

A Story with No Ending: Penelope and Ambiguous Loss in the *Odyssey*

1) Interview with the former wife of a MIA soldier (quoted by Hunter 1988, 323)

“I’ve come to realize that his remains have not been returned so there is no finality to it. Also, all the news in the papers recently [about the possibility of American POWs still being held in Southeast Asia after the war ended] has upset me. I didn’t know I was still vulnerable. [...] What if he were still there? I can’t even think about it! [...] Looking at this thing 10 years later, I feel less removed now than I did, say, seven years after Homecoming.”

2) Psychological father presence (*Od.* 1.113-117)

τὴν δὲ πολὺ πρῶτος ἶδε Τηλέμαχος θεοειδῆς·
ἦστο γὰρ ἐν μνηστήροισι φίλον τετιμημένος ἦτορ,
ὀσσόμενος πατέρ’ ἐσθλὸν ἐνὶ φρεσίν, εἴ ποθεν ἐλθὼν (115)
μνηστήρων τῶν μὲν σκέδασιν κατὰ δώματα θεΐη,
τιμὴν δ’ αὐτὸς ἔχοι καὶ κτήμασιν οἷσιν ἀνάσσοι.

Godlike Telemachus was the very first to see her,
for he was sitting among the suitors, with sorrow in his heart,
seeing with his mind’s eye his noble father, if he, coming
from elsewhere, should scatter the suitors in the halls,
and he himself should have honor and be lord of his possessions.

3) Penelope interrupts Phemius’ song (*Od.* 1.340-344)

“ταύτης δ’ ἀποπαύε’ ἀοιδῆς (340)
λυγρῆς, ἣ τέ μοι **αἰέν** ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλον κῆρ
τείρει, ἐπεὶ με μάλιστα καθίκετο πένθος ἄλαστον.
τοίην γὰρ κεφαλὴν ποθέω μεμνημένη **αἰεὶ**
ἀνδρός, τοῦ κλέος εὐρὺ καθ’ Ἑλλάδα καὶ μέσον Ἄργος.”

“But cease from this painful song,
which **always** wears out my heart in my breast,
since unforgettable grief touches me most of all.
For I **constantly** remember and long for such a face,
the face of my husband, whose fame reaches far in Greece and mid-Argos.”

4) Penelope cries herself to sleep (*Od.* 1.363-364; cf. 16.450-451, 19.603-604, 21.357-358)

κλαίεν ἔπειτ’ Ὀδυσῆα, φίλον πόσιν, ὄφρα οἱ ὕπνον
ἠδὺν ἐπὶ βλεφάροισι βάλε γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη.

Then she wept for Odysseus, her dear husband, until grey-eyed
Athena cast sweet sleep upon her eyelids.

5) Penelope's "frozen grief" thaws (*Od.* 19.204-209)

τῆς δ' ἄρ' ἀκουούσης ῥέε δάκρυα, τήκετο δὲ χρῶς.
ὥς δὲ χιὼν κατατήκετ' ἐν ἀκροπόλοισιν ὄρεσσιν, (205)
ἦν τ' εὐρος κατέτηξεν, ἐπὶν ζέφυρος καταχεύη,
τηκομένης δ' ἄρα τῆς ποταμοὶ πλήθουσι ῥέοντες·
ὥς τῆς τήκετο καλὰ παρήϊα δάκρυ χεούσης,
κλαιούσης ἐὼν ἄνδρα, παρήμενον.

As she listened, her tears flowed, and her face melted.
As snow melts on the high peaks of mountains,
snow that the East wind thaws when the West wind pours it down,
and while it melts, the rivers are full with flowing water,
so her lovely cheeks melted with tears pouring down,
as she cried for her husband, although he sat beside her.

6) Penelope's resilience (*Od.* 19.576-581, cf. 21.74-79)

“νῦν δὲ μνηστήρεσσιν ἄεθλον τοῦτον ἐφήσω·
ὃς δὲ κε ῥηίτατ' ἐντανύσῃ βιὸν ἐν παλάμῃσι
καὶ διοϊστεύσῃ πελέκεων δυοκαίδεκα πάντων,
τῷ κεν ἄμ' ἐσποίμην, νοσφισσαμένη τόδε δῶμα (580)
κουρίδιον, μάλα καλόν, ἐνίπλειον βιότοιο,
τοῦ ποτε μεμνήσεσθαι οἴομαι ἐν περ ὄνειρῳ.”

“But now I will set this contest for the suitors:
whoever most easily strings the bow in his hands
and shoots an arrow through all twelve axes,
him I would follow, leaving behind the house
of my marriage, a house especially fine and filled with wealth,
which, I think, I will always remember, even in my dreams.”

7) Penelope's conflicting emotions (*Od.* 20.79-82)

“ὥς ἔμ' αἰστώσειαν Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχοντες,
ἢ μ' ἐϋπλόκαμος βάλοι Ἄρτεμις, ὄφρ' **Ὀδυσῆα** (80)
ὀσσομένη καὶ γαίαν ὑπο στυγερὴν ἀφικοίμην,
μηδὲ τι χεῖρονος ἀνδρὸς ἐϋφραίνοιμι νόημα.”

So may those who dwell on Olympus make me disappear,
or may Artemis with the beautiful hair shoot me, so that
with Odysseus in my mind's eye I may arrive beneath the hateful earth,
and may never delight the mind of a man worse than him.

8) Penelope fetches the bow (*Od.* 21.42-50, 67)

ἦ δ' ὅτε δὴ θάλαμον τὸν ἀφίκετο διὰ γυναικῶν
οὐδὸν τε δρυῖνον προσεβήσετο, τὸν ποτε τέκτων
ξέσσειν ἐπισταμένως καὶ ἐπὶ στάθμην ἴθυνεν,
ἐν δὲ σταθμοῦς ἄρσε, θύρας δ' ἐπέθηκε φαεινάς, (45)
αὐτίκ' ἄρ' ἢ γ' ἰμάντα **θοῶς** ἀπέλυσε κορώνης,
ἐν δὲ κληῖδ' ἤγε, θυρέων δ' ἀνέκοπτεν ὀχῆας
ἄντα τιτυσκομένη. τὰ δ' ἀνέβραχεν ἠύτε ταῦρος
βοσκόμενος λειμῶνι· τόσ' ἔβραχε καλὰ θύρετρα
πληγέντα κληῖδι, πετάσθησαν δέ οἱ **ῶκα**.
... **αὐτίκα** δὲ μνηστήρσι μετήυδα καὶ φάτο μῦθον.

When she, dazzling among women, came to the storeroom,
and stepped upon the threshold of oak, which once upon a time
a carpenter had skillfully planed and trued to the line,
and fitted door-posts on it, and set bright doors on them,
immediately, behold!, she **quickly** loosed the strap from the hook,
and thrust in the key, and **with true aim** shot back the bolts
of the door. And as a bull bellows when grazing in a meadow,
so bellowed the beautiful doors when struck with the key,
and they **quickly** flew open before her.
... and **immediately** she spoke among the suitors and made this speech.

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