

§45. Penelope



. . . Unto the chamber she led them, and then she returned, and with gladness these two came once more to the rites of the bed as aforetime.

– *Od 23:295-296*

Not a few, both anciently and recently, have regarded this as the end of the *Odyssey*, and condemned what follows as late and inferior.¹ Inferior it may be, since the poet was working out beyond what the experience of the established hexameter tradition prepared her for. But to eliminate the last half of 23 and all of 24 makes a hash of the obviously intentional 24-book outline, and ignores the poet's own opening announcement (§31), that she intends something more than the same old catch-and-kill morality of the *Iliad*.²

But that the scene of meeting is handled with great skill, is admitted by all. We may proceed to consider some of its fine points. There are six sections:

- (1) Penelope in her chamber, does not believe Eurycleia's good news
- (2) She descends, and sees Odysseus; they do not speak to each other
- (3) *Odysseus and Telemachus plan ahead, counterfeiting a wedding*
- (4) Penelope and Odysseus speak; at length he convinces her
- (5) They go to bed; their intimate conversation is only reported
- (6) *Odysseus, next morning, sets out on his final task*

The third and sixth (italicized) interrupt the recognition scene. Even in outline, we can see how effectively the devices of delay are employed to prolong things. But though the whole scene is a study in delay, the underlying pace is excited, as is shown by the short speeches of which it mostly consists.³

¹Page **Odyssey** 101, "The greatest of the ancient critics, Aristophanes and Aristarchus, maintained that the *Odyssey* of Homer ended at 23:296." West **Odyssey** 291, "It looks likely that there had been an earlier *Odyssey* in which these later episodes did not appear, and which ended with Odysseus and Penelope happily sleeping together for the first time in twenty years." Page 102f details the faults of these later episodes.

²We thus find ourselves in general sympathy with Stanford **Odyssey** 2/404-406.

³As with the *Iliad* 1 Quarrel, with its series of brief speeches, we repeat our warning that with smaller samples, the chance of false positives with the BIRD test increases. We might see here a sort of inverse quarrel, each arguing about identity with the other, concluding at last with recognition and acceptance.

(1) Here is the first group of speeches, most of them brief:

Eu1	5-9	[*Eurycleia gives good news; Odysseus has returned Penelope abuses her for lying
Pe1	11-24	
Eu2	26-31	[*Eurycleia insists; he kept secret only to punish the suitors *Penelope asks her, did he really come back?
Pe2	35-38	
Eu3	40-57	Eurycleia repeats what she has been told
Pe3	59-68	*Penelope insists it must be a god that killed the suitors
Eu4	70-79	[*Eurycleia reports her discovery of the telltale scar *Penelope will at least go to see her son [she descends] *Telemachus asks why she does not speak to Odysseus
Pe4	81-84	
Te1	97-103	

Od 24	Eu1*	Pe1	Eu2*	Pe2*	Eu3	Pe3*	Eu4*	Pe4*	Te1*
	36	106	41	30	135	72	76	26	47
Eu1*	~	0.50	0.58	0.30	0.77	0.76	0.60	0.35	0.61
Pe1	0.50	~	0.61	0.61	0.64	0.41	0.44	0.47	0.56
Eu2*	0.58	0.61	~	0.48	0.45	0.58	0.43	0.39	0.67
Pe2*	0.30	0.61	0.48	~	0.52	0.77	0.50	0.23	0.50
Eu3	0.77	0.64	0.45	0.52	~	0.54	0.46	0.58	0.64
Pe3*	0.76	0.41	0.58	0.77	0.54	~	0.52	0.55	0.45
Eu4*	0.60	0.44	0.43	0.50	0.46	0.52	~	0.34	0.48
Pe4*	0.35	0.47	0.39	0.23	0.58	0.55	0.34	~	0.48
Te1*	0.61	0.56	0.67	0.50	0.64	0.45	0.48	0.48	~

We first notice that not only the *consecutive*-speech D values, but *most* of the values, are either in the Low range, or the low end of Normal. We are dealing not with Yes and No, but with nuanced variations of Yes. Let us follow along.

Eurycleia's happy report and Penelope's response of angry disbelief are close (D = 0.50), but just barely. Eurycleia's next assurance, and Penelope's more accepting response, are closer (D = 0.48). Eurycleia admits she lacks direct knowledge of the slaying; Penelope responds more distantly (D = 0.54). Then a last pair of speeches in Penelope's chamber. This time Penelope agrees to go see (0.34, the closest value in these exchanges – and still closer (0.23, the lowest value on this table) to her previous, more positive, response, Pe2).

Now she and Odysseus are facing each other, and we would like to know how closely their speeches are related. To the surprise of everyone present, including modern readers, *they say not a word to each other*. And Telemachus reproves Penelope for just this. His speech responds closely (not that he was present when they were spoken) to Penelope's most recent and most hopeful speech (D = 0.48), and Eurycleia's speech before that (D = 0.48), and to every speech of Penelope's, except her first, harsh one, before *that* (D = 0.45, 0.50). He is saying, stylistically as well as literally,

After all that, why don't you *say* something to him?

(2) What happens next is this brief exchange:

Pe5	105-110	[*Penelope responds to Telemachus' question
Od1	113-122		*Odysseus addresses, <i>not her</i> , but Telemachus
Te2	124-128		*Telemachus asks how to deal with the citizens
Od2	130-140	[*Odysseus offers a plan: counterfeit a wedding
Out	149-151		*Outside voices show that the ruse has succeeded

<i>Od 23</i>	<i>Pe5*</i>	<i>Od1*</i>	<i>Te2*</i>	<i>Od2*</i>	<i>Out*</i>
	47	76	37	75	20
<i>Pe5*</i>	~	0-00	0-00	0-00	0-00
<i>Od1*</i>	0-00	~	0-00	0-00	0-00
<i>Te2*</i>	0-00	0-00	~	0-00	0-00
<i>Od2*</i>	0-00	0-00	0-00	~	0-00
<i>Out*</i>	0-00	0-00	0-00	0-00	~

Penelope speaks, still not to Odysseus, *but in answer to Telemachus*. Finally Odysseus himself speaks. Again we have a surprise. He speaks not to Penelope, *but to Telemachus*, explaining why she may be slow to recognize him. Whoever its nominal addressee, that speech is really in answer to Penelope, and to her speech it is close stylistically (D = 0.47). Then, in the middle of that speech, he turns to the problem created by the suitors' death: How to handle the hostility of the citizenry, when they learn that all their best men have been slain? Telemachus says that it is up to him to plan, and he thus refuses the invitation to make a plan himself; this refusal is marked by a High value (D = 0.80), the highest recorded in this Book.

(3) Odysseus suggests that they counterfeit a wedding, as though Penelope were marrying one of the suitors, so as to lull any suspicions of the townsfolk. The place is cleaned, music is summoned. The success of the ruse is shown by imagined voices from outside, to which the narrator adds a sardonic comment:

Then to the sound of their feet did the spacious mansion re-echo,
 while that the fair-zoned maidens and men were making them merry;
 hearing the which, spake many a one outside of the palace:
 "Sure she is married at last, our lady of many a wooer!
 Pitiful creature, unable to wait for the love of her girlhood,
 faithfully keeping on guard at his palace until he arrived here!"
 Thus spake many a one; but they knew not how it had happened.

This has been a poem of deception and delay, in all their forms. The deception of the whole town merely takes that art to the next wider social level.

We might expect that the citizens would respond with joy to the news that one of their own had won obstinate Penelope. But that is not what they say. Instead, they criticize Penelope, that she has not held out until the very end. At least for that moment, they are on the same side as the poet, and the rest of us.

(4-5) Meanwhile, it is at last time for the Od 23 recognition scene:

- a. 165-172 (8) He marvels at her refusal to recognize him
- b. 173-180 (8) She offers to have his own bed made up for him
- c. 181-204 (24) He is outraged that someone has moved his bed
- d. 205-230 (26) She is at last convinced
- e. 231-240 (10) They embrace

<i>Recog</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>
	47	76	37	75	20
<i>a</i>	~	0-00	0-00	0-00	0-00
<i>b</i>	0-00	~	0-00	0-00	0-00
<i>c</i>	0-00	0-00	~	0-00	0-00
<i>d</i>	0-00	0-00	0-00	~	0-00
<i>d</i>	0-00	0-00	0-00	0-00	~

[Comment]