

The Odyssey

BOOK TWENTY-THREE

Odysseus and Penelope

[Eurycleia wakes up Penelope to tell her Odysseus has returned and killed the Suitors; Penelope refuses to believe the news; Penelope comes down and sits in the same room as Odysseus but doesn't recognize him; Telemachus criticizes his mother; Odysseus invites her to test him and discusses with Telemachus what their next step will be to deal with the aftermath of the killings; they organize a fake wedding dance to deceive anyone passing the house; Odysseus is given a bath, and Athena transforms his appearance; Penelope tells Eurycleia to set his old bed up for him outside the bedroom; Odysseus tells the story of the bed; Penelope acknowledges Odysseus and embraces him; Odysseus tells her of the ordeals yet to come, according to the prophecy of Teiresias; Penelope and Odysseus go to bed, make love, and then she hears the story of his adventures; in the morning Odysseus gets up, tells Penelope to stay in her upper rooms, puts on his armour, instructs Eumaeus and Philoetius to arm themselves; Athena leads them out of the city]

Old Eurycleia went up to an upstairs room,
laughing to herself, to inform her mistress
her beloved husband was inside the house.
Her knees moved quickly as her feet hurried on.
She stood beside her lady's head and spoke to her:
"Wake up, Penelope, my dear child,
so you yourself can see with your own eyes
what you've been wanting each and every day.
Odysseus has arrived. He may be late,
[10] but he's back in the house. And he's killed
those arrogant suitors who upset this home,
used up his goods, and victimized his son."

Wise Penelope then answered her:
"Dear nurse,
the gods have made you mad. They can do that—
turn even someone really sensible
into a fool and bring the feeble minded
to a path of fuller understanding.
They've injured you—your mind was sound before.
Why mock me, when my heart is full of grief,

[20] telling this mad tale, rousing me from sleep,
a sweet sleep binding me, shrouding my eyes?
I've not had a sleep like that since Odysseus
went off to look at wicked Ilion,
a place whose name no one should ever speak.
Come now, go back down to the women's hall.
Among my servants, if some other one
had come to tell me this, woken me up
when I was sleeping, I'd have sent her back
at once to the woman's quarters in disgrace.
[30] But I'll be good to you because you're old."

The dear nurse Eurycleia then said to her:
"But I'm not making fun of you, dear child.
It's true. Odysseus has returned. He's back,
here in the house, exactly as I said.
He's that stranger all the men dishonoured
in the hall. For some time Telemachus
knew he was at home, but he was careful
to conceal his father's plans, until the time
he could pay back those overbearing men
for their forceful oppression."

[40] Eurycleia spoke.
Penelope rejoiced. She jumped up out of bed,
hugged the old woman, tears falling from her eyelids,
then she spoke to her—her words had wings:
"Come now,
dear nurse, tell me the truth. If he's really here,
back home as you claim, then how could he
turn his hands against those shameless suitors?
He was alone, and in this house those men
were always in a group."

Her dear nurse Eurycleia
then answered her:
"I didn't see or hear about it.

[50] I only heard the groans of men being killed.

We sat in our well-built women's quarters,
in a corner, terrified. Close-fitting doors
kept us in there, until Telemachus,
your son, called me from the room. His father
had sent him there to summon me. And then,
I found Odysseus standing with the bodies—
dead men on the hard earth all around him,
lying on each other, a heart-warming sight—
and he was there, covered with blood and gore,

[60] just like a lion. Now all those bodies

have been piled up at the courtyard gates,
and he's purging his fair home with sulphur.
He's kindled a great fire. He sent me out
to summon you. Now, come along with me,
so you two can be happy in your hearts.
You've been through so much misfortune, and now
what you've been looking forward to so long
has come about at last. He's come himself,
to his own hearth while still alive—he's found

[70] you and your son inside these halls and taken
his revenge on all suitors in his home,
men who acted harmfully against him."

Wise Penelope then answered Eurycleia:

"Dear nurse, don't laugh at them and boast too much.

You know how his appearance in the hall
would please everyone, especially me
and the son born from the two of us.

But this story can't be true, not the way
you've told it. One of the immortal gods

[80] has killed the noble suitors out of rage
at their heart-rending pride and wicked acts.

There was no man on this earth they honoured,
bad or good, when he came into their group.

They've met disaster through their foolishness.

But in some place far away Odysseus

has forfeited his journey to Achaea,
and he himself is lost.”

Dear nurse Eurycleia

then answered her:

“My child, what kind of speech has slipped
the barrier of your teeth, when you declared
[90] your husband won’t get home—he’s in the house,
at his own hearth. Your heart just has no trust.
But come on, I’ll tell you something else—
it’s a clear proof—that scar a boar gave him
some time ago with its white tusk. I saw it.
I washed it clean. I was going to tell you,
but his hand gripped me by the throat—his heart
in its great subtlety wouldn’t let me speak.
But come with me. I’ll stake my life on it.
If I’ve deceived you, then you can kill me
and choose a painful death.”

[100] Wise Penelope

then answered her:

“Dear nurse, you find it hard
to grasp the plans of the eternal gods,
even though you’re really shrewd. But let’s go
to my son, so I can see the suitors
now they’re dead—and the man who killed them.”

Penelope spoke, then went down from the upper room,
her heart turning over many things—Should she
keep her distance and question her dear husband,
or should she come up to him, hold his head and hands,
[110] and kiss them? Crossing the stone threshold, she went in
and sat down in the firelight opposite Odysseus,
beside the further wall. He was sitting there
by a tall pillar, looking at the ground, waiting
to learn if his noble wife would speak to him
when her own eyes caught sight of him. She sat there

a long time in silence. Amazement came in her heart—
sometimes her eyes gazed at him full in the face,
but other times she failed to recognize him,
he had such shabby clothing covering his body.

[120] Telemachus spoke up, addressing a rebuke
directly to her:

“Mother, you’re a cruel woman,
with an unfeeling heart. Why turn aside
from my father in this way? Why not sit
over there, close to him, ask him questions?
No other woman’s heart would be so hard
to make her keep her distance from a husband
who’s come home to her in his native land
in the twentieth year, after going through
so many harsh ordeals. That heart of yours
is always harder than a stone.”

[130] Wise Penelope

then answered him:

“My child, inside my chest
my heart is quite amazed. I cannot speak
or ask questions, or look directly at him.
If indeed it’s true he is Odysseus
and is home again, surely the two of us
have more certain ways to know each other.
We have signs only we two understand.
Other people will not recognize them.”

As she spoke, lord Odysseus, who’d been through so much,

[140] smiled and immediately spoke to Telemachus—
his words had wings:

“Telemachus, let your mother
test me in these halls. She will soon possess
more certain knowledge. Right now I’m filthy,
with disgusting clothing on my body.
That’s why she rejects me and will not say
I am Odysseus. But we need to think

how this matter can best resolve itself.
Anyone who murders just one person
in the district, even when the dead man
[150] does not leave many to avenge him later,
goes into exile, leaving his relatives
and his native land. But we have slaughtered
the city's main defence, the best by far
of the young men in Ithaca. I think
you should consider what that means."

Shrewd Telemachus then answered him and said:
"Surely you must look into this yourself,
dear father. For among all men, they say,
your planning is the best—of mortal men
[160] no one can rival you. And as for us,
we're keen to follow you, and I don't think
we'll lack the bravery to match our strength."

Resourceful Odysseus said this in reply:
"All right, I'll say what seems to me the best.
First of all, take a bath. Put tunics on.
Next, tell the female servants in the hall
to change their clothing. After that, we'll let
the holy minstrel, with his clear-toned lyre,
lead us in playful dancing, so anyone
[170] who hears us from outside—someone walking
down the road or those who live close by—
will say it is a wedding. In that way,
the wide rumour of the suitors' murder
will not spread too soon down in the city,
before we go out to our forest lands.
There later on we'll think of our next move,
whatever the Olympian god suggests."

They listened eagerly to what Odysseus said
and were persuaded. So first of all they bathed
[180] and put on tunics. The women got dressed up.

Then the godlike singer took his hollow lyre
and encouraged their desire for lovely songs
and noble dancing. The whole great house resounded
to the steps of men celebrating a good time
with women wearing lovely gowns. So any man
who listened in as he walked past outside the house
might offer a remark like this:

“It seems that someone
has married the queen with all those suitors.
A heartless woman. She lacked the courage
[190] to maintain her wedded husband’s home
and persevere till he arrived back home.”

That’s what someone would’ve said—he’d never know
what was going on. Meanwhile, Eurynome,
the housekeeper, gave brave Odysseus a bath,
rubbed him with oil, and put a tunic on him,
a fine cloak, as well. Athena poured beauty on him,
large amounts to make him taller, more robust
to look at, and on his head she made his hair
flow in curls resembling a hyacinth in bloom.

[200] Just as a man sets a layer of gold on silver,
a skillful artisan whom Pallas Athena
and Hephaestus have taught all sorts of crafts,
so he produces marvelous work, that’s how Athena
poured grace onto his head and shoulders, as he came
out of his bath, looking like the immortal gods.
He sat back down in the chair from which he’d risen,
opposite his wife, and said to her:

“Strange lady,
to you those who live on Mount Olympus
have given, more so than to other women,
[210] an unfeeling heart. No other woman
would harden herself and keep her distance
from her husband, who, in the twentieth year,
came back to her in his own native land,
after going through so much misfortune.

So come, nurse, spread out a bed for me,
so I can lie down by myself. The heart
inside her breast is made of iron.”

Wise Penelope then answered him:

“Strange man,
I am not making too much of myself,
[220] or ignoring you. Nor is it the case
that I’m particularly offended.
I know well the sort of man you were
when you left Ithaca in your long-oared ship.
So come, Eurycleia, set up for him
outside the well-built bedroom that strong bed
he made himself. Put that sturdy bedstead
out there for him and throw some bedding on,
fleeces, cloaks, and shining coverlets.”

Penelope said this to test her husband.

[230] But Odysseus, angry at his true-hearted wife,
spoke out:

“Woman, those words you’ve just uttered
are very painful. Who’s shifted my bed
to some other place? That would be difficult,
even for someone really skilled, unless
a god came down in person—for he could,
if he wished, set it elsewhere easily.
But among men there is no one living,
no matter how much energy he has,
who would find it easy to shift that bed.

[240] For built into the well-constructed bedstead
is a great symbol which I made myself
with no one else. A long-leaved olive bush
was growing in the yard. It was in bloom
and flourishing—it looked like a pillar.
I built my bedroom round this olive bush,
till I had finished it with well-set stones.
I put a good roof over it, then added

closely fitted jointed doors. After that,
I cut back the foliage, by removing
[250] branches from the long-leaved olive bush.
I trimmed the trunk off, upward from the root,
cutting it skillfully and well with bronze,
so it followed a straight line. Once I'd made
the bedpost, I used an augur to bore out
the entire piece. That was how I started.
Then I carved out my bed, till I was done.
In it I set an inlay made of gold,
silver, and ivory, and then across it
I stretched a bright purple thong of ox-hide.
[260] And that's the symbol I describe for you.
But, lady, I don't know if that bed of mine
is still in place or if some other man
has cut that olive tree down at its base
and set the bed up in a different spot."

Odysseus spoke, and sitting there, Penelope
went weak at the knees, and her heart grew soft.
For she recognized that it was true—that symbol
Odysseus had described to her. Eyes full of tears,
she ran to him, threw her arms around his neck,
kissed his head, and said:
[270] "Don't be angry, Odysseus,
not with me. In all other matters
you've been the cleverest of men. The gods
have brought us sorrows—they were not willing
the two of us should stay beside each other
to enjoy our youth and reach together
the threshold of old age. Now's not the time
to rage at me, resenting what I've done
because I didn't welcome you this way
when I first saw you. But in my dear breast
[280] my heart was always fearful, just in case
some other man would come and trick me
with his stories. For there are many men

who dream up wicked schemes. Argive Helen,
a child of Zeus, would never have had sex
with a man who came from somewhere else,
if she'd known Achaea's warrior sons
would bring her back to her dear native land.
And some god drove her to that shameful act.
Not till that time did she start harbouring
[290] within her heart the disastrous folly
which made sorrow come to us as well.
But now you've mentioned that clear symbol,
our bed, which no one else has ever seen,
other than the two of us, you and me,
and a single servant woman, Actoris,
whom my father gave me when I came here.
For both of us she kept watch at the doors
of our strong bedroom. You've now won my heart,
though it's been truly stubborn."

Penelope spoke,
[300] and stirred in him an even more intense desire
to weep. As he held his loyal and loving wife,
he cried. Just as it's a welcome sight for swimmers
when land appears, men whose well-constructed ship
Poseidon has demolished on the sea, as winds
and surging waves were driving it, and a few men
have swum to shore, escaping the grey sea,
their bodies thickly caked with brine, and they climb
gladly up on land, evading that disaster,
that how Penelope rejoiced to see her husband.
[310] She simply couldn't stop her white arms holding him
around the neck. And rose-fingered early Dawn
would've appeared with them still weeping there,
if goddess Athena with the gleaming eyes,
had not thought of something else—she prolonged
the lengthy night as it came to an end, keeping
Dawn and her golden throne waiting by Ocean's stream—
she would not let her harness her swift horses,

who carry light to men, Lampros and Phaeton,
the colts who bring on Dawn.

Resourceful Odysseus
then said to his wife:

[320] “Lady, we’ve not yet come
to the end of all our trials. Countless tasks
must still be carried out in days to come,
plenty of hard work I have to finish.
That’s what the spirit of Teiresias
prophesied to me when I descended
inside Hades’ house to ask some questions
concerning our return, my companions
and myself. But come, wife, let’s go to bed,
so we can lie down and enjoy sweet sleep.”

Wise Penelope then answered him:

[330] “You’ll have a bed
when your heart so desires, for the gods
have seen to it that you’ve returned back here
to your well-built home and native land.
But since you’ve thought of it and some god
has set it in your heart, come and tell me
of this trial. For I think I’ll hear of it
in future, so to learn of it right now
won’t make things any worse.”

Resourceful Odysseus
then answered her and said:
“Strange lady,

[340] why urge me so eagerly to tell you?
All right, I’ll say it, and I’ll hide nothing.
But your heart will not find it delightful.
I myself get no enjoyment from it.
Teiresias ordered me to journey out
to many human cities, carrying
in my hands a well-made oar, till I reached
a people who know nothing of the sea,

who don't put salt on any food they eat,
and have no knowledge of ships painted red
[350] or well-made oars that serve those ships as wings.

He told me a sure sign I won't conceal—
when someone else runs into me and says
I've got a shovel used for winnowing
on my broad shoulders, he told me to set it
in the ground there, make rich sacrifice
to lord Poseidon with a ram, a bull,
and a boar that breeds with sows, then leave,
go home, and there make sacred offerings
to immortal gods who hold wide heaven,
[360] all of them in order. My death will come
far from the sea, such a gentle passing,
when I'm bowed down with a ripe old age,
with my people prospering around me.
He said all this would happen to me."

Wise Penelope then said to him:
"If it's true the gods
are going to bring you a happier old age,
there's hope you'll have relief from trouble."

While they went on talking to each other in this way,
Eurynome and the nurse prepared the bed
[370] with soft coverlets, by light from flaming torches.
Once they'd quickly covered up the sturdy bed,
the old nurse went back to her room to rest,
and the bedroom servant, Eurynome, led them
on their way to bed, a torch gripped in her hands.
When she'd brought them to the room, then she returned.
Odysseus and Penelope approached with joy
the place where their bed stood from earlier days.
Telemachus, Philoetius, and Eumaeus
stopped their dancing feet, made the women stop as well,
[380] and then lay down in the shadowy hall to sleep.
Odysseus and Penelope, once they'd had the joy

of making love, then entertained each other
telling stories, in mutual conversation.
The lovely lady talked of all she'd been through
in the house, looking at that destructive group,
the suitors, who, because of her, had butchered
so many cattle and fat sheep and drained from jars
so much wine. Odysseus, born from Zeus, then told
all the troubles he'd brought down on men, all the grief
[390] he'd had to work through on his own. Penelope
was happy listening, and sleep did not flow down
across her eyelids until he'd told it all.
He began by telling how he first destroyed
the Cicones, and then came to the fertile land
of Lotus-eating men, and all the Cyclops did—
and how he forced him to pay the penalty
for his brave comrades eaten by the Cyclops—
then how he came to Aeolus, who'd taken him in
quite willingly and sent him on his way.
[400] But it was not yet his destiny to reach
his dear native land. Instead, storm winds once more
caught him, drove him across the fish-filled seas,
for all his weary groans. He told how he next came
to Telepylos where the Laestrygonians live,
men who destroyed his ships and well-armed comrades,
all of them, and how Odysseus was the only one
to escape in his black ship.¹ He went on to talk
of Circe's devious resourcefulness and how
in his ship with many oars he'd then gone down
[410] to Hades' murky home in order to consult
the spirit of Teiresias of Thebes and seen
all his companions and his mother, who bore him
and raised him as a child, and how he'd listened to
the Sirens' voices, in their never-ending song,
then come to the Wandering Rocks, dread Charybdis,
and to Scylla, whom men have never yet escaped
without being harmed, how his comrades slaughtered
the oxen of sun god Helios, how his ship

was shattered by a flaming lightning bolt thrown down
[420] from high-thundering Zeus, how his fine comrades perished,
all at once, while he alone escaped from fate,
how he reached the nymph Calypso on her island,
Ogygia, how she kept him in her hollow caves,
longing for him to be her husband, nurturing him
and telling him she'd make him an immortal
who through all his days would not get any older,
but she could not convince the heart within his chest,
how, after suffering a great deal, he then had come
to the Phaeacians, who greatly honoured him,
[430] as if he were a god, and sent him in a ship
to his dear native land, after offering gifts
of bronze and gold and rich supplies of clothing.
He stopped his story at that point, when sweet sleep,
which makes men's limbs relax, came over him,
and eased disturbing worries he had in his heart.
Then Athena, goddess with the gleaming eyes,
came up with something else. When she thought Odysseus
had had his heart's fill of pleasure with his wife and slept,
from Ocean she quickly stirred up early Dawn
[440] on her golden throne to bring her light to men.
Odysseus rose from his soft bed and told his wife:
"Lady, the two of us by now have had
sufficient trouble—you here lamenting
my hazardous return, while, in my case,
Zeus and the other gods kept me tied up
far from my native land, in great distress,
for all my eagerness to get back home.
Now that we've come back to the bed we love,
you should tend to our wealth inside the house.
[450] As for the flocks those arrogant suitors stole,
I'll seize many beasts as plunder on my own,
and Achaeans will give others, till they fill up
each and every pen. Now I'm going to go
out to my forest lands, and there I'll see
my noble father, who on my behalf

has suffered such anxiety. Lady,
since I know how intelligent you are,
I'm asking you to follow these instructions—
once sunrise comes, the story will be out
[460] about the suitors slaughtered in our home.
So you should go up to your upper room
with your female attendants. Then sit there.
Don't look in on anyone or ask questions.”

Once he'd said this, he put his splendid armour on,
around his shoulders, and roused Telemachus,
Philoetius, and Eumaeus, and told them all
to get weapons in their hands to fight a war.
They did not disobey, but dressed themselves in bronze,
opened the doors, and went outside, with Odysseus
[470] in the lead. By now light was shining on the ground,
but Athena kept them hidden by the night,
as she led them quickly from the city.