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A TRANSLATOR'S RECKONING WITH THE WOMEN OF THE ODYSSEY

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Many readers of the Odyssey want Penelope, Odysseus' strong-willed wife, to fit the ideal of an empowered woman. Artwork by Louis-Jean-François Lagrenée. Photograph by Paul Fearn / Alamy

Since I completed my translation of the Odyssey, which is the first published version of Homer's epic in English translated by a woman, readers have often assumed that I must sympathize above all with the story's female characters. I am asked, in particular, about my interpretation of Penelope, Odysseus' faithful wife. Penelope spends twenty years in tearful isolation, waiting for her man to come home from war—and also, as it happens, from the cave and bed of two beautiful goddesses—while caring for her son and warding off the advances of her abusive suitors. At the same time, she manages to fool the suitors with her sneaky trick of weaving by day and unpicking her work at night, telling them that she can never marry until her project is finished. Moreover, she successfully needles her husband by pretending to have moved the bed that he constructed out of a still-living olive tree, a reminder that she has the power to hurt him by sleeping with another man. She's canny, she's strong-willed, she has grit, she has a vivid imagination, she's loyal, she's a competent, mostly single mother who shows deep love for her difficult, moody son, and she keeps a big and complex household running for two decades. You have to love her for all these things, and I do.

But many students, scholars, and general readers want even more from this literary character: they want her to fit the ideal of an empowered woman. It is comforting to subscribe to the notion—as Daniel Mendelsohn does in his recently published memoir, "An Odyssey," and as Robert Fagles does, in his translation of the poem—that the marriage between Odysseus and Penelope is a partnership of intellectual equals, based on true love and a shared outlook on life. Odysseus speaks, in Homer's poem, of the ideal of like-mindedness (*homophrosyne*) in marriage. It is not usually mentioned that he brings it up only when talking to an impressionable teen-age girl, Nausicaa, whom he avoids telling that he's married, and whom he has a strong ulterior motive for buttering up, since his life depends on her help. (We should know by now that powerful older men do not always tell young women the truth.)

Moreover, the sentimentalized reading of Penelope erases some facts about her social position that the original poem makes very clear. Whereas Odysseus has many choices, many identities, many places to go and people to be and to see, Penelope has only one choice, and it is defined exclusively by her marital status: she can wait for Odysseus, or marry someone else—and even this very limited choice is not open forever, since the abusive suitors can eventually force her hand. In Mary Beard's forthcoming pamphlet, "Women and Power," she writes about a scene in the Odyssey that she calls Western literature's "first recorded example of a man telling a woman to 'shut up' "—Telemachus telling Penelope, in Book One, to be silent after she asks the poet performing in her palace to sing a different tune.

The silencing of female voices, and the dangers of female agency, are central problems in the poem. Penelope's strictly constrained position is presented in some ways as necessary, since élite wives who act more freely may do scary things—like the half-divine Helen, who abandons her husband for another man, or her sister Clytemnestra, who helps her lover murder her husband. In Ithaca, Odysseus owns the house, the weapons, the wealth, the slaves, the farm, the orchard, and the seat in the council of men; Penelope does not even fully share the marriage bed, which her husband calls "my bed." Penelope is, like her husband, highly intelligent; but her intelligence, evoked by her standard epithet, *periphron*, "circumspect," suggests caution and risk aversion. Her keen mind is not liberating; it keeps her stuck. By contrast, Odysseus' intelligence is defined as an ability to find a fix for any situation: he is *polymechanos*, the guy with a solution for everything, and an iron will. The poem sets up a sharp distinction between Odysseus' fantasy and Penelope's realism. He believes that, after twenty years away from home, he can return to being exactly the man he used to be, while she knows that, no matter how strong or smart or faithful she is, she can never be the same. In one of the most upsetting and beautiful passages of the poem, Penelope cries so desperately that her very being seems to dissolve. In my translation, it reads:

> Her face was melting, like the snow that Zephyr
>
> scatters across the mountain peaks; then Eurus
>
> thaws it, and as it melts, the rivers swell
>
> and flow again. So were her lovely cheeks
>
> dissolved in tears.

Other translations of this passage say that her tears "melted" or "streamed" down her cheeks, or that (in the English cliché) her "heart" melted. But Homer's original text says that her *chros*—her "skin" or "flesh"—melted, and that her cheeks themselves dissolved (*teketo kala pareia*). Penelope experiences her marriage in terms of grief, abandonment, and the loss of identity—a loss that, disturbingly, Homer presents as a necessary and natural process, like the coming of spring on the mountain. In translating this passage, I wanted to bring out both the beauty and the precision of the imagery, and the horror—a common, relatable horror—of being a woman who experiences her attachment to her husband as the destruction of her self. I wanted the reader of my English to feel as I do in reading the Greek: for Penelope, and with her pain, rather than prettifying or trivializing her grief.

All this may make Penelope seem like an innocent victim, but she is also a woman of privilege, who colludes in, indeed insists on, the silencing of more vulnerable women. Penelope clutches desperately at whatever shards of autonomy are available in her husband's house. After Odysseus slaughters her suitors, he tells Telemachus to kill the female slaves who have slept with them. Contemporary translators and commentators often present the massacre of these women as if it were quite ordinary, and entirely justified. The murdered slaves are routinely described in contemporary American English translations as "disobedient maids," and are labelled as "sluts" or "whores"—a level of verbal abuse that finds absolutely no analogue in the Greek. The killing of these abused slaves (who are usually referred to, euphemistically, as "servants" or "maids") is often described as if it were unquestionably ethical. The study guide SparkNotes describes these women as "disloyal women servants" who must be "executed," while CliffsNotes calls them "maidservants" who were "disloyal," and claims that their murder has a "macabre beauty." In the poem's original language, Telemachus refers to them only with *hai*, the feminine article—"those female people who … slept beside the suitors." In my translation, I call them "these girls," and hope to convey the scene in both its gruesome inhumanity and its pathos: "their heads all in a row, / were strung up with the noose around their necks / to make their death an agony. They gasped, / feet twitching for a while, but not for long."

There is a vision of empowered femininity in the Odyssey, but it is conveyed not in in the mortal world but in that of the gods. The poem's plot is, of course, engineered by the wonderfully gender-fluid goddess Athena, who protects and saves her favorite human from the Sirens, goddesses and female monsters who try to entrap him or transform him or hide him or devour him or swallow him up, with their dangerous feminine wiles. The divine Calypso, Aphrodite, and Circe provide passionate models of female power—idealized fantasies of how much agency mortal women might have, if only social circumstances were completely different. I read Homer's great poem as a complex and truthful articulation of gender dynamics that continue to haunt us. The Odyssey traces deep male fears about female power, and it shows the terrible damage done to women, and perhaps also to men, by the androcentric social structures that keep us silent and constrained. Birds in Homer are the ultimate image of speech and of freedom. Athena repeatedly transforms herself into a bird of prey, whooshing up to the rooftops or surfing across the waves of the sea. The silenced slave girls are "like doves or thrushes," caught in a hunter's net. Penelope, meanwhile, is like a "pale gray nightingale" who "sits among the leaves / that crowd the trees." She can't fly, but her warbling amounts to a "symphony of sound."

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