

Match Made in Heaven

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"There is nothing nobler or more admirable than when two people who see eye to eye keep house as man and wife, confounding their enemies and delighting their friends."

Homer

That bard created such two people in *The Odyssey*, their contrasting roles concealing the similarities in their natures. Both Penelope and Odysseus dealt with "a world of pain", but in very different settings: she wastes away at home, while he faces a myriad of adventures and sufferings around the Greek world. Although Homer assigned them dissimilar parts in his epic, however, his story still reveals striking resemblances between Odysseus and Penelope: they possess positive qualities and several faults in common as well as one major dissimilarity, all of which are the secrets to their long and blissful marriage and help them to see "eye to eye."

One can easily see why Ithaca's king and queen remained happily united for so many years when looking at the shining characteristics they share. Both are wondrously loyal, even when faced with an abundance of temptations. Over the course of twenty years, Odysseus knew countless lovely women, from Nausicaa to Calypso, yet he remained determined to return to his wife. Likewise, Penelope had her choice of one-hundred and eighty of the best men in Greece all vying for her hand, but she still "falls to weeping for Odysseus" every time she thinks of her beloved husband. Undoubtedly, *The Odyssey's* happy ending could not have occurred without their mutual fidelity. Cunning brilliance is the second attribute common to both Odysseus and Penelope, and it served to reunite them as much as their reciprocal devotion did. Odysseus is known as the "man of twists and turns", and presumably, he used his acumen to select a wife who could match him in matters of the mind. Being the hero of the story, Odysseus's brains are flaunted by Homer in his every action, from his escape from the Cyclops to all the creative stories he

fabricated. But Penelope's wisdom can also be detected within the text, and is crucial to the plot. For example, take the often-retold story of her web, woven and unwoven to keep the suitors at bay for three years, or when in Book 18, she coyly elicited expensive gifts from each suitor to compensate for some of her husband's squandered estate. One can also adduce the test she devised for the suitors as a confirmation of her sagacity: "The hand that can string this bow with the greatest ease...he is the man I follow." Penelope knows very well that it is highly unlikely that one of her brazen suitors could muster the strength needed to shoot "*his* polished bow": it was just another clever way postpone marriage. Had Penelope not "sp[un] out her wiles", much like her husband had done abroad, the lovely queen of Ithaca would probably have been coerced into an unwanted union long before Odysseus returned.

Not only are the queen and king of Ithaca alike for possessing dominant traits of loyalty and astuteness, they also share several shortcomings. Firstly, although they are devoted enough to pine for each other for two decades, neither were one hundred percent loyal to their spouse. Odysseus did not remain faithful to Penelope, sleeping with Circe, then Calypso, and perhaps some mortal women unworthy of being mentioned as well. Odysseus claims that he lay with the Circe for the sake of diplomacy, but if so, then why did he stay in her "arching caverns" for over a year, leaving only at his crew's urging? Homer also hints at Odysseus's voluntary treachery during his seven-year detainment with Calypso, including lines such as "they lost themselves in love", and "since the nymph no longer pleased." Is the bard implying that the nymph with lovely braids once pleased him, and thus, he willingly copulated with her? Penelope, being a woman, could not have had such affaires d'amour and still be considered loyal. However, because she was only a woman, she still harbored an innate desire to attract men. In Book 18, she fulfilled Athena's wish that she should "display herself to her suitors, fan their hearts, inflame them more" in order to receive the suitors' gifts, but perchance also to satisfy her own longing for attention - after all, Penelope is a woman whose husband has been gone

for more than twenty years. She succeeds in accomplishing both: After she descends the stairs, "the suitor's knees went slack, their hearts dissolved with lust" and they showered her with "gorgeous presents." Homer seems to reiterate this fact that Penelope enjoyed the courtship of so many fine, young princes, even though her suitors were a burden and a plague to the household. Book 19 includes a passage describing a dream Penelope had, in which an eagle, which later reveals himself as Odysseus, destroys her flock of geese by "snap[ping] their necks and kill[ing] them one and all", the geese obviously symbolizing her gaggle of suitors. Penelope is comforted by this dream and seems to hope that it foreshadows future events, but also acknowledged that she "wept and wailed" and was "sobbing, stricken" at the slaying of her geese. Hence, though Penelope does remain honorable and is faithful to Odysseus during the twenty years when they were apart, she still, perhaps subconsciously, fostered a desire to do otherwise. However, Penelope's slight interest in her suitors may not be a have been such a bad thing; on the contrary, it could have inspired her to forgive her husband more easily if he ever told her of his dalliances with goddesses. Second, both Odysseus and Penelope are characterized as "wary", and although their caution helped them to succeed in many situations, both are overly circumspect at times, causing them to be suspicious of those who love them most. One of the most tense and heartbreaking scenes in the book takes place in Book 23, when Penelope is face to face with her devout husband for the first time after twenty years of separation, yet refuses to acknowledge him, prompting Telemachus to reproach:

"What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?

Holding back from her husband, home at last for *her*

After bearing twenty years of brutal struggle-

Your heart was always harder than a rock!"

Her son is right, but Penelope still refused to speak to Odysseus, even after Telemachus's rebuking, causing the great-hearted Odysseus to "blaze up in fury" over his wife's distrust. An analogous incident took place later between Odysseus and his old father.

Seeing Laertes in the orchard, Odysseus observed him sitting alone, "his heart racked with sorrow", a sight enough to make even "long-enduring Odysseus" stop to weep. Yet, even so, Odysseus decided to test the old man first, to "reproach him with words that cut him to the core." It was wholly unnecessary to verify the loyalty of Laertes, for after all, the man is his father and if that were not enough, Odysseus had heard testimonies to Laertes's grief from Eumaeus as well as his own mother in Hades. Odysseus's often-praised caution prompted him to be rather irrational in his handling of the situation, telling a tale that causes his dear father to grieve even more: "Both hands clawing the ground for dirt and grime, he poured it over his grizzled head, sobbing, in spasms." His suspicion inflicts unnecessary pain on his father, much as Penelope's caution angered him; nevertheless, it is because their minds operate in such a similar fashion that they are able to understand each other's rash actions, caused by that extreme "wariness" which dominates their reasoning. It was because of their faults that Odysseus and Penelope could see "eye to eye."

But for all their innate likenesses, one main difference remains between the hero and heroine of *The Odyssey*: Odysseus has pride, a kind of virile self-regard that Penelope surely lacks, for better or for worse. Odysseus's excessive self-respect gets him into many difficult circumstances: his odyssey of misery would not have occurred had he not revealed his identity to the Cyclops because he could not bear being remembered as "Nobody". One cannot imagine that Penelope would find ever herself into such a predicament. However, there are some instances during the plot of *The Odyssey* when Penelope should have displayed more dignity. Several times throughout the story, Telemachus scolds her in a disrespectful manner, telling her to "Tend to your [Penelope's] own tasks", declaring that he "hold[s] the reins of power in this house." Penelope didn't put her teenage son in his proper place, opting instead to meekly withdraw to her own quarters. Had Telemachus spoken similar words to his father, Odysseus's ego certainly wouldn't have allowed such a lack of reverence, and

Telemachus most likely would have received some tough love at his hands. Pride is the only significant distinction between the characters of Odysseus and Penelope, but it is a meaningful difference as well. If Ithaca's queen was as self-righteous as its king, one could expect many royal family squabbles instead of the marital bliss they are famed for. Penelope is modest and demure, attributes that are absolutely necessary in order to live in harmony with a proud man like Odysseus.

In conclusion, Odysseus and Penelope are alike in almost every respect, with their good qualities holding them together, their faults leading to understanding, and their one dissimilarity producing compatibility. That is why they were able to build the strongest kind of love, the love described in I Corinthians 13:7 : " Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance." *The Odyssey* itself is a testimony to this kind of bond between husband and wife, a bond forged by harmonious natures, able to survive through twenty years of separation, temptation, and suffering.