Selections from

THE PENEOLOPIAD

By Margaret Atwood

MY CHILDHOOD

Where shall I begin? There are only two choices: at the beginning or not at the beginning. The real beginning would be the beginning of the world, after which one thing has led to another; but since there are differences of opinion about that, I'll begin with my own birth.

My father was King Icarius of Sparta. My mother was a Naiad. Daughters of Naiads were a dime a dozen in those days; the place was crawling with them. Nevertheless, it never hurts to be of semidivine birth. Or it never hurts immediately.

When I was quite young my father ordered me to be thrown into the sea. I never knew exactly why, during my lifetime, but now I suspect he'd been told by an oracle that I would weave his shroud. Possibly he thought that if he killed me first, his shroud would never be woven and he would live forever. I can see how the reasoning might have gone. In that case, his wish to drown me came from an understandable desire to protect himself. But he must have misheard, or else the oracle herself misheard – the gods often mumble – because it was not his shroud that was at issue, but my father-in-law's shroud. If that was the prophecy it was a
true one, and indeed the weaving of this particular shroud proved a great convenience to me later on in my life.

The teaching of crafts to girls has fallen out of fashion now, I understand, but luckily it had not in my day. It's always an advantage to have something to do with your hands. That way, if someone makes an inappropriate remark, you can pretend you haven't heard it. Then you don't have to answer.

But perhaps this shroud-weaving oracle idea of mine is baseless. Perhaps I have only invented it in order to make myself feel better. So much whispering goes on, in the dark caverns, in the meadows, that sometimes it's hard to know whether the whispering is coming from others or from the inside of your own head. I use head figuratively. We have dispensed with heads as such, down here.

No matter – into the sea I was thrown. Do I remember the waves closing over me, do I remember the breath leaving my lungs and the sound of bells people say the drowning hear? Not in the least. But I was told the story: there is always some servant or slave or old nurse or busybody ready to regale a child with the awful things done to it by its parents when it was too young to remember. Hearing this discouraging anecdote did not improve my relations with my father. It is to this episode – or rather, to my knowledge of it – that I attribute my reserve, as well as my mistrust of other people's intentions.

It was stupid of Icarius to try to drown the daughter of a Naiad, however. Water is our element, it is our birthright. Although we are not such good swimmers as our mothers, we do have a way of floating, and we're well connected among the fish and seabirds. A flock of purple-striped ducks came to my rescue and towed me ashore. After an omen like that, what could my father do? He took me back, and renamed me – duck was my new nickname. No doubt he felt guilty about what he'd almost done: he became, if anything, rather too affectionate towards me.

I found this affection difficult to reciprocate. You can imagine. There I would be, strolling hand in hand with my apparently fond male parent along a cliff edge or a river bank or a parapet, and the thought would occur to me that he might
suddenly decide to shove me over or bash me to death with a rock. Preserving a calm facade under these circumstances was a challenge. After such excursions I would retire to my room and dissolve in floods of tears. (Excessive weeping, I might as well tell you now, is a handicap of the Naiad-born. I spent at least a quarter of my earthly life crying my eyes out. Fortunately in my time there were veils. They were a practical help for disguising red, puffy eyes.)

My mother, like all Naiads, was beautiful, but chilly at heart. She had waving hair and dimples, and rippling laughter. She was elusive. When I was little I often tried to throw my arms around her, but she had a habit of sliding away. I like to think that she may have been responsible for calling up that flock of ducks, but probably she wasn’t: she preferred swimming in the river to the care of small children, and I often slipped her mind. If my father hadn’t had me thrown into the sea she might have dropped me in herself, in a fit of absent-mindedness or irritation. She had a short attention span and rapidly changing emotions.

You can see by what I’ve told you that I was a child who learned early the virtues – if such they are – of self-sufficiency. I knew that I would have to look out for myself in the world. I could hardly count on family support.
ASPHODEL

It's dark here, as many have remarked. 'Dark Death', they used to say. 'The gloomy halls of Hades', and so forth. Well, yes, it is dark, but there are advantages – for instance, if you see someone you'd rather not speak to you can always pretend you haven't recognized them. There are of course the fields of asphodel. You can walk around in them if you want. It's brighter there, and a certain amount of vapid dancing goes on, though the region sounds better than it is – the fields of asphodel has a poetic lilt to it. But just consider. Asphodel, asphodel, asphodel – pretty enough white flowers, but a person gets tired of them after a while. It would have been better to supply some variety – an assortment of colors, a few winding paths and vistas and stone benches and fountains. I would have preferred the odd hyacinth, at least, and would a sprinkling of crocuses have been too much to expect? Though we never get spring here, or any other seasons. You do have to wonder who designed the place.

Have I mentioned the fact that there's nothing to eat except asphodel?

But I shouldn't complain.

The darker grottoes are more interesting – the conversation there is better, if you can find a minor rascal of some sort – a pickpocket, a stockbroker, a small-time pimp. Like a lot of goody-goody girls, I was always secretly attracted to men of that kind.

I don't frequent the really deep levels much, though. That's where the punishments are dealt out to the truly villainous, those who were not sufficiently punished while alive. It's hard to put up with the screams. The torture is mental torture, however, since we don't have bodies any more. What the gods really like is to conjure up banquets – big platters of meat, heaps of bread, bunches of grapes – and then snatch them away. Making people roll heavy stones up steep hills is
another of their favorite jests. I sometimes have a yen to go down there: it might help me to remember what it was like to have real hunger, what it was like to have real fatigue.

Every once in a while the fogs part and we get a glimpse of the world of the living. It's like rubbing the glass on a dirty window, making a space to look through. Sometimes the barrier dissolves and we can go on an outing. Then we get very excited, and there is a great deal of squeaking.

These outings can take place in many ways. Once upon a time, anyone who wished to consult us would slit the throat of a sheep or cow or pig and let the blood flow into a trench in the ground. We'd smell it and make a beeline for the site, like flies to a carcass. There we'd be, chirping and fluttering, thousands of us, like the contents of a giant wastepaper basket caught in a tornado, while some self-styled hero held us off with drawn sword until the one he wanted to consult appeared. A few vague prophecies would be forthcoming: we learned to keep them vague. Why tell everything? You needed to keep them coming back for more, with other sheep, cows, pigs, and so forth.

Once the right number of words had been handed over to the hero we'd all be allowed to drink from the trench, and I can't say much in praise of the table manners on such occasions. There was a lot of pushing and shoving, a lot of slurping and spilling; there were a lot of crimson chins. However, it was glorious to feel the blood coursing in our non-existent veins again, if only for an instant.

We could sometimes appear as dreams, though that wasn't as satisfactory. Then there were those who got stuck on the wrong side of the river because they hadn't been given proper burials. They wandered around in a very unhappy state, neither here nor there, and they could cause a lot of trouble.

Then after hundreds, possibly thousands of year – it's hard to keep track of time here, because we don't have any of it as such – customs changed. No living people went to the underworld much anymore, and our own abode was upstaged by a much more spectacular establishment down the road – fiery pits, wailing and
gnashing of teeth, gnawing worms, demons with pitchforks – a great many special effects.

But we were still called up occasionally by magicians and conjurors – men who’d made pacts with the infernal powers – and then by smaller fry, the table-tilters, the mediums, the channellers, people of that ilk. It was demeaning, all of it – to have to materialize in a chalk circle or a velvet-upholstered parlor just because someone wanted to gape at you – but it did allow us to keep up with what was going on among the still-alive. I was very interested in the invention of the light bulb, for instance, and in the matter-into-energy theories of the twentieth century. More recently, some of us have been able to infiltrate the new ethereal-wave system that now encircles the globe, and to travel around that way, looking out at the world through the flat, illuminated surfaces that serve as domestic shrines. Perhaps that’s how the gods were able to come and go as quickly as they did back then – they must have had something like that at their disposal. I never got summoned much by the magicians. I was famous, yes – ask anyone – but for some reason they didn’t want to see me, whereas my cousin Helen was much in demand. It didn’t seem fair – I wasn’t known for doing anything notorious, especially of a sexual nature, and she was nothing if not infamous. Of course she was very beautiful. It was claimed she’d come out of an egg, being the daughter of Zeus who’d raped her mother in the form of a swan. She was quite stuck-up about it, was Helen. I wonder how many of us really believed that swan rape concoction? There were a lot of stories of that kind going around then – the gods couldn’t seem to keep their hands or paws or beaks off mortal women, they were always raping someone or other.

Anyway, the magicians insisted on seeing Helen, and she was willing to oblige. It was like a return to the old days to have a lot of men gawping at her. She liked to appear in one of her Trojan outfits, over-decorated to my taste, but *chacun à son goût*¹. She had a kind of slow twirl she would do; then she’d lower her head and glance up into the face of whoever had conjured her up, and give one of her

¹ People have their own preferences
trademark intimate smiles, and they were hers. Or she’d take on the form in which she displayed herself to her outraged husband, Menelaus, when Troy was burning and he was about to plunge his vengeful sword into her. All she had to do was bare one of her peerless breasts, and he was down on his knees, and drooling and begging to take her back.

As for me … well, people told me I was beautiful, they had to tell me that because I was a princess, and shortly after that a queen, but the truth was that although I was not deformed or ugly, I was nothing special to look at. I was smart, though: considering the times, very smart. That seems to be what I was known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion.

If you were a magician, messing around in the dark arts and risking your soul, would you want to conjure up a plain but smart wife who’d been good at weaving and had never transgressed, instead of a woman who’d driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames?

Neither would I.

Helen was never punished, not one bit. Why not, I’d like to know? Other people got strangled by sea serpents and drowned in storms and turned into spiders and shot with arrows for much smaller crimes. Eating the wrong cows. Boasting. That sort of thing. You’d think Helen might have got a good whipping at the very least, after all the harm and suffering she caused to countless other people. But she didn’t.

Not that I mind. Not that I minded.

I had other things in my life to occupy my attention.

Which brings me to the subject of my marriage.
My Marriage

My marriage was arranged. That’s the way things were done then: were there were weddings, there were arrangements. I don’t mean such things as bridal outfits, flowers, banquets, and music, though we had those too. Everyone has those, even now; The arrangements I mean were more devious than that.

Under the old rules only important people had marriages, because only important people had inheritances: All the rest was just copulation of various kinds – rapes or seductions, love affairs or one-night stands, with gods who said they were shepherds or shepherds who said they were gods. Occasionally a goddess might get mixed up in it to dabble around in perishable flesh like a queen playing at milkmaids, but the reward for the man was a shortened life and often a violent death. Immortality and mortality didn’t mix well: it was fire and mud, only the fire always won.

The gods were never averse to making a mess. In fact they enjoyed it. To watch some mortal with his or her eyes frying in their sockets through an overdose of god-sex made them shake with laughter. There was something childish about the gods, in a nasty way. I can say this now because I no longer have a body, I’m beyond that kind of suffering, and the gods aren’t listening anyway. As far as I can tell they’ve gone to sleep. In your world, you don’t get visitations from the gods the way people used to unless you’re on drugs.

Where was I? Oh yes. Marriages. Marriages were for having children, and children were not toys and pets. Children were vehicles for passing things along. These things could be kingdoms, rich wedding gifts, stories, grudges, blood feuds. Through children, alliances were forged; through children, wrongs were avenged. To have a child was to set loose a force in the world.
If you had an enemy it was best to kill his sons, even if those sons were babies. Otherwise they would grow up and hunt you down. If you couldn't bring yourself to slaughter them, you could disguise them and send them far away, or sell them as slaves, but as long as they were alive they would be a danger to you.

If you had daughters instead of sons, you needed to get them bred as soon as possible so you could have grandsons. The more sword-wielders and spear-throwers you could count on from within your family the better, because all the other noteworthy men around were on the lookout for a pretext to raid some king or noble and carry away anything they could grab, people included. Weakness in one power-holder meant opportunity for another, so every king and noble needed all the help he could get.

Thus it went without saying that a marriage would be arranged for me when the time came.

At the court of King Icarius, my father, they still retained the ancient custom of having contests to see who should marry a nobly born woman who was – so to speak – on the block. The man who won the contest got the woman and the wedding, and was then expected to stay at the bride’s father’s palace and contribute his share of male offspring. He obtained wealth through the marriage – gold cups, silver bowls, horses, robes, weapons, all that trash they used to value so much back when I was alive. His family was expected to hand over a lot of this trash as well.

I can say trash because I know where most of it ended up. It moldered away in the ground or it sank to the bottom of the sea, or it got broken or melted down. Some of it made its way to enormous palaces that have – strangely – no kings or queens in them. Endless processions of people in graceless clothing file through these palaces, staring at the gold cups and the silver bowls, which are not even used any more. Then they go to a sort of market inside the palace and buy pictures of these things, or miniature versions of them that are not real silver and gold. That is why I say trash.
Under the ancient customs, the huge pile of sparkling wedding loot stayed with the bride’s family, in the bride’s family’s palace. Perhaps that is why my father had become so attached to me after having failed to drown me in the sea: where I was, there would be the treasure.

(Why did he throw me in? That question still haunts me. Although I’m not altogether satisfied with the shroud-weaving explanation, I’ve never been able to find the right answer, even down here. Every time I see my father in the distance, wading through the asphodel, and try to catch up with him, he hurries away as if he doesn’t want to face me.

I’ve sometimes thought I may have been a sacrifice to the god of the sea, who was known to be thirsty for human life. Then the ducks rescued me, through no act of my father’s. I suppose my father could argue that he’d fulfilled his side of the bargain, if bargain it was, and that he hadn’t cheated, and that if the sea-god had failed to drag me down and devour me, that was his own tough luck.

The more I think about this version of events, the more I like it. It makes sense.)

Picture me, then, as a clever but not overly beautiful girl of marriageable age, let’s say fifteen. Suppose I’m looking out the window of my room – which was on the second floor of the palace – down into the courtyard where the contestants are gathering: all those young hopefuls who wish to compete for my hand.

I don’t look directly out of the window, of course. I don’t plant my elbows on the windowsill like some hulking maid and stare shamelessly. No, I peek, from behind my veil and from behind the drapery. It would not do to let all those scantily clad young men see my unveiled face. The palace women have dolled me up as best they can, minstrels have composed songs of praise in my honor – ‘radiant as Aphrodite’, and all the usual claptrap – but I feel shy and miserable. The young men laugh and joke; they seem at ease with one another; they do not glance up.
I know it isn't me they're after, not Penelope the Duck. It's only what comes with me – the royal connection, the pile of glittering junk. No man will ever kill himself for love of me.

And no man ever did. Not that I would have wanted to inspire those kinds of suicides. I was not a man eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen who loved to make conquests just to show she could. As soon as the man was groveling, and it never took long, she'd stroll away without a backwards glance, giving that careless laugh of hers, as if she'd just been watching the palace midget standing ridiculously on his head.

I was a kind girl – kinder than Helen, or so I thought. I knew I would have to have something to offer instead of beauty. I was clever, everyone said so – in fact they said it so much that I found it discouraging – but cleverness is a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is some distance away from him. Up close, he'll take kindness any day of the week, if there's nothing more alluring to be had.

The most obvious husband for me would have been a younger son of a king with large estates one of King Nestor's boys, perhaps. That would have been a good connection for King Icarius. Through my veil, I studied the young men milling around down below, trying to figure out who each one was and – a thing of no practical consequence, since it wasn't up to me to choose my husband which one I preferred.

A couple of the maids were with me – they never left me unattended, I was a risk until I was safely married, because who knew what upstart fortune hunter might try to seduce me or seize me and run away with me? The maids were my sources of information. They were ever-flowing fountains of trivial gossip: they could come and go freely in the palace, they could study the men from all angles, they could listen in on their conversations, they could laugh and joke with them as much as they pleased: no one cared who might worm his way in between their legs.

'Who's the barrel-chested one?' I asked.
'Oh, that's only Odysseus,' said one of the maids. He was not considered – by the maids at least – to be a serious candidate for my hand. His father's palace was on Ithaca, a goat-strewn rock; his clothes were rustic; he had the manners of a small-town big shot, and had already expressed several complicated ideas the others considered peculiar. He was clever though, they said. In fact he was too clever for his own good. The other young men made jokes about him – 'Don't gamble with Odysseus, the friend of Hermes,' they said. 'You'll never win.' This was like saying he was a cheat and a thief. His grandfather Autolycus was well known for these very qualities, and was reputed never to have won anything fairly in his life.

'I wonder how fast he can run,' I said. In some kingdoms the contest for brides was a wrestling match, in others a chariot race, but with us it was just running.

'Not very fast, on those short legs of his,' said one maid unkindly. And indeed the legs of Odysseus were quite short in relation to his body. It was all right when he was sitting down, you didn't notice, but standing up he looked top-heavy.

'Not fast enough to catch you,' said another of the maids. 'You wouldn't want to wake up in the morning and find yourself in bed with your husband and a herd of Apollo's cows.' This was a joke about Hermes, whose first act of thievery on the day he was born involved an audacious cattle raid. 'Not unless one of them was a bull,' said another. 'Or else a goat,' said a third. 'A big strong ram! I bet our young duck would like that! She'd be bleating soon enough!' 'I wouldn't mind one of that kind myself,' said a fourth. 'Better a ram than the babyfingers you get around here.' They all began laughing, holding their hands over their mouths and snorting with mirth.

I was mortified. I didn't understand the coarser kinds of jokes, not yet, so I didn't know exactly why they were laughing, though I understood that their laughter was at my expense. But I had no way of making them stop.

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At this moment my cousin Helen came sailing up, like the long-necked swan she fancied herself to be. She had a distinctive swaying walk and she was exaggerating it. Although mine was the marriage in question, she wanted all the attention for herself. She was as beautiful as usual, indeed more so: she was intolerably beautiful. She was dressed to perfection: Menelaus, her husband, always made sure of that, and he was rich as stink so he could afford it. She tilted her face towards me, looking at me whimsically as if she were flirting. I suspect she used to flirt with her dog, with her mirror, with her comb, with her bedpost. She needed to keep in practice.

'I think Odysseus would make a very suitable husband for our little duckie,' she said. 'She likes the quiet life, and she'll certainly have that if he takes her to Ithaca, as he's boasting of doing. She can help him look after his goats. She and Odysseus are two of a kind. They both have such short legs.' She said this lightly, but her lightest sayings were often her cruelest. Why is it that really beautiful people think everyone else in the world exists merely for their amusement?

The maids sniggered. I was crushed. I had not thought my legs were quite that short, and I certainly hadn't thought Helen would notice them. But not much escaped her when it came to assessing the physical graces and defects of others. That was what got her into trouble with Paris, later he was so much better looking than Menelaus, who was lumpish and red-haired. The best that was claimed of Menelaus, once they started putting him into the poems, was that he had a very loud voice.

The maids all looked at me to see what I would say. But Helen had a way of leaving people speechless, and I was no exception.

'Never mind, little cousin,' she said to me, patting me on the arm. 'They say he's very clever. And you're very clever too, they tell me. So you'll be able to understand what he says. I certainly never could! It was lucky for both of us that he didn't win me!'

She gave the patronizing smirk of someone who's had first chance at a less than delicious piece of sausage but has fastidiously rejected it. Indeed, Odysseus
had been among the suitors for her hand, and like every other man on earth he’d desperately wanted to win her. Now he was competing for what was at best only second prize.

Helen strolled away, having delivered her sting. The maids began discussing her splendid necklace, her scintillating earrings, her perfect nose, her elegant hairstyle, her luminous eyes, the tastefully woven border of her shining robe. It was as if I wasn’t there. And it was my wedding day.

All of this was a strain on the nerves. I started to cry, as I would do so often in the future, and was taken to lie down on my bed.

Thus I missed the race itself Odysseus won it. He cheated, as I later learned. My father’s brother, Uncle Tyndareus, father of Helen – though, as I’ve told you, some said that Zeus was her real father – helped him to do it. He mixed the wine of the other contestants with a drug that slowed them down, though not so much as they would notice; to Odysseus he gave a potion that had the opposite effect. I understand that this sort of thing has become a tradition, and is still practiced in the world of the living when it comes to athletic contests.

Why did Uncle Tyndareus help my future husband in this way? They were neither friends nor allies. What did Tyndareus stand to gain? My uncle would not have helped anyone – believe me – simply out of the goodness of his heart, a commodity that was in short supply.

One story has it that I was the payment for a service Odysseus had rendered to Tyndareus. When they were all competing for Helen and things were getting more and more angry, Odysseus made each contestant swear an oath that whoever won Helen must be defended by all of the others if any other man tried to take her away from the winner. In that way he calmed things down and allowed the match with Menelaus to proceed smoothly. He must have known he had no hope himself. It was then – so the rumor goes – that he struck the bargain with Tyndareus: in return
for assuring a peaceful and very profitable wedding for the radiant Helen, Odysseus would get plain-Jane Penelope.

But I have another idea, and here it is. Tyndareus and my father, Icarius, were both kings of Sparta. They were supposed to rule alternately, one for a year and the other the next, turn and turn about. But Tyndareus wanted the throne for himself alone, and indeed he later got it. It would stand to reason that he’d sounded out the various suitors on their prospects and their plans, and had learned that Odysseus shared the newfangled idea that the wife should go to the husband’s family rather than the other way around. It would suit Tyndareus fine if I could be sent far away, me and any sons I might bear. That way there would be fewer to come to the aid of Icarius in the event of an open conflict.

Whatever was behind it, Odysseus cheated and won the race. I saw Helen smiling maliciously as she watched the marriage rites. She thought I was being pawned off on an uncouth dolt who would haul me off to a dreary backwater, and she was not displeased. She’d probably known well beforehand that the fix was in.

As for me, I had trouble making it through the ceremony – the sacrifices of animals, the offerings to the gods, the lustral sprinklings, the libations, the prayers, the interminable songs. I felt quite dizzy. I kept my eyes downcast, so all I could see of Odysseus was the lower part of his body. Short legs, I kept thinking, even at the most solemn moments. This was not an appropriate thought it was trivial and silly, and it made me want to giggle – but in my own defense I must point out that I was only fifteen.
And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat. A package of meat in a wrapping of gold, mind you. A sort of gilded blood pudding.

But perhaps that is too crude a simile for you.

Let me add that meat was highly valued among us – the aristocracy ate lots of it, meat, meat, meat, and all they ever did was roast it: ours was not an age of haute cuisine. Oh, I forgot: there was also bread, flat bread that is, bread, bread, bread, and wine, wine, wine. We did have the odd fruit or vegetable, but you've probably never heard of these because no one put them into the songs much.

The gods wanted meat as much as we did, but all they ever got from us was the bones and fat, thanks to a bit of rudimentary sleight of hand by Prometheus: only an idiot would have been deceived by a bag of bad cow parts disguised as good ones, and Zeus was deceived; which goes to show that the gods were not always as intelligent as they wanted us to believe.

I can say this now because I'm dead. I wouldn't have dared to say it earlier. You could never tell when one of the gods might be listening, disguised as a beggar or an old friend or a stranger. It's true that I sometimes doubted their existence, these gods. But during my lifetime I considered it prudent not to take any risks.

There was lots of everything at my wedding feast – great glistening hunks of meat, great wads of fragrant bread, great flagons of mellow wine. It was amazing that the guests didn't burst on the spot, they stuffed themselves so full. Nothing helps gluttony along so well as eating food you don't have to pay for yourself, as I learned from later experience.

We ate with our hands in those days. There was a lot of gnawing and some heavy-duty chewing, but it was better that way – no sharp utensils that could be
snatched up and plunged into a fellow guest who might have annoyed you. At any wedding preceded by a contest there were bound to be a few sore losers; but no unsuccessful suitor lost his temper at my feast. It was more as if they’d failed to win an auction for a horse.

The wine was mixed too strong, so there were many fuddled heads. Even my father, King Icarius, got quite drunk. He suspected he’d had a trick played on him by Tyndareus and Odysseus; he was almost sure they’d cheated, but he couldn't figure out how they’d done it, and this made him angry, and when he was angry he drank even more, and dropped insulting comments about people's grandparents. But he was a king, so there were no duels.

Odysseus himself did not get drunk. He had a way of appearing to drink a lot without actually doing it. He told me later that if a man lives by his wits, as he did, he needs to have those wits always at hand and kept sharp, like axes or swords. Only fools, he said, were given to bragging about how much they could drink. It was bound to lead to swilling competitions, and then to inattention and the loss of one's powers, and that would be when your enemy would strike.

As for me, I couldn’t eat a thing. I was too nervous. I sat there shrouded in my bridal veil, hardly daring to glance at Odysseus. I was certain he would be disappointed in me once he’d lifted that veil and made his way in through the cloak and the girdle and the shimmering robe in which I’d been decked out. But he wasn’t looking at me, and neither was anyone else. They were all staring at Helen, who was dispensing dazzling smiles right and left, not missing a single man. She had a way of smiling that made each one of them feel that secretly she was in love with him alone.

I suppose it was lucky that Helen was distracting everyone’s attention, because it kept them from noticing me and my trembling and awkwardness. I wasn’t just nervous, I was really afraid. The maids had been filling my ears with tales about how once I was in the bridal chamber – I would be torn apart as the earth is by the plough, and how painful and humiliating that would be.
As for my mother, she’d stopped swimming around like a porpoise long enough to attend my wedding, for which I was less grateful than I ought to have been. There she sat on her throne beside my father, robed in cool blue, a small puddle gathering at her feet. She did make a little speech to me as the maids were changing my costume yet again, but I didn't consider it to be a helpful one at the time. It was nothing if not oblique; but then, all Naiads are oblique.

Here is what she said:

Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does.

After the ceremonies and the feasting, there was the usual procession to the bridal chamber, with the usual torches and vulgar jokes and drunken yelling. The bed had been garlanded, the threshold sprinkled, the libations poured. The gatekeeper had been posted to keep the bride from rushing out in horror, and to stop her friends from breaking down the door and rescuing her when they heard her scream. All of this was play-acting: the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood.

Once the door had been closed, Odysseus took me by the hand and sat me down on the bed. 'Forget everything you've been told,' he whispered. 'I'm not going to hurt you, or not very much. But it would help us both if you could pretend. I've been told you're a clever girl. Do you think you could manage a few screams? That will satisfy them they're listening at the door – and then they'll leave us in peace and we can take our time to become friends.'

This was one of his great secrets as a persuader – he could convince another person that the two of them together faced a common obstacle, and that they needed to join forces in order to overcome it. He could draw almost any listener into a collaboration, a little
conspiracy of his own making. Nobody could do this better than he: for once, the stories don’t lie. And he had a wonderful voice as well, deep and sonorous. So of course I did as he asked.

Somewhat later I found that Odysseus was not one of those men who, after the act, simply roll over and begin to snore. Not that I am aware of this common male habit through my own experience; but as I’ve said, I listened a lot to the maids. No, Odysseus wanted to talk, and as he was an excellent raconteur I was happy to listen. I think this is what he valued most in me: my ability to appreciate his stories. It’s an underrated talent in women.

I’d had occasion to notice the long scar on his thigh, and so he proceeded to tell me the story of how he got it. As I’ve already mentioned, his grandfather was Autolycus, who claimed the god Hermes was his father. That may have been a way of saying that he was a crafty old thief, cheat, and liar, and that luck had favored him in these kinds of activities.

Autolycus was the father of Odysseus’s mother, Anticleia, who’d married King Laertes of Ithaca and was therefore now my mother-in-law. There was a slanderous item going around about Anticleia – that she’d been seduced by Sisyphus, who was the true father of Odysseus – but I found it difficult to believe, as who would want to seduce Anticleia? It would be like seducing a prow. But let the tale stand, for the moment.

Sisyphus was a man so tricky he was said to have cheated Death twice: once by fooling King Hades into putting on handcuffs that Sisyphus refused to unlock, once by talking Persephone into letting him out of the underworld because he hadn’t been properly buried, and thus didn’t belong on the dead side of the River Styx. So if we admit the rumor about Anticleia’s infidelity, Odysseus had crafty and unscrupulous men on two of the main branches of his family tree.

Whatever the truth of this, his grandfather Autolycus – who’d named him – invited Odysseus to Mount Parnassus to collect the gifts promised him at his birth. Odysseus did pay the visit, during which he went boar hunting with the sons of
Autolycus. It was a particularly ferocious boar that had gored him in the thigh and given him the scar.

There was something in the way Odysseus told the story that made me suspect there was more to it. Why had the boar savaged Odysseus, but not the others? Had they known where the boar was hiding out, had they led him into a trap? Was Odysseus meant to die so that Autolycus the cheat wouldn’t have to hand over the gifts he owed? Perhaps.

I liked to think so. I liked to think I had something in common with my husband: both of us had almost been destroyed in our youth by family members. All the more reason that we should stick together and not be too quick to trust others.

In return for his story about the scar, I told Odysseus my own story about almost drowning and being rescued by ducks. He was interested in it, and asked me questions about it, and was sympathetic – everything you would wish a listener to be. 'My poor duckling,' he said, stroking me. 'Don’t worry. I would never throw such a precious girl into the ocean.' At which point I did some more weeping, and was comforted in ways that were suitable for a wedding night.

So by the time the morning came, Odysseus and I were indeed friends, as Odysseus had promised we would be. Or let me put it another way: I myself had developed friendly feelings towards him – more than that, loving and passionate ones – and he behaved as if he reciprocated them. Which is not quite the same thing.

After some days had passed, Odysseus announced his intention of taking me and my dowry back with him to Ithaca. My father was annoyed by this – he wanted the old customs kept, he said, which meant that he wanted both of us and our newly gained wealth right there under his thumb. But we had the support of Uncle Tyndareus, whose son-in-law was Helen’s husband, the powerful Menelaus, so Icarius had to back down.

You’ve probably heard that my father ran after our departing chariot, begging me to stay with him, and that Odysseus asked me if I was going to Ithaca with him of my own free will or did I prefer to remain with my father? It’s said that
in answer I pulled down my veil, being too modest to proclaim in words my desire for my husband, and that a statue was later erected of me in tribute to the virtue of Modesty.

There's some truth to this story. But I pulled down my veil to hide the fact that I was laughing. You have to admit there was something humorous about a father who’d once tossed his own child into the sea capering down the road after that very child and calling, 'Stay with me!'

I didn't feel like staying. At that moment, I could hardly wait to get away from the Spartan court. I hadn't been very happy there, and I longed to begin a new life.

(From this point in the text, Penelope describes her journey to Ithaka, the birth of her son Telemachus, the start of the Trojan war (“Helen Ruins My Life”), the years of waiting, the arrival of the suitors, and her trick of weaving the shroud for Laertes. This next chapter deals with a dream, sent by Athena, in which her sister Iphthime tells Penelope that Telemachus will return safely from his journey to Pylos and Sparta.)
BAD DREAMS

Now began the worst period of my ordeal. I cried so much I thought I would turn into a river or a fountain, as in the old tales. No matter how much I prayed and offered up sacrifices and watched for omens, my husband still didn't return. To add to my misery, Telemachus was now of an age to start ordering me around. I'd run the palace affairs almost single-handedly for twenty years, but now he wanted to assert his authority as the son of Odysseus and take over the reins. He started making scenes in the hall, standing up to the Suitors in a rash way that I was certain was going to get him killed. He was bound to embark on some foolhardy adventure or other, as young men will.

Sure enough, he snuck off in a ship to go chasing around looking for news of his father, without even so much as consulting me. It was a terrible insult, but I couldn't dwell on that part of it, because my favorite maids brought me the news that the Suitors, having learned of my son's daring escapade, were sending a ship of their own to lie in wait for him and ambush him and kill him on his return voyage.

It's true that the herald Medon revealed this plot to me as well, just as the songs relate. But I already knew about it from the maids. I had to appear to be surprised, however, because otherwise Medon – who was neither on one side nor the other – would have known I had my own sources of information.

Well, naturally, I staggered around and fell on to the threshold and cried and wailed, and all of my maids – my twelve favorites, and the rest of them – joined in my lamentations. I reproached them all for not having told me of my son's departure, and for not stopping him, until that interfering old biddy Eurycleia confessed that she alone had aided and abetted him. The only reason the two of them hadn't told me, she said, was that they hadn't wanted me to fret. But all would come out fine in the end, she added, because the gods were just.
I refrained from saying I’d seen scant evidence of that so far.

When things get too dismal, and after I’ve done as much weeping as possible without turning myself into a pond, I have always – fortunately – been able to go to sleep. And when I sleep, I dream. I had a whole run of dreams that night, dreams that have not been recorded, for I never told them to a living soul. In one, Odysseus was having his head bashed in and his brains eaten by the Cyclops; in another, he was leaping into the water from his ship and swimming towards the Sirens, who were singing with ravishing sweetness, just like my maids, but were already stretching out their birds’ claws to tear him apart; in yet another, he was making love with a beautiful goddess, and enjoying it very much. Then the goddess turned into Helen; she was looking at me over the bare shoulder of my husband with a malicious little smirk. This last was such a nightmare that it woke me up, and I prayed that it was a false dream sent from the cave of Morpheus through the gate of ivory, not a true one sent through the gate of horn.

I went back to sleep, and at last managed a comforting dream. This one I did relate; perhaps you have heard of it. My sister Iphthime – who was so much older than I was that I hardly knew her, and who had married and moved far away – came into my room and stood by my bed, and told me she had been sent by Athena herself, because the gods didn’t want me to suffer. Her message was that Telemachus would return safely.

But when I questioned her about Odysseus – was he alive or dead? – she refused to answer, and slipped away.

So much for the gods not wanting me to suffer. They all tease. I might as well have been a stray dog, pelted with stones or with its tail set alight for their amusement. Not the fat and bones of animals, but our suffering, is what they love to savor.
(Penelope soon hears news from Telemachus about his journey to Sparta and his meeting with Helen. Then, in the next chapter, Odysseus himself finally returns)

**Yelp of Joy**

Who is to say that prayers have any effect? On the other hand, who is to say they don’t? I picture the gods, diddling around on Olympus, wallowing in the nectar and ambrosia and the aroma of burning bones and fat, mischievous as a pack of ten-year-olds with a sick cat to play with and a lot of time on their hands. ‘Which prayer shall we answer today?’ they ask one another. ‘Let’s cast dice! Hope for this one, despair for that one, and while we’re at it, let’s destroy the life of that woman over there by having sex with her in the form of a crayfish!’ I think they pull a lot of their pranks because they’re bored.

Twenty years of my prayers had gone unanswered. But, finally, not this one. No sooner had I performed the familiar ritual and shed the familiar tears than Odysseus himself shambled into the courtyard.

The shambling was part of a disguise, naturally. I would have expected no less of him. Evidently he’d appraised the situation in the palace – the Suitors, their wasting of his estates, their murderous intentions towards Telemachus, their appropriation of the sexual services of his maids, and their intended wife-grab – and wisely concluded that he shouldn’t simply march in and announce that he was Odysseus, and order them to vacate the premises. If he’d tried that he’d have been a dead man within minutes.

So he was dressed as a dirty old beggar. He could count on the fact that most of the Suitors had no idea what he looked like, having been too young or not even born when he’d sailed away. His disguise was well enough done – I hoped the wrinkles and baldness were part of the act, and not real – but as soon as I saw that
barrel chest and those short legs I had a deep suspicion, which became a certainty when I heard he’d broken the neck of a belligerent fellow panhandler. That was his style: stealthy when necessary, true, but he was never against the direct assault method when he was certain he could win.

I didn’t let on I knew: It would have been dangerous for him. Also, if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognize him: it’s always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness.

Telemachus was in on the deception: I could see that as well. He was by nature a spinner of falsehoods like his father, but he was not yet very good at it. When he introduced the supposed beggar to me, his shuffling and stammering and sideways looks gave him away.

That introduction didn’t happen until later. Odysseus spent his first hours in the palace snooping around and being abused by the Suitors, who jeered and threw things at him. Unfortunately I could not tell my twelve maids who he really was, so they continued their rudeness to Telemachus, and joined the Suitors in their insults. Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks was particularly cutting, I was told. I resolved to interpose myself when the time was right, and to tell Odysseus that the girls had been acting under my direction.

When evening came I arranged to see the supposed beggar in the now-empty hall. He claimed to have news of Odysseus – he spun a plausible yarn, and assured me that Odysseus would be home soon, and I shed tears and said I feared it was not so, as travelers had been telling me the same sort of thing for years. I described my sufferings at length, and my longing for my husband – better he should hear all this while in the guise of a vagabond, as he would be more inclined to believe it.

Then I flattered him by consulting him for advice. I was resolved – I said – to bring out the great bow of Odysseus, the one with which he’d shot an arrow through twelve circular axe-handles – an astounding accomplishment – and challenge the Suitors to duplicate the feat, offering myself as the prize. Surely that would bring an
end, one way or another, to the intolerable situation in which I found myself. What did he think of that plan?

He said it was an excellent idea.

The songs claim that the arrival of Odysseus and my decision to set the test of the bow and axes coincided by accident – or by divine plan, which was our way of putting it then. Now you’ve heard the plain truth. I knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform this archery trick. I knew that the beggar was Odysseus. There was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose.

Growing confidential with the purported seedy tramp, I then related a dream of mine. It concerned my flock of lovely white geese, geese of which I was very fond. I dreamt that they were happily pecking around the yard when a huge eagle with a crooked beak swooped down and killed them all, whereupon I wept and wept.

Odysseus-the-beggar interpreted this dream for me: the eagle was my husband, the geese were the Suitors, and the one would shortly slay the others. He said nothing about the crooked beak of the eagle, or my love for the geese and my anguish at their deaths.

In the event, Odysseus was wrong about the dream. He was indeed the eagle, but the geese were not the Suitors. The geese were my twelve maids, as I was soon to learn to my unending sorrow.

There’s a detail they make much of in the songs. I ordered the maids to wash the feet of Odysseus-the-mendicant, and he refused, saying he could only allow his feet to be washed by one who would not deride him for being gnarled and poor. I then proposed old Eurycleia for the task, a woman whose feet were as lacking in aesthetic value as his own. Grumbling, she set to work, not suspecting the booby trap I’d placed ready for her. Soon she found the long scar familiar to her from the many, many times she’d performed the same service for Odysseus. At this point she let out a yelp of joy and upset the basin of water all over the floor, and Odysseus almost throttled her to keep her from giving him away.
The songs say I didn’t notice a thing because Athena had distracted me. If you believe that, you’ll believe all sorts of nonsense. In reality I’d turned my back on the two of them to hide my silent laughter at the success of my little surprise.

(Penelope next refutes some of the slanderous gossip that has been spread about her over the last several thousand years; then she and Helen have a conversation about how many men were killed over the two of them. In the next chapter, she describes the death of her maids.)
Odysseus and Telemachus Snuff the Maids

I slept through the mayhem. How could I have done such a thing? I suspect Eurycleia put something in the comforting drink she gave me, to keep me out of the action and stop me from interfering. Not that I would have been in the action anyway: Odysseus made sure all the women were locked securely into the women’s quarter.

Eurycleia described the whole thing to me, and to anyone else who would listen. First, she said, Odysseus – still in the guise of a beggar – watched while Telemachus set up the twelve axes, and then while the Suitors failed to string his famous bow. Then he got hold of the bow himself, and after stringing it and shooting an arrow through the twelve axes – thus winning me as his bride for a second time – he shot Antinous in the throat, threw off his disguise, and made mincemeat of every last one of the Suitors, first with arrows, then with spears and swords. Telemachus and two faithful herdsmen helped him; nevertheless it was a considerable feat. The Suitors had a few spears and swords, supplied to them by Melanthius, a treacherous goatherd, but none of this hardware was of any help to them in the end.

Eurycleia told me how she and the other women had cowered near the locked door, listening to the shouts and the sounds of breaking furniture, and the groans of the dying. She then described the horror that happened next.

Odysseus summoned her, and ordered her to point out the maids who had been, as he called it, ‘disloyal’. He forced the girls to haul the dead bodies of the Suitors out into the courtyard – including the bodies of their erstwhile lovers – and
to wash the brains and gore off the floor, and to clean whatever chairs and tables remained intact.

Then – Eurykleia continued – he told Telemachus to chop the maids into pieces with his sword. But my son, wanting to assert himself to his father, and to show that he knew better – he was at that age – hanged them all in a row from a ship's hawser.

Right after that, said Eurykleia – who could not disguise her gloating pleasure – Odysseus and Telemachus hacked off the ears and nose and hands and feet and genitals of Melanthius the evil goatherd and threw them to the dogs, paying no attention to the poor man's agonized screams. 'They had to make an example of him,' said Eurykleia, 'to discourage any further defections.'

'But which maids?' I cried, beginning to shed tears. 'Dear gods – which maids did they hang?'

'Mistress, dear child,' said Eurykleia, anticipating my displeasure, 'he wanted to kill them all! I had to choose some – otherwise all would have perished!'

'Which ones?' I said, trying to control my emotions.

'Only twelve,' she faltered. 'The impertinent ones. The ones who'd been rude. The ones who used to thumb their noses at me. Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks and her cronies – that lot. They were notorious whores.'

'The ones who'd been raped,' I said. 'The youngest. The most beautiful.' My eyes and ears among the Suitors, I did not add. My helpers during the long nights of the shroud. My snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves.

It was my fault! I hadn't told her of my scheme. 'They let it go to their heads,' said Eurykleia defensively. 'It wouldn't have done for King Odysseus to allow such impertinent girls to continue to serve in the palace. He could never have trusted them. Now come downstairs, dear child. Your husband is waiting to see you.'
What could I do? Lamentation wouldn’t bring my lovely girls back to life. I bit my tongue. It’s a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years.

Dead is dead, I told myself. I’ll say prayers and perform sacrifices for their souls. But I’ll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me, as well.

There could be a more sinister explanation. What if Eurycleia was aware of my agreement with the maids – of their spying on the Suitors for me, of my orders to them to behave rebelliously? What if she singled them out and had them killed out of resentment at being excluded and the desire to retain her inside position with Odysseus?

I haven’t been able to confront her about it, down here. She’s got hold of a dozen dead babies, and is always busy tending them. Happily for her they will never grow up. Whenever I approach and try to engage her in conversation she says, 'Later, my child. Gracious me, I’ve got my hands full! Look at the itty pretty – a wuggle wuggle woo!'

So I’ll never know.
I descended the staircase, considering my choices. I’d pretended not to believe Eurycleia when she told me that it was Odysseus who’d killed the Suitors. Perhaps this man was an imposter, I’d said – how would I know what Odysseus looked like now, after twenty years? I was also wondering how I must seem to him. I’d been very young when he’d sailed away; now I was a matron. How could he fail to be disappointed?

I decided to make him wait: I myself had waited long enough. Also I would need time in order to fully disguise my true feelings about the unfortunate hanging of my twelve young maids.

So when I entered the hall and saw him sitting there, I didn’t say a thing. Telemachus wasted no time: almost immediately he was scolding me for not giving a warmer welcome to his father. Flinty-hearted, he called me scornfully. I could see he had a rosy little picture in his mind: the two of them siding against me, grown men together, two roosters in charge of the henhouse. Of course I wanted the best for him – he was my son, I hoped he would succeed, as a political leader or a warrior or whatever he wanted to be – but at that moment I wished there would be another Trojan War so I could send him off to it and get him out of my hair. Boys with their first beards can be a thorough pain in the neck.

The hardness of my heart was a notion I was glad to foster, however, as it would reassure Odysseus to know I hadn’t been throwing myself into the arms of every man who’d turned up claiming to be him. So I looked at him blankly, and said it was too much for me to swallow, the idea that this dirty, blood-smeared vagabond was the same as my fine husband who had sailed away, so beautifully dressed, twenty years before.
Odysseus grinned – he was looking forward to the big revelation scene, the part where I would say, 'It was you all along! What a terrific disguise!' and throw my arms around his neck. Then he went off to take a much-needed bath. When he came back in clean clothes, smelling a good deal better than when he’d gone, I couldn’t resist teasing him one last time. I ordered Eurycleia to move the bed outside the bedroom of Odysseus, and to make it up for the stranger.

You’ll recall that one post of this bed was carved from a tree still rooted in the ground. Nobody knew about it except Odysseus, myself, and my maid Actoris, from Sparta, who by that time was long dead.

Assuming that someone had cut through his cherished bedpost, Odysseus lost his temper at once. Only then did I relent, and go through the business of recognizing him. I shed a satisfactory number of tears, and embraced him, and claimed that he’d passed the bedpost test, and that I was now convinced.

And so we climbed into the very same bed where we’d spent a great many happy hours when we were first married, before Helen took it into her head to run off with Paris, lighting the fires of war and bringing desolation to my house. I was glad it was dark by then, as in the shadows we both appeared less wizened than we were.

'We’re not spring chickens anymore,' I said.

'That which we are, we are,' said Odysseus.

After a little time had passed and we were feeling pleased with each other, we took up our old habits of story-telling. Odysseus told me of all his travels and difficulties – the nobler versions, with the monsters and the goddesses, rather than the more sordid ones with the innkeepers and whores. He recounted the many lies he’d invented, the false names he’d given himself – telling the Cyclops his name was No One was the cleverest of such tricks, though he’d spoiled it by boasting – and the fraudulent life histories he’d concocted for himself, the better to conceal his identity and his intentions. In my turn, I related the tale of the Suitors, and my trick with the shroud of Laertes, and my deceitful encouragements of the Suitors, and the skilful ways
in which I’d misdirected them and led them on and played them off against one another.

Then he told me how much he’d missed me, and how he’d been filled with longing for me even when enfolded in the white arms of goddesses; and I told him how very many tears I’d shed while waiting twenty years for his return, and how tediously faithful I’d been, and how I would never have even so much as thought of betraying his gigantic bed with its wondrous bedpost by sleeping in it with any other man.

The two of us were – by our own admission proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.

But we did.

Or so we told each other.

No sooner had Odysseus returned than he left again. He said that, much as he hated to tear himself away from me, he’d have to go adventuring again. He’d been told by the spirit of the seer Teiresias that he would have to purify himself by carrying an oar so far inland that the people there would mistake it for a winnowing fan. Only in that way could he rinse the blood of the Suitors from himself, avoid their vengeful ghosts and their vengeful relatives, and pacify the anger of the sea-god Poseidon, who was still furious with him for blinding his son the Cyclops.

It was a likely story. But then, all of his stories were likely.

(The entire manuscript of this text is available from Amazon.com, as well as from various other booksellers.)