

Penelope's Test

Penelope tests Odysseus to prove he really is her husband.

- 1540 Greathearted Odysseus, home at last,
was being bathed now by Eurynome
and rubbed with golden oil, and clothed again
in a fresh tunic and a cloak. Athena
lent him beauty, head to foot. She made him
1545 taller, and massive, too, with crisping hair

1042 ♦ The Epic

Literary Analysis

Epic Simile To what is
Odysseus' hair compared?
Is this comparison an epic
simile?

in curls like petals of wild hyacinth
but all red-golden. Think of gold infused
on silver by a craftsman, whose fine art
Hephaestus* taught him, or Athena: one
1550 whose work moves to delight: just so she lavished
beauty over Odysseus' head and shoulders.
He sat then in the same chair by the pillar,
facing his silent wife, and said:

"Strange woman,
the immortals of Olympus made you hard,
1555 harder than any. Who else in the world
would keep aloof as you do from her husband
if he returned to her from years of trouble,
cast on his own land in the twentieth year?

Nurse, make up a bed for me to sleep on.
1560 Her heart is iron in her breast."

Penelope

spoke to Odysseus now. She said:

"Strange man,
if man you are . . . This is no pride on my part
nor scorn for you—not even wonder, merely.
I know so well how you—how he—appeared
1565 boarding the ship for Troy. But all the same . . .

Make up his bed for him, Eurycleia.
Place it outside the bedchamber my lord
built with his own hands. Pile the big bed
with fleeces, rugs, and sheets of purest linen."

1570 With this she tried him to the breaking point,
and he turned on her in a flash raging:

"Woman, by heaven you've stung me now!
Who dared to move my bed?
No builder had the skill for that—unless
1575 a god came down to turn the trick. No mortal
in his best days could budge it with a crowbar.
There is our pact and pledge, our secret sign,
built into that bed—my handiwork
and no one else's!

An old trunk of olive

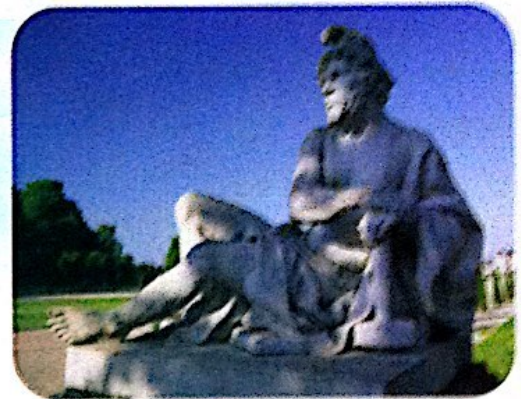
1580 grew like a pillar on the building plot,

Literature

in context *Mythology Connection*

♦ Hephaestus

Any craftsman taught by Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire and metalworking, would be worth his weight in gold. His counterpart in Roman mythology was the mighty fire god Vulcan. Hephaestus was renowned for his work at the forge, crafting such items as Athena's spear, Achilles' shield, and Zeus' thunderbolts. Hephaestus was the only god with a physical deformity, caused when his father Zeus hurled him from Olympus. During his recovery, he learned how to craft beautiful objects from underwater coral and metals.



Statue of Vulcan, Hephaestus' Roman counterpart

✓ Reading Check

How does Odysseus describe Penelope's attitude toward him?

and I laid out our bedroom round that tree,
lined up the stone walls, built the walls and roof,
gave it a doorway and smooth-fitting doors.
Then I lopped off the silvery leaves and branches,
1585 hewed and shaped that stump from the roots up
into a bedpost, drilled it, let it serve
as model for the rest. I planed them all,
inlaid them all with silver, gold and ivory,
and stretched a bed between—a pliant web
1590 of oxhide thongs dyed crimson.

There's our sign!

I know no more. Could someone else's hand
have sawn that trunk and dragged the frame away?"

Their secret! as she heard it told, her knees
grew tremulous and weak, her heart failed her.
1595 With eyes brimming tears she ran to him,
throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him,
murmuring:

"Do not rage at me, Odysseus!

No one ever matched your caution! Think
what difficulty the gods gave: they denied us
1600 life together in our prime and flowering years,
kept us from crossing into age together.
Forgive me, don't be angry. I could not
welcome you with love on sight! I armed myself
long ago against the frauds of men,
1605 impostors who might come—and all those many
whose underhanded ways bring evil on! . . .
But here and now, what sign could be so clear
as this of our own bed?

No other man has ever laid eyes on it—
1610 only my own slave, Actoris, that my father
sent with me as a gift—she kept our door.
You make my stiff heart know that I am yours."

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,
1615 his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,

Reading Strategy

Summarizing How would
you describe Penelope's
feelings in lines
1593–1596?

✓ Reading Check

What difficulty does
Penelope say the gods
gave to her and
Odysseus?

longed for as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer
 spent in rough water where his ship went down
 under Poseidon's blows, gale winds and tons of sea.
 Few men can keep alive through a big surf
 to crawl, clotted with brine, on kindly beaches
 in joy, in joy, knowing the abyss²⁰ behind:
 and so she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband,
 her white arms round him pressed as though forever.

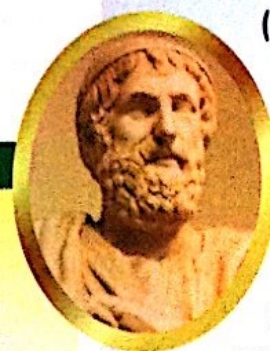
20. **abyss** (ə bis') *n.*
 ocean depths.

The Ending

Odysseus is reunited with his father. Athena commands that peace prevail between Odysseus and the relatives of the slain suitors. Odysseus has regained his family and his kingdom.

Homer

(circa 800 B.C.)



A legendary poet and historian, Homer is credited with two of the most famous and enduring epics of all time: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Their impressive length and scope have resulted in the coining of an adjective from the author's name: *homeric*, meaning "large-scale, massive, or enormous."

Facts about Homer's life have been lost over time. Scholars even disagree about whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written by the same person—and whether Homer existed at all! According to tradition, however, Homer was born in western Asia Minor and he was blind.

In later centuries, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were

Review and Assess

Thinking About the Selection

1. **Respond:** Do you think that Odysseus' revenge is justified? Why or why not?
2. (a) **Recall:** Which act begins Odysseus' revenge on the suitors? (b) **Analyze:** Why does this act catch the suitors by surprise?
3. (a) **Recall:** What planning does Odysseus do before battling the suitors? (b) **Analyze:** How does his planning help him defeat his opponents?
4. (a) **Recall:** How does the fight turn out? (b) **Analyze:** Even though some suitors have been crueler than others, why does Odysseus take equal revenge on all of them?
5. (a) **Recall:** What is Penelope's test, and how does Odysseus pass it? (b) **Infer:** Why does Penelope feel the need to test Odysseus, even though he has abandoned his disguise? (c) **Interpret:** Is the mood after the test altogether happy? Explain.
6. (a) **Connect:** Are Odysseus' actions in dealing with the suitors consistent with his actions in earlier episodes of the epic? Explain. (b) **Assess:** Do you consider him heroic?
7. **Evaluate:** How do you think the problem of the suitors should