

# Tales from Ancient Greece

## 8. ODYSSEUS AND PENELOPE

- HERMES            Imagine. You've been away from home for twenty years. For ten of them you've been at war and the other ten you've been trying to sail home, but your ship's been blown this way that way across the sea, into danger after danger. That's what had happened to Odysseus and I couldn't understand why Athena, goddess of wisdom, hadn't done anything to help him. So I told her so. But she just said:
- ATHENA            Oh, Hermes, I know I've taken years to help Odysseus get home, but I couldn't support him openly: I couldn't offend my uncle.
- HERMES            Your uncle?
- ATHENA            Yes: Poseidon, the sea-god. He was furious with Odysseus for blinding his son the Cyclops. That's why he's tormented him all these years and not allowed him reach home.
- HERMES            But Odysseus is desperate to get home. Hasn't he suffered enough?
- ATHENA            Oh, I suppose you're right. Go and tell him that I'll help him soon.
- HERMES            Great! What are you going to do?
- ATHENA            I'll think of something. Don't keep on!
- HERMES            I didn't know if I could trust her: she didn't seem that bothered. But I flew down to tell Odysseus what she'd said. I found him, all alone in the blazing sun, sprawled on a raft that had washed up on an island –
- ODYSSEUS        Penelope, my beloved wife, and Telemachus, my son. Will I ever see you again?
- HERMES            I flew down and landed beside him - Odysseus, king!
- ODYSSEUS        Hermes – god! What brings you here?
- HERMES            Athena's sent me to tell you she's going to help.
- ODYSSEUS        Is she now? Ha!



8. Odysseus and Penelope

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HERMES I know where you're coming from, but honestly, I think she meant it.

ODYSSEUS Where's she been all these years? Why has she left me to suffer so much?

HERMES You've every right to be upset, but she seems to be –

ODYSSEUS Look – someone's coming across the sand to us!

HERMES A tall woman with a bronze helmet. I knew who she was at once.

HERMES Athena! She's kept her word – she's come to help you.

And so she had -

ATHENA The first thing you should know, Odysseus, is that this island is Ithaca.

ODYSSEUS Ithaca?!

ATHENA Yes, you're home!

ODYSSEUS I'm home!

ATHENA But don't get too excited. Things are a bit - sticky - at the palace.

ODYSSEUS 'Sticky'? Meaning what?

ATHENA Well, you can't expect everything to be still the same when you've been away for twenty years.

ODYSSEUS It's hardly my fault! I didn't want to go to Troy in the first place, remember?!

ATHENA Now, then -

HERMES Keep calm.

ODYSSEUS All right. But what is it, what's going on?

ATHENA Well, your wife Penelope is still quite a beauty -

ODYSSEUS Yes –

ATHENA So obviously she's attracted some attention -

ODYSSEUS What?



## 8. Odysseus and Penelope

- ATHENA Quite a lot, actually.
- ODYSSEUS What are you saying?
- ATHENA Suitors. Suitors galore are in your palace: they've been there for months. Nobles and princes from every neighbouring land, seeking Penelope's hand in marriage.
- ODYSSEUS But she's already married! To me!
- ATHENA Ah, yes, but you see, everyone thinks you're dead.
- ODYSSEUS What? Not - ?
- ATHENA No, not Penelope. Your wife's hoping and praying you're still alive.
- ODYSSEUS So she doesn't - ?
- ATHENA No, she doesn't want to marry any of them. Keeps putting them off.
- ATHENA But now it's getting a bit –
- HERMES A bit hairy?
- ATHENA A bit hairy. They're insisting you must be dead and demanding that she chooses one of them. They've given her till tomorrow to decide.
- ODYSSEUS What?! What's my son Telemachus doing to stop it?
- ATHENA Ah, well that's the real problem, you see. They're planning to kill him.
- ODYSSEUS What?! Kill my son?!
- ATHENA He's been away, looking for you everywhere. And while he's been gone they've been plotting his murder.
- ODYSSEUS Oh! What can I do?!
- ATHENA The first thing is we can't have you looking like that.
- ODYSSEUS How do you expect me to look, with news like this?!
- ATHENA No, I mean looking like a king. Your clothes are worn but still royal. So let's see what we can do.



## 8. Odysseus and Penelope

HERMES                    And the goddess Athena turned Odysseus into a tramp! Suddenly his skin was shrivelled, his cheeks hollow, his hair thin and he was dressed in rags.

ODYSSEUS                What's the point of this?!

ATHENA                    The nobles mustn't know who you are or they'll kill you on the spot. So: next - go to the palace and start begging – I'll see to the rest.

HERMES                    Odysseus wasn't sure what she'd got in mind and neither was I: that Athena, she doesn't give a lot away.

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HERMES                    So off to the palace went Odysseus, turned by Athena into a shabby, smelly tramp, where he arrived in the middle of a feast. The nobles were having a high old time, drinking all the palace wine, eating all the palace food. I thought Odysseus would explode. But he kept calm and played the part of the beggar rather well.

ODYSSEUS                If it please you, noble sirs, show charity to a poor man who's fallen on hard times.

1st SUITOR                The floor's even harder – fall on that!

HERMES                    And I saw a supposedly noble man kick Odysseus to the floor.

ODYSSEUS                Kicking's no more than I deserve, I know, but can you spare me a little something from your very well loaded plates? A scrap is all I ask for.

2nd SUITOR                You'll get a scrap all right – I'll take you on!

HERMES                    And poor Odysseus was kicked while he was down. So much for Athena's disguise! But suddenly Penelope, Odysseus's wife, came in to see what was happening.

PENELOPE                Stop this! Stop! This is no way to behave!

1st SUITOR                He's just a beggar. One fewer will be no loss.

2nd SUITOR                Blame it on boredom, lady. How else are we meant to pass the time while we wait for your decision?

1st SUITOR                In fact let's make a deal: we spare the beggar – we let him go – if you agree to decide at last: which of us is to be your husband?



## 8. Odysseus and Penelope

- PENELOPE I've already said I'll decide tomorrow.
- 2nd SUITOR No! No more delay! Decide tonight - or this beggar dies!
- PENELOPE What?!
- 1ST SUITOR Decide!
- PENELOPE Very well. Tonight. I'll give my hand to whichever one of you proves most skilful with the bow.
- 1st SUITOR The bow, eh? Excellent! What's the test?
- PENELOPE You must shoot an arrow through the twelve axes hung there on the wall.
- 1st SUITOR How's that? How can you shoot an arrow through an axe?
- PENELOPE Each axe has a round hole bored through its head.
- 1st SUITOR Oh, so it has.
- PENELOPE Take the axes down and plant them upright in a row, with the holes all in a line. My husband Odysseus could shoot an arrow straight and true, through all the twelve holes. If any of you can do the same, you're worthy to take his place.
- 2nd SUITOR A fine test! Excellent!
- 1st SUITOR If Odysseus could do it, so can we!
- PENELOPE Prepare yourselves. And in the meantime give this poor man here to me, to tend his bruises.
- HERMES So Penelope took the tramp by the arm, never guessing he was her long-lost husband, and led him to her private chamber -
- PENELOPE Telemachus, fetch water.
- HERMES And Odysseus's son Telemachus, just back from seeking news of him, quickly brought a bowl of water.
- TELEMACHUS Here. No, don't touch – let us bathe your wounds.





8. Odysseus and Penelope

HERMES I could see tears welling in Odysseus's eyes. He was wondering if he should tell them who he was, or if the goddess meant him to stay disguised. And, it was then, as his wife and son sat bathing the bruises on his legs and arms, that the door seemed to open by itself - and an old hound, a hunting dog, came hobbling painfully into the room. He stopped when he saw Odysseus then tried to wag his poor old stump of a tail. Then he limped up to Odysseus - laid his head in his lap and died.

PENELOPE Ah, poor dog!

ODYSSEUS Argus! Argus, my old friend!

PENELOPE Argus? How do you know his name?

ODYSSEUS Twenty years ago no dog could outrun him!

PENELOPE He's - he's kept himself alive these twenty years, waiting for his master to return. And now -

ATHENA Now he's seen his master, and can die.

PENELOPE Athena! Goddess!

HERMES Suddenly Athena was there. She does love to make an entrance.

PENELOPE Then this is my husband?

ODYSSEUS Penelope.

ATHENA It is. But there's no time to lose. Listen: you've set them the test of the bow and the axes.

PENELOPE Yes.

ATHENA So they'll come armed with bows. Telemachus?

TELEMACHUS Goddess?

ATHENA They're planning to kill you.

TELEMACHUS What?!

ATHENA So you must go to work with Hermes.

TELEMACHUS Hermes?



## 8. Odysseus and Penelope

- HERMES            Hi! I'm here as well.
- I quite like making an entrance myself!
- ATHENA            You and Hermes must gather up their bows as soon as they lay them down.
- TELEMACHUS      Understood.
- PENELOPE        But why will they lay down their bows?
- ATHENA            Because you will insist they use your husband's bow, Odysseus's bow, and that bow alone.
- PENELOPE        It hasn't been strung or used for twenty years!
- ATHENA            No. They'll have to string it first. Go, lady, go, Telemachus – you, too, Odysseus, but stay disguised.
- HERMES            And back to the hall they went the goddess and I following behind, invisible.
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- HERMES            As we all went back into the hall, the nobles and princes were standing ready, their bows and arrows in hand. They'd taken the twelve axes from their hooks on the wall and planted them upright in a row, the holes in the axe-heads all in a perfect line. When they saw Telemachus walk in, I could see their fingers twitching: they were wondering if they should kill him there and then.
- PENELOPE        So, let the test begin. But only one bow must be used – this bow, the great bow of Odysseus, my husband.
- 1ST SUITOR        Ex-husband!
- PENELOPE        Here is the bow, and here's the string. Who'll be the first to string the bow and shoot? The first to pass the test will win my hand.
- HERMES            And they all rushed forward to grab the bow. But no one could bend the bow enough to fit the string. Each of them tried in turn...they strained and strove, but –
- 2ND SUITOR        It's impossible! The bow's too strong!
- 1ST SUITOR        We'll use our own!
- 2ND SUITOR        Aye!



## 8. Odysseus and Penelope

- 1ST SUITOR But where are they?
- HERMES Ah! They'd been too busy to notice: Yours Truly and Telemachus, we'd smuggled all their bows away!
- PENELOPE Not your own, no! It must be Odysseus's bow.
- 1ST SUITOR But we've all tried to string it and it can't be done!
- PENELOPE No – not all of you in the hall have tried. What about our friend here?
- 1ST SUITOR What, the tramp?!
- 2ND SUITOR That pile of rags?!
- PENELOPE Leave him be! He is a guest here in my house and I say he shall be allowed his turn! Give him the bow, Telemachus.
- HERMES And Odysseus's son handed the bow and the bowstring to his father. Odysseus turned the bow one way, then the other, seeing if it was damaged after lying unused for twenty years.
- 1ST SUITOR Oh, quite the expert on bows!
- 2ND SUITOR Maybe he keeps a collection at home!
- HERMES And as easily as a minstrel strings his lyre, Odysseus bent the bow and fixed the string without the slightest effort. Then he tested the string and it sang as he plucked it:
- PENELOPE Sweet as a swallow's note! What do you say now, sirs?
- 1ST SUITOR Er – impressive - for a wretched beggar. But let's see if he can shoot.
- PENELOPE Let's see, indeed. Telemachus, give our friend an arrow.
- 1ST SUITOR No, give him the whole quiver – he'll need more than one shot!
- PENELOPE Very well – give him all the arrows.
- HERMES And Odysseus took the quiver full of arrows and slung it across his back. I suddenly felt Athena at my shoulder, and I looked up and saw her eyes flashing. I had a terrible feeling about what was going to happen.





## 8. Odysseus and Penelope

- PENELOPE      Come, friend: see the axes in a line? With a round ring bored in each head? Shoot your arrow through all twelve rings, and you shall be my husband!
- 1ST SUITOR      Not a chance!
- 2ND SUITOR      No chance at all!
- HERMES          Odysseus fitted the arrow on the string, drew back the arrow and string together, and -
- The arrow sped clean and true, right through every axe-head: it didn't miss a single one.
- 1ST SUITOR      Impossible!
- 2ND SUITOR      It's a trick!
- 1ST SUITOR      The filthy rogue's a conjuror!
- ODYSSEUS        No, sirs. No conjuror - but a king!
- HERMES          Suddenly he was a beggar no more! Athena had turned him back into his true shape!
- ODYSSEUS        Odysseus, king of this isle of Ithaca. Telemachus, bar the door.
- TELEMACHUS     Yes, father!
- ODYSSEUS        You came here and thought to take my wife. For months you've been stuffing yourselves with my food and wine! You even planned to kill my son! Your fate is sealed.
- HERMES          Arrow after arrow flew from the bow. They tried to hide, to scramble clear, but every single arrow found its target. And at last, the quiver was empty, all the arrows gone, and every prince and nobleman lay dead.
- ODYSSEUS        My beloved wife, Penelope. My dear son, Telemachus. We're together now and I'll never go to war again.
- HERMES          So Odysseus was home, returned to his wife and son, and king again.
- I wonder what you make of that? A happy ending? Well, whatever you make of it – I hope at least you'll agree with what I said at the very start: that the earth, and everything in it, is alive – and life is full of wonders.

