

Penelope

In the evening, Penelope interrogates the old beggar.

“Friend, let me ask you first of all:
who are you, where do you come from, of what nation
and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

1290 “My lady, never a man in the wide world
should have a fault to find with you. Your name
has gone out under heaven like the sweet
honor of some god-fearing king, who rules
19 in **equity** over the strong: his black lands bear
both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright,
1295 new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea
gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy,
so that his folk fare well.

1300 this being so, let it suffice to ask me
of other matters—not my blood, my homeland.
Do not enforce me to recall my pain.

O my dear lady.

1305 My heart is sore; but I must not be found
sitting in tears here, in another's house:
it is not well forever to be grieving.
One of the maids might say—or you might think—
1305 I had got maudlin over cups of wine.”

And Penelope replied:

“Stranger, my looks,
my face, my carriage,¹² were soon lost or faded
when the Achaeans crossed the sea to Troy,
Odysseus my lord among the rest.

1310 If he returned, if he were here to care for me,
I might be happily renowned!
But grief instead heaven sent me—years of pain.
Sons of the noblest families on the islands,
Dulichium, Same, wooded Zacynthus,¹³
1315 with native Ithacans, are here to court me,
against my wish; and they consume this house.
Can I give proper heed to guest or suppliant
or herald on the realm's affairs?

How could I?
wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here
1320 they press for marriage.

Ruses¹⁴ served my turn
to draw the time out—first a close-grained web
I had the happy thought to set up weaving
on my big loom in hall. I said, that day:
1325 “Young men—my suitors, now my lord is dead,
let me finish my weaving before I marry,
or else my thread will have been spun in vain.
It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes
when cold Death comes to lay him on his bier.
The country wives would hold me in dishonor
1330 if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.”
I reached their hearts that way, and they agreed.
So every day I wove on the great loom,
but every night by torchlight I unwove it;
and so for three years I deceived the Achaeans.

Vocabulary

maudlin (môd' lin)

adj. tearfully and foolishly sentimental

12. **carriage** (kar' ij) *n.*
posture.

13. **Zacynthus** (za sin' thus)

14. **ruses** (rôoz' iz) *n.* tricks.

Reading Skill

Historical and Cultural Context How do the ancient Greek ideas in Penelope's speech about honoring the dead compare to modern ideas?

21 Reading Check

How was Penelope able to delay marriage for three years?



The Trial of the Bow from Homer's *The Odyssey*, N. C. Wyeth, Brandywine River Museum

1335 But when the seasons brought a fourth year on,
as long months waned, and the long days were spent,
through impudent folly in the slinking maids
they caught me—clamored up to me at night;
I had no choice then but to finish it.
1340 And now, as matters stand at last,
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 eat up his property.
1345 He comprehends it, being a man full-grown,
able to oversee the kind of house
Zeus would endow with honor.

But you too
confide in me, tell me your ancestry.
You were not born of mythic oak or stone.”

Penelope again asks the beggar to tell about himself. He makes up a tale in which Odysseus is mentioned and declares that Penelope's husband will soon be home.

1350 “You see, then, he is alive and well, and headed
homeward now, no more to be abroad
far from his island, his dear wife and son.
Here is my sworn word for it. Witness this,
god of the zenith, noblest of the gods,¹⁵
24 and Lord Odysseus' hearthfire, now before me:
1355 I swear these things shall turn out as I say.
Between this present dark and one day's ebb,
after the wane, before the crescent moon,
Odysseus will come.”

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◀ **Critical Viewing**
The winner of the archery contest will win Penelope's hand in marriage. What details or artistic techniques capture the tension in this scene?
[Interpret]

15. god of the zenith, noblest of the gods Zeus.