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Romance and Reunion: Odysseus and Penélopê in *The Odyssey*

by Tracy Lesan

Homer's *Odyssey* is an epic that has been enjoyed throughout the centuries and is one of the greatest literary classics. A major reason for its popularity is the variety of levels from which *The Odyssey* may be read. First, it may be read as a continuation and completion of *The Iliad*, for in the end we witness the reconciliation of two major characters of *The Iliad*, Akhilleus [Achilles] and Agamemnon, as they meet in death in the underworld. Also, *The Odyssey* closes with an account of Akhilleus's funeral, just as *The Iliad* closed with an account of Hektor's funeral. Second, *The Odyssey* may be read strictly as a first-rate adventure story. We follow Odysseus as he encounters magical monsters such as Kyklopes [Cyclops], Skylla, Kharybdis, and the singing Seirênês and goddesses such as the evil Kirkê [Circe] and the enchanting Kalypso. In addition, we witness in the final chapters Odysseus's destruction of the wicked suitors who had made a mockery of his grand estate for years in an attempt to steal his faithful wife, Penélopê. Third, *The Odyssey*, like *The Iliad*, gives modern readers a rare glimpse of Homer's ancient Greece in the 7th and 8th centuries B.C. We learn about these people's relationships, their gods, their emotions, and their morals. Homer's works are a binding force between life and humanity then and now.

Reading *The Odyssey* on any one of these levels alone, either as a sequel to *The Iliad*, as a thrilling adventure story, or as an account of ancient peoples, is more than sufficient to justify *The Odyssey* as a classical literary work. Still, there is yet another dimension to *The Odyssey* which attracts readers more than any other dimension and makes reading *The Odyssey* an unforgettable experience for people of all ages. This special dimension is the romance of Odysseus and Penélopê. There is much excitement and adventure which make *The Odyssey* interesting and appealing, but when we look more closely we can see that *The Odyssey* is more than just an adventure. *The Odyssey* is, above all, an inspiring love story. The romance of Odysseus and Penélopê is the binding force of *The Odyssey*.

As with any love story, *The Odyssey* has a conflict which is the foundation for the action that occurs. In the beginning we discover that

Odysseus has been away from his homeland for twenty years. In his absence, numerous greedy suitors have been living off the wealth and glory of his estate competing for his beautiful wife, Penélopê. Odysseus's family and friends hope that one day he will return and win back his home from the suitors, but that hope is shallow. Since Odysseus has been gone so long, they can only assume that he is dead. Odysseus's absence is the central crisis in *The Odyssey*. The action in this love story may be broken into three major parts: 1) Penélopê and her life during Odysseus's absence, 2) Odysseus and his test, and 3) the reunion of Odysseus and Penélopê.

While the main character of *The Odyssey* is usually considered to be Odysseus, we must not overlook the importance of Penélopê, for she, more than anyone else, is the driving force behind Odysseus's return. Throughout *The Odyssey* we hardly cease to be amazed or awed by Penélopê. Penélopê never has to fight with monsters or wrathful gods as Odysseus does, but in many ways the struggles that she encounters during Odysseus's absence are even greater than those faced by Odysseus.

One trait for which Penélopê deserves admiration is her ability to cope with being on her own. In addition to being deprived of the love and companionship of her husband when Odysseus goes to war, she is also faced with the burdensome tasks of raising a young boy and managing a large estate. This ordeal would be difficult if only for a few months or one year, but for Penélopê the ordeal lasts twenty years. We can only imagine how sad and distraught she must have felt when months and years passed without any word from her husband. After so many years the only realistic conclusion is that Odysseus has died in battle or that he is trapped somewhere far away, never to return. Though *The Odyssey* gives no real account of the life on the estate during Odysseus's absence, we can see that Penélopê has somehow been able to hold everything together—raise their son as well as manage the estate—in spite of the pain and heartache. Penélopê is a strong woman.

A second quality for which Penélopê may be admired is her wisdom and shrewdness in dealing with the suitors. That shrewdness is exemplified by the famous account of Penélopê and her loom, as she is able to deceive the suitors for three years and delay any decision regarding marriage. It is difficult to believe that she could keep the deception going for three years, but the amazing part is that she probably would have been able to continue the deception even longer had not the secret been betrayed by one of her disloyal maids. After that, Penélopê is still able to delay the suitors with guile and false promises. Even Odysseus, a master of guile and deception, is amused when she

charms gifts out of the suitors with promises of marriage that she does not intend to keep (345). It comes as little surprise that she soon develops the reputation among the suitors as having “a clever mind; / so cunning— history cannot show the like / among the ringleted ladies of Akhaia” (22).

Despite her great strength and ability to cope, her intense longing for Odysseus and hatred for the suitors eventually begin to take their toll. There are at least ten accounts throughout *The Odyssey* of Penélopê weeping for Odysseus:

And now the pain around her heart benumbed her;

*she sank down . . .
wailing . . .*

until at last she broke out through her tears:

*“Dearest companions, what has Zeus given me?
Pain—more pain than any living woman.
My lord, my lion heart, gone, long ago—
the bravest man, and best, of the Danaans”*

(74)

When Odysseus meets his mother in the underworld, he is told about Penélopê: “Still with her child indeed she is, poor heart, / . . . Forlorn her nights / and days go by, her life used up in weeping” (190-191). Eumaios, the swineherd, informs the disguised Odysseus:

*Every time some traveller comes ashore
he has to tell my mistress his pretty tale,
and she receives him kindly, questions him,
remembering her prince, while the tears run
down her cheeks . . .*

(251)

Penélopê asks of her son:

*what am I to do now? Return alone
and lie again on my forsaken bed—
sodden how often with my weeping
since that day when Odysseus put to sea*

(312)

The fact that she still mourns for Odysseus after twenty years shows well her undying and seemingly immeasurable love for him.

Another example of her growing despair is evident in her conversation with the disguised Odysseus:

*I have no strength left to evade a marriage,
cannot find any further way; my parents*

*urge it upon me, and my son
will not stand by while they [the suitors] eat up
his property. (358)*

In the following passage she is so distraught that she even prays for death:

*Ah, soft
that drowse I lay embraced in, pain forgot!
If only Artemis . . . would give me
death as mild, and soon! No heart-ache more,
no wearing out my lifetime with desire
and sorrow, mindful of my lord, good man
in all ways that he was, best of the Akhaians!
(342)*

Penélopê is an amazing woman and a great heroine. It would be so easy for Penélopê to relent and give in to the suitors' wishes, but her love for Odysseus has not dimmed even after twenty years, and she still clings to the faint hope that he will one day return. She is strong and is able to keep her life in order in spite of all her difficulties. At the same time she experiences periods of vulnerability and weakness, two very natural results of her ordeal. This vulnerability makes her seem more human and even more appealing. As readers we empathize with Penélopê and feel both the heartache she experiences from the absence of her lord Odysseus as well as the intense hatred she has for the suitors; we weep as she weeps. We want to comfort her and somehow ease her sorrow, perhaps tell her that Odysseus is alive and will soon be home to save her, but we cannot. She must continue to be strong and endure more hardships before she can be together with Odysseus.

Just as Penélopê suffers during Odysseus's absence, so does Odysseus suffer. After seven years with Kalypso and twenty years away from Penélopê, Odysseus still grieves as shown by these passages:

*Odysseus,
who sat apart, as a thousand times before,
and racked his own heart growing, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea. (83)*

*The sweet days of his life time
were running out in anguish over his exile. (85)*

It is touching to see Odysseus, the great and powerful man that he is, so overcome with sadness and longing that he cries. It is obvious that Odysseus and Penélopê still love and desire each other, but their love is a tragic one because they have been parted so long. At last, Kalypso

tells Odysseus he is free to leave if he chooses, but she also tries to entice him to stay:

*versatile Odysseus,
after these years with me, you still desire
your own home? . . .
If you could see it all, before you go—
all the adversity you face at sea—
you would stay here, . . . and be
immortal—though you wanted her forever,
that bride for whom you pine each day.
Can I be less desirable than she is?
Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals
compare with goddesses in grace and form?*
(87)

In Odysseus's simple response, we sense the magnitude of his love for Penélopê:

*My lady goddess, here is no cause for anger.
My quiet Penélopê . . .
would seem a shade before your majesty,
death and old age being unknown to you,
while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day
I long for home
If any god has marked me out again
for shipwreck, my tough heart can undergo it.
. . . Let the trial come.*
(87)

How tempting it must have been to remain with the enchanting goddess and be immortal. This temptation would likely be too strong to resist for many men, but not for Odysseus. Penélopê is special and more dear to Odysseus than anything else, even eternal life. Perhaps Odysseus puts it best when he says, "Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass / in his home . . . In far lands / he shall not, though he find a house of gold" (146).

Odysseus knows his journey home will be treacherous, but the opportunity to finally be together with Penélopê is worth any risk. If not for Penélopê, he would never take that risk. Odysseus does, indeed, encounter many dangers and obstacles during his travel home, but we find that his difficulties do not end there. Once Odysseus reaches his homeland, Athena gives him one last major test; she tells Odysseus to keep his identity a secret at all costs:

*Patience, iron patience, you must show;
so give it out to neither man nor woman
that you are back from wandering. Be silent
under all injuries, even blows from men.*
(240)

The hardest part is now beginning for Odysseus. Not only must he keep his identity secret to everyone (except to his son) and destroy all the suitors, he must also not tell Penélopê. He has endured numerous hardships and is finally home with his loving Penélopê, but he is forbidden to reveal himself even to her. This is not an easy test.

One thing that surely creates difficulty for Odysseus is Penélopê's stunning beauty and grace. Nowhere could that beauty be described any better than it is when Penélopê appears before the suitors and the disguised Odysseus:

*the goddess [Athena]
endowed her with immortal grace to hold
the eyes of the Akhaians. With ambrosia
she bathed her cheeks and throat and smoothed her
brow—*

. . . .
*Grandeur she gave her, too, in height and form,
and made her whiter than carved ivory.*

. . . .
this beautiful lady went before the suitors.

. . . .
she paused, her shining veil across her cheek,

. . . .
*and in that instant weakness took those men
in the knee joints, their hearts grew faint with
lust;*

not one but swore to god to lie beside her.
(342)

Her appearance obviously has a dramatic effect on the suitors, but that effect must be ten-fold in its severity for Odysseus. This vision of Penélopê would likely be enough to make the best laid plans (not to mention patience) of most men go awry, but again the temptation is somehow not enough to sway Odysseus.

At this point, we might think that Odysseus would be unable to resist any more temptation, but we soon find that his test is not yet complete. Though it is no doubt very difficult for Odysseus to see his lovely Penélopê every day from a distance and keep his secret from her, that difficulty is probably trifling compared to what he must endure when he finally meets Penélopê face-to-face. We can barely imagine how agonizing and tormenting it must be for Odysseus to talk with Penélopê and be alone with her at last after twenty years and still not reveal himself to her. The stirring passage that follows describes the agony and torment both lovers feel:

*Now all these lies he made appear so truthful
she wept as she sat listening. The skin*

*of her pale face grew moist the way pure snow
softens and glistens on the mountains . . .
and, as the snow melts, mountain streams run full:
so her white cheeks were wetted by these tears
shed for her lord—and he close by her side.
Imagine how his heart ached for his lady,
his wife in tears; and yet he never blinked;
his eyes might have been made of horn or iron
for all that she could see. He had this trick—
wept, if he willed to, inwardly.*

(360)

Both lovers are in great pain: Penélopê, because she does not know the fate of her husband, and Odysseus, because he is with her but is forbidden to reveal himself. As readers, we ache right along with them and are left wondering if they will ever again find peace and happiness. We want to shake Odysseus and make him tell Penélopê everything so they need not endure more pain, but we cannot. We know that Odysseus must find a way to destroy the suitors and win back his estate from them before he and Penélopê can be together. Finally Odysseus begins the destruction by killing the most despicable suitor of all, Antiñoös:

*He [Odysseus] drew to his fist the cruel head of
an arrow for Antiñoös
just as the young man leaned to lift his beautiful drinking cup,*

*. . . .
the wine was even at his lips
Odysseus' arrow hit him under the chin
and punched up to the feathers through his throat.*

*Backward and down he went, letting the winecup
fall
from his shocked hand. Like pipes his nostrils
jetted
crimson runnels, a river of mortal red,
and one last kick upset his table
knocking the bread and meat to soak in dusty
blood.*

(409)

Odysseus takes sweet revenge on the suitors not only for himself and Penélopê, but for us as well. The exquisitely detailed description of Antiñoös's death appeases our intense hatred for the suitors—almost as if we had fired the arrow ourselves. The suitors represent the only barrier separating Odysseus and Penélopê, and with just one arrow Odysseus pierces that barrier. Once Odysseus begins the long-awaited destruction, nothing will stop him. The full force of his wrath is now unleashed:

*You yellow dogs, you thought I'd never make it
home from the land of Troy. You took my house to
plunder,
. . . You dared
bid for my wife while I was still alive.
.
contempt for what men say of you hereafter.
Your last hour has come. You die in blood.*
(410)

Odysseus and his small group defeat over one hundred suitors and win back the estate. Now Odysseus's test is complete, and he cleans the house in preparation for his meeting with Penélopê.

All during the fight Penélopê has been upstairs sleeping, so she knows nothing about Odysseus's return. When the nurse first tells her that Odysseus has come and killed all the suitors, Penélopê thinks it is all a cruel joke and will not leave. The nurse keeps insisting, however, that Penélopê come and meet Odysseus until Penélopê eventually relents. As Penélopê goes downstairs, she debates inwardly whether she should keep her distance and ask questions, or run up to him and kiss him. Then she sees Odysseus undisguised for the first time:

*There
leaning against a pillar, sat the man
and never lifted up his eyes, but only waited
for what his wife would say when she had seen him.
And she, for a long time, sat deathly still
in wonderment—for sometimes as she gazed
she found him—yes, clearly—like her husband,
but sometimes blood and rags were all she saw.*
(432)

She cannot believe that after twenty years Odysseus has truly come home, and she just stands there, unmoving. Telerákhos scolds her and says her heart is as "hard as flint" (432). Like Telerákhos, we want Penélopê to rush immediately into Odysseus's arms, but we cannot be too harsh on her for not doing so. In fact, her passive response is quite understandable; imposters have raised hopes many times in the past, and she does not want to be hurt again this time. She does say, however, that if the man is Odysseus, they will know each other through secret signs. Once Odysseus explains how he built their cherished bed over twenty years ago, something only he could have known, Penélopê is convinced that this is Odysseus. The pain, grief, and longing are now gone, and after twenty years they are finally together. Nowhere could there be a more emotional and moving reunion than this one of Odysseus and Penélopê, as depicted by the following passages:

her knees
 grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
 With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
 throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him

. . .

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
 of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
 his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,

. . .

and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her
 husband,
 her white arms round his pressed as though
 forever.

The rose Dawn might have found them weeping still
 had not grey-eyed Athena slowed the night

. . .

So they came
 into that bed so steadfast, loved of old,
 opening glad arms to one another.

. . .

"My lady,
 what ordeals have we not endured! . . .
 But now our life resumes:
 we've come together to our longed for bed."
 (435-440)

We have followed Odysseus and Penélopê in all their struggles while they are apart; we have shared their periods of intense grief and longing, and now we share their rejoicing as well as we leave them united, once again, in love. We could ask for no better ending to this love story.

Why then, we might ask, is there one more book after this? Why does *The Odyssey* not end with the two lovers together? We can only speculate on the answers to these questions. It is possible that Homer simply lost the focus of his work. The last book is inconsistent with the natural progression of the story and departs from the theme of the love of Odysseus and Penélopê. Odysseus's reunion with his father is an important part of the story and would fit well most any place except where it is located—at the end. The true climax occurs when Odysseus and Penélopê are reunited, because that reunion is what all the action has led up to and is what we have awaited throughout. The last book serves only to detract from their reunion and shift the focus away from Odysseus and Penélopê. It is also possible that Homer himself never realized how vital the two lovers are to his story and never considered their relationship to be the focal point. Whether by design or by accident, Homer's *Odyssey* is a love story. That is its most compelling feature.

The Odyssey is a classic that would be enjoyed as an adventure story,

as a sequel to *The Iliad*, or as a history of ancient Greece alone, but without the romance of Odysseus and Penélopé, much of its magic and appeal would be lost. Their story enthralles us, and we are immediately drawn into the action. It is as if we are with them through it all, experiencing their struggles and sharing their suffering and rejoicing. It is often easy for us as readers to be taken in by thrilling adventures and surface actions in a story and miss the underlying theme or core upon which the work is based. On the surface *The Odyssey* is an intriguing adventure, but if that is all we see when we read it, then we have missed the essential element of *The Odyssey*. The whole work revolves around these two lovers. The love that Odysseus and Penélopé share is the only thing that brings Odysseus home; there would be no story without that love. The romance of Odysseus and Penélopé is the binding force of *The Odyssey* and the reason why *The Odyssey* is so special.

Perhaps more importantly than anything else, however, this romance makes us feel good. In our world today, where it seems that true love between men and women is all too fleeting and tenuous, where divorce is ravaging marriages and families, we need a happy ending where love is not the loser over all, but the victor. The love of Odysseus and Penélopé is pure and unvanquishable and serves as a standard of love for men and women to follow today, just as it no doubt did nearly twenty-eight centuries ago, and just as it no doubt will in the centuries yet to come.

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