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 ἵδε Τηλέμαχος θεοειδὴς· ἢτοι γὰρ ἐν μνηστήριοι φίλον τετιμένος ἦτοι, ὀσόμενος πατέρ’ ἐσθλὸν ἐν φρεσίν, εἰ ποθὲν ἐλθὼν μνηστήριον τῶν μὲν σκέδασιν κατὰ δόματα θείη, τιμήν δ’ αὐτὸς ἔχοι καὶ κτίμασιν οἰσὶν 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’ ἀοιδής λυγρῆς, ἢ τέ μοι ἀιτείν ἐνι στήθεσι φίλον κῆν τείρει, ἐπεὶ με μάλλον καθίκετο πένθος ἄλαστον. τοίνυν γὰρ κεφαλῆν ποθεῖν μεμνημένη αἰτεὶ ἀνδρός, τοῦ κλέος εὐφύς καθ’ Ἑλλάδα καὶ μέσον Ἀργος.”

“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.”


κλαῖεν ἔπειτ’ Ὄδυσση, φίλον πόσιν, ὥρα οἱ ὑπνον ἢδυν ἐπὶ βλεφάροις βάλε γλαυκώπις 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)

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)

“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 twelves 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)

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)

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.
Selected Bibliography


