

Waiting from THE PENELOPIAD

By Margaret Atwood

What can I tell you about the next ten years? Odysseus sailed away to Troy. I stayed in Ithaca. The sun rose, traveled across the sky, set. Only sometimes did I think of it as the flaming chariot of Helios. The moon did the same, changing from phase to phase. Only sometimes did I think of it as the silver boat of Artemis. Spring, summer, fall, and winter followed one another in their appointed rounds. Quite often the wind blew. Telemachus grew from year to year, eating a lot of meat, indulged by all.

We had news of how the war with Troy was going: sometimes well, sometimes badly. Minstrels sang songs about the notable heroes - Achilles, Ajax, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Hector, Aeneas, and the rest. I didn't care about them: I waited only for news of Odysseus. When would he come back and relieve my boredom? He too appeared in the songs, and I relished those moments. There he was making an inspiring speech, there he was uniting the quarrelling factions, there he was inventing an astonishing falsehood, there he was delivering sage advice, there he was disguising himself as a runaway slave and sneaking into Troy and speaking with Helen herself, who - the song proclaimed - had bathed him and anointed him with her very own hands.

I wasn't so fond of that part.

Finally, there he was, concocting the stratagem of the wooden horse filled with soldiers. And then - the news flashed from beacon to beacon - Troy had fallen. There were reports of a great slaughtering and looting in the city. The streets ran red with blood, the sky above the palace turned to fire; innocent boy children were thrown off a cliff, and the Trojan women were parceled out as plunder, King Priam's daughters among them. And then, finally, the hope-for news arrived: the Greek ships had set sail for home.

And then, nothing.

Day after day I would climb up to the top floor of the palace and look over the harbor. Day after day there was no sign. Sometimes there were ships, but never the ship I longed to see.

Rumors came, carried by other ships. Odysseus and his men had got drunk at their first port of call and the men had mutinied, said some; no, said others, they'd eaten a magic plant that had caused them to lose their memories, and Odysseus had saved them by having them tied up and carried onto the ships. Odysseus had been in a fight with a giant one-eyed Cyclops, said some; no, it was only a one-eyed tavern keeper, said another, and the fight was over non-payment of the bill. Some of the men had been eaten by cannibals, said some; no, it was just a brawl of the usual kind, said others, with ear-bittings and nosebleeds and stabbings and eviscerations. Odysseus was the guest of a goddess on an enchanted isle, said some; she'd turned his men into pigs - not a hard job in my view - but had turned them back into men because she'd fallen in love with him and was feeding him unheard-of delicacies prepared by her own immortal hands, and the two of them made love deliriously every night; no, said others, it was just an expensive whorehouse, and he was sponging off the Madam.

Needless to say, the minstrels took up these themes and embroidered them considerably. They always sang the noblest versions in my presence - the ones in which Odysseus was clever, brave, and resourceful, and battling supernatural monsters, and beloved of goddesses. The only reason he hadn't come back home was that a god - the sea-god Poseidon, according to some - was against him, because a Cyclops crippled by Odysseus was his son. Or several gods were against him. Or the Fates. Or something. For surely - the minstrels implied, by way of praising me - only a strong divine power could keep my husband from rushing back as quickly as possible into my loving - and lovely - wifely arms.

The more thickly they laid it on, the more costly were the gifts they expected from me. I always complied. Even an obvious fabrication is some comfort when you have few others.

http://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/print/penelopiad_print.html

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