

Penelope's Love

I would like to give a talk on how Penelope cleverly expresses her affection for Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, while he is still in disguise. She recognizes him, lets him know that she still loves him, and hints that she may not have been perfectly faithful. All this has to be done in secret and subtle ways so that the suitors don't suspect their connection. I will discuss two scenes in Books 18 and 19.

Right after Odysseus has defeated the beggar Iros (18.125 ff.), he gives a short lecture to one of the young suitors, reminding him that life is hard and men are frail. The gods do what they want, he says; we just have to endure. No man should flout the will of the gods, but should take, in silence, whatever they give.

Penelope hears this conversation up in her room. (We know she can hear what goes on in the hall because in one of the opening scenes she complains about the music.) She has not yet met Odysseus, but who could have said those words? Neither the suitors, the servants, nor her son. That philosophical speech on the essence of life can only have come from one man: her wise and eloquent husband.

She immediately tells her maids that, for the first time ever, she wants to go down and present herself to the suitors. They suggest that she bathe and put on her best makeup, but she says she wants to dress simply (befitting a wife).

When she comes down, she criticizes Eurymachus, the suitor she is most likely to marry, telling him, in response to his praise of her beauty, that she is no longer beautiful. She says that the immortal gods took away all her beauty that day when her husband left for Troy (18. 251-253). She is telling Odysseus, as he sits right there, that he, alone, made her feel beautiful. She

then goes on to quote his final words to her, word for word, from 20 years ago. She has kept him in her heart.

A second passage concerns her fidelity. Near the end of their quiet talk the night before the bow contest (19. 535 ff.), Penelope tells Odysseus about a dream she had. An eagle came down, she says, and killed all her geese, and she cried and cried. Then the eagle told her that he was her husband who had come to kill the suitors. Penelope asks Odysseus, in disguise, to interpret what this means. He replies that it simply means Odysseus will return and kill the suitors.

Isn't this a bit odd? Why does she ask him to interpret this dream? The eagle tells her exactly what it means. And why is she telling this supposed stranger her dreams, anyway? Something else is going on.

This scene occurs just before she tells Odysseus about the bow contest which she is arranging for the next day; the contest that will enable him, if all goes well, to get the bow and use it against the suitors. Their fight will start tomorrow. On this night before she will be asking her husband to fight to the death for her, she might well want to be as truthful as she can be with him about just what he is fighting for; about who she is. Perhaps he only wants her if she has been 100% faithful.

She doesn't say anything definite, but raises the issue of her fidelity and asks him what he thinks about this; does he need to know more? That she cried and cried when the geese/suitors died (the Greek is quite specific) is an admission that she has had some kind of emotional connection with them. She is giving her husband the option of backing out now, while there is still time. She loves him enough to let him go if that is what he truly needs.

Odysseus replies simply that her husband will return and defeat the suitors. In other words, it doesn't matter what happened in the past; what matters now is what he and she will make of their lives from now on. He will be there.

Penelope and Odysseus cannot make open declarations of their love; that would be far too dangerous. But they show each other, slowly and carefully, what is in their hearts.