the gods, who couldn't bear to see us share the joys of youth and reach the threshold of old age together. But don't be cross with me now, or hurt because I did not give you this loving welcome the
180 moment I first saw you. For I had always had the cold fear in my heart that somebody might come here and deceive me with his talk. There are many who think up wicked selfish schemes. Helen of Argos, born of Zeus, would never have slept in her foreign lover's arms had sheo known that her countrymen would go to war to fetch her back to
185 Argos. It was the god who drove her to do this shameful deed, though not until that moment had her heart contemplated that fatal madness, the madness which was the cause of her woes and ours. But now you have faithfully described the secret of our bed, which no one ever saw but you and I and one maid, Actoris, who was my
190 father's gift when first I came to you, and was the keeper of our bedroom door. You have convinced my unbelieving heart.'

— A LONGER NIGHT

Her words stirred a great longing for tears in Odysseus' heart, and he wept as he held his dear and loyal wife in his arms. It was **like the moment when the blissful land is seen by struggling sailors**, whose
195 fine ship Poseidon has battered with wind and wave and smashed on the high seas. A few swim safely to the mainland out of the foaming surf, their bodies caked with brine; and blissfully they tread on solid land, saved from disaster. It was bliss like that for Penelope to see her husband once again. Her white arms round his neck never quite let
200 go. Rosy-fingered Dawn would have found them still weeping, had not Athene of the flashing eyes had other ideas. **She held the night lingering** at the western horizon and in the East at Ocean's Stream she kept golden-throned Dawn waiting and would not let her yoke the nimble steeds who bring us light, Lampus and Phaethon, the
205 colts that draw the chariot of Day.

At last the shrewd Odysseus said to his wife, 'Dear wife, we have not yet come to the end of our trials. There lies before me still a great

LINES 193–194

like the moment when the blissful land is seen by struggling sailors A famous 'reverse' **simile**: Penelope's joy at holding her husband is likened to a shipwrecked sailor's joy at swimming to shore.

LINES 201–202

She held the night lingering Athene holds back the dawn, lengthening the night so that the reunited couple may have longer together before the day's new dangers begin.

and hazardous adventure, which I must see through to the very end. That was what Teiresias' soul predicted for me when I went down to
 210 the House of Hades to find a way home for my followers and myself. So come to bed now, dear wife, and let us at last enjoy a sweet sleep in each other's arms.'

Thoughtful Penelope answered: 'Your bed shall be ready the moment you wish, now that the gods have brought you back to your own
 215 country and your lovely home. But since you have mentioned it – since a god put it in your heart – tell me all about this new ordeal; I suppose I shall hear about it sooner or later, so I might as well learn about it at once.'

— THE JOURNEY STILL TO COME

'What a strange woman you are!' said the quick-witted Odysseus.
 220 'Why press me so insistently? However, I will tell you all, holding nothing back. Not that you will find it to your liking, any more than I do! Teiresias told me to **carry a well-balanced oar** and wander on from city to city, till I came to a people who know nothing of the sea, and never use salt with their food, so that crimson-painted ships and
 225 the long oars that serve those ships as wings are quite beyond their experience. He gave me this infallible sign (which I now reveal to you) – when I met some other traveller who referred to the oar I was carrying on my shoulder as a "winnowing-fan", then, he said, the time would have come for me to plant my oar in the earth and offer
 230 the Lord Poseidon the rich sacrifice of a ram, a bull and a breeding boar. After that I was to go back home and make ceremonial sacrifices to the everlasting gods who live in the far-flung heavens, to all of them this time, in due precedence. As for my end, he said that Death would come to me away from the sea, and that I would die
 235 peacefully in old age, surrounded by a prosperous people. He assured me that all this would come true.'

'If the gods make your old age a happier time,' the sagacious Penelope replied,

'there is a hope of an end to your troubles.'

240 While they were talking, Eurynome and the nurse, by the light of torches, were putting soft bedclothes on their bed. When the work was done and the bed comfortably made, the old woman went back to her own quarters for the night, and the housekeeper Eurynome, with a torch in her hands, lit them on their way to bed, taking her
 245 leave when she had brought them to their room. And blissfully they lay down on their own familiar bed.

As for Telemachus, the cowman, and the swineherd, they brought their dancing feet to rest, dismissed the women and lay down for the

LINE 222

carry a well-balanced oar In bed, Odysseus tells Penelope of his wanderings – and of the one journey still to come: the task Teiresias set him, to carry an **oar** inland until it is taken for a winnowing-fan, and there make his peace with Poseidon.

night in the shadowy hall.

250 But Odysseus and Penelope, after they had enjoyed the pleasure of love, turned to the pleasure of talk. The noble Queen told him all she had endured in his home, watching that destructive gang of Suitors at their work, of all the cattle and fat sheep that they had slaughtered in pursuit of her, of all the jars they had emptied of wine. And in his
255 turn Odysseus, favourite of Zeus, told her of all the discomfiture he had inflicted on others and all the miseries which he himself had undergone. She listened entranced, and her eyelids never closed in sleep till the whole tale was finished.

He began with his victory over the Cicones and his visit to the fertile
260 land where the **Lotus-eaters** live. He spoke of what the Cyclops did, and the price he had made him pay for the fine men he ruthlessly devoured. He told her of his stay with Aeolus, who gave him a friendly welcome and saw him on his way; and how the gale, since it was not his destiny to reach his home so soon, had caught him once more
265 and driven him, sick at heart, over the teeming seas. Next he told how he came to Telepylus, where the Laestrygonians destroyed his fleet and all his fighting men, the black ship that carried him being the only one to get away. He told about Circe and her complex arts; of how he sailed across the seas in his great ship to the dank Halls of
270 Hades to consult the soul of Theban Teiresias, and saw all his former comrades and the mother who had borne him and nursed him as a child.

He told her how he had listened to the sweet song of the Sirens; how he had sailed by the Wandering Rocks, by dread Charybdis, and by
275 Scylla, whom no sailors pass unscathed; how his men had killed the cattle of the Sun; how Zeus the Thunderer had struck his fast ship with a flaming bolt, and all his fine company had been killed at one fell swoop, though he himself escaped their dreadful fate. He described his arrival at the Isle of Ogygia and his reception by the
280 Nymph Calypso, who had longed to marry him and kept him in her vaulted cavern, a pampered guest, offering immortality and ageless youth, but never won him round. Finally how he arrived, after a disastrous voyage, at Scherie, where the Phaeacians honoured him in their hearts like a god and sent him home by ship with generous gifts
285 of bronze and gold and clothes. He had just finished this last tale when sleep came suddenly upon him, relaxing all his limbs and banishing his cares.

— TO LAERTES' FARM

And now Athene of the flashing eyes had another idea. When she was satisfied that he had had his fill of love and sleep in his wife's
290 arms, she roused fresh golden-throned Dawn to leave Ocean's

LINE 260

Lotus-eaters He recounts the whole of his adventures to her, from the Cicones and the Lotus-eaters to Calypso.

Stream and bring daylight to the world. Odysseus too rose from his soft bed and told Penelope what he wanted her to do. ‘Dear wife,’ he said, ‘the pair of us have had our share of trials, you here in tears because of my distressing absence from home, and I yearning to get
295 back to Ithaca but harassed and kept in exile by Zeus and all the gods. But now we have returned to the bed we both longed for, I leave the house and my belongings in your care. As for the ravages the insolent Suitors have made among my flocks, I shall repair the greater part by raiding on my own, and the people of Ithaca must
300 contribute too, till they have filled up all my folds again. But now I am going to our orchard farm, to see my good father, who has suffered so much on my account. And this, my dear, is what I wish you to do, though you are too wise to need telling. Since it will be common knowledge, as soon as the sun is up, that I have killed the Suitors in
305 the palace, go with your ladies-in-waiting to your room upstairs and stay quietly there, see nobody, and ask no questions.’

Odysseus fixed his splendid armour round his shoulders, woke up Telemachus, the cowman and the swineherd, and told them all to pick up their arms. They carried out his orders and put on their
310 bronze armour. Then they opened the doors and went out with Odysseus leading. It was already broad daylight over the land, but Athene hid them in darkness and soon led them clear of the town.

LINE 304

as the sun is up At daybreak Odysseus, Telemachus and the two herdsmen arm and slip out of the town, hidden by Athene, and head for the farm of old Laertes.

