

AUTHOR OF THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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'Fabulous . . . irreverent'  
*New York Times*

'As potent as a curse'  
*Sunday Times*

# THE PENELOPIAD



• THE CANONS •

## Introduction

The story of Odysseus' return to his home kingdom of Ithaca following an absence of twenty years is best known from Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus is said to have spent half of these years fighting the Trojan War and the other half wandering around the Aegean Sea, trying to get home, enduring hardships, conquering or evading monsters, and sleeping with goddesses. The character of 'wily Odysseus' has been much commented on: he's noted as a persuasive liar and disguise artist – a man who lives by his wits, who devises stratagems and tricks, and who is sometimes too clever for his own good. His divine helper is Pallas Athene, a goddess who admires Odysseus for his ready inventiveness.

In *The Odyssey*, Penelope – daughter of Icarius of Sparta, and cousin of the beautiful Helen of Troy – is portrayed as the quintessential faithful wife, a woman known for her intelligence and constancy. In

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addition to weeping and praying for the return of Odysseus, she cleverly deceives the many Suitors who are swarming around her palace, eating up Odysseus' estate in an attempt to force her to marry one of them. Not only does Penelope lead them on with false promises, she weaves a shroud that she unravels at night, delaying her marriage decision until its completion. Part of *The Odyssey* concerns her problems with her teenaged son, Telemachus, who is bent on asserting himself not only against the troublesome and dangerous Suitors, but against his mother as well. The book draws to an end with the slaughter of the Suitors by Odysseus and Telemachus, the hanging of twelve of the maids who have been sleeping with the Suitors, and the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope.

But Homer's *Odyssey* is not the only version of the story. Mythic material was originally oral, and also local – a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another. I have drawn on material other than *The Odyssey*, especially for the details of Penelope's parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumours circulating about her.

## INTRODUCTION

I've chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids. The maids form a chanting and singing Chorus which focuses on two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to? The story as told in *The Odyssey* doesn't hold water: there are too many inconsistencies. I've always been haunted by the hanged maids; and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself.



## A Low Art

*Now that I'm dead I know everything.* This is what I wished would happen, but like so many of my wishes it failed to come true. I know only a few factoids that I didn't know before. Death is much too high a price to pay for the satisfaction of curiosity, needless to say.

Since being dead – since achieving this state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness – I've learned some things I would rather not know, as one does when listening at windows or opening other people's letters. You think you'd like to read minds? Think again.

Down here everyone arrives with a sack, like the sacks used to keep the winds in, but each of these sacks is full of words – words you've spoken, words you've heard, words that have been said about you. Some sacks are very small, others large; my own is

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of a reasonable size, though a lot of the words in it concern my eminent husband. What a fool he made of me, some say. It was a specialty of his: making fools. He got away with everything, which was another of his specialties: getting away.

He was always so plausible. Many people have believed that his version of events was the true one, give or take a few murders, a few beautiful seductresses, a few one-eyed monsters. Even I believed him, from time to time. I knew he was tricky and a liar, I just didn't think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me. Hadn't I been faithful? Hadn't I waited, and waited, and waited, despite the temptation – almost the compulsion – to do otherwise? And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been? That was the line they took, the singers, the yarn-spinners. *Don't follow my example*, I want to scream in your ears – yes, yours! But when I try to scream, I sound like an owl.

## A LOW ART

Of course I had inklings, about his slipperiness, his wiliness, his foxiness, his – how can I put this? – his unscrupulousness, but I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut; or, if I opened it, I sang his praises. I didn't contradict, I didn't ask awkward questions, I didn't dig deep. I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages.

But after the main events were over and things had become less legendary, I realised how many people were laughing at me behind my back – how they were jeering, making jokes about me, jokes both clean and dirty; how they were turning me into a story, or into several stories, though not the kind of stories I'd prefer to hear about myself. What can a woman do when scandalous gossip travels the world? If she defends herself she sounds guilty. So I waited some more.

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work myself up to it: it's a low

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art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it, strolling beggars, blind singers, maidservants, children – folks with time on their hands. Once, people would have laughed if I'd tried to play the minstrel – there's nothing more preposterous than an aristocrat fumbling around with the arts – but who cares about public opinion now? The opinion of the people down here: the opinion of shadows, of echoes. So I'll spin a thread of my own.

The difficulty is that I have no mouth through which I can speak. I can't make myself understood, not in your world, the world of bodies, of tongues and fingers; and most of the time I have no listeners, not on your side of the river. Those of you who may catch the odd whisper, the odd squeak, so easily mistake my words for breezes rustling the dry reeds, for bats at twilight, for bad dreams.

But I've always been of a determined nature. Patient, they used to call me. I like to see a thing through to the end.

The Chorus Line:  
A Rope-Jumping Rhyme

we are the maids  
the ones you killed  
the ones you failed

we danced in air  
our bare feet twitched  
it was not fair

with every goddess, queen, and bitch  
from there to here  
you scratched your itch

we did much less  
than what you did  
you judged us bad

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you had the spear  
you had the word  
at your command

we scrubbed the blood  
of our dead  
paramours from floors, from chairs

from stairs, from doors,  
we knelt in water  
while you stared

at our bare feet  
it was not fair  
you licked our fear

it gave you pleasure  
you raised your hand  
you watched us fall

we danced on air  
the ones you failed  
the ones you killed

## 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 semi-divine 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

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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

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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 Icarus 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

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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 façade 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

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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.