

CHAPTER  
**5**

Section 1

LITERATURE SELECTION *from Odyssey*  
by Homer

*The Odyssey, the second of Homer's epics, tells the story of Odysseus and his ten-year journey home from the Trojan War after taking part in a ten-year siege of Troy by the Greeks. In this excerpt, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is reunited with his wife Penelope after killing all of his rivals who wanted to marry her. To the annoyance of their son Telemachus, Penelope refuses to believe that Odysseus has returned. As you read, think about how Penelope is finally persuaded of her husband's identity.*

Penelope spoke, and came down from the chamber, her heart pondering  
much, whether to keep away and question her dear husband,  
or to go up to him and kiss his head, taking his hands.  
But then, when she came in and stepped over the stone threshold,  
5 she sat across from him in the firelight, facing Odysseus,  
by the opposite wall, while he was seated by the tall pillar,  
looking downward, and waiting to find out if his majestic  
wife would have anything to say to him, now that she saw him.  
She sat a long time in silence, and her heart was wondering.  
10 Sometimes she would look at him, with her eyes full upon him,  
and again would fail to know him in the foul clothing he wore.  
Telemachos spoke to her and called her by name and scolded her:  
“My mother, my harsh mother with the hard heart inside you,  
why do you withdraw so from my father, and do not  
15 sit beside him and ask him questions and find out about him?  
No other woman, with spirit as stubborn as yours, would keep back  
as you are doing from her husband who, after much suffering,  
came at last in the twentieth year back to his own country.  
But always you have a heart that is harder than stone within you.”  
20 Circumspect [wise; careful] Penelope said to him in answer:  
“My child, the spirit that is in me is full of wonderment,  
and I cannot find anything to say to him, nor question him,  
nor look him straight in the face. But if he is truly Odysseus,  
and he has come home, then we shall find other ways, and better,  
25 to recognize each other, for we have signs that we know of  
between the two of us only, but they are secret from others.”  
So she spoke, and much-enduring noble Odysseus  
smiled, and presently spoke in winged words to Telemachos:  
“Telemachos, leave your mother to examine me in the palace  
30 as she will, and presently she will understand better;  
but now that I am dirty and wear foul clothing upon me,  
she dislikes me for that, and says I am not her husband.  
But let us make our plans how all will come out best for us.  
For when one has killed only one man in a community,  
35 and then there are not many avengers to follow, even  
so, he flees into exile, leaving kinsmen and country.  
But we have killed what held the city together, the finest  
young men in Ithaka. It is what I would have you consider.”  
Then the thoughtful Telemachos said to him in answer:

40 “You must look to this yourself, dear father; for they say  
you have the best mind among men for craft, and there is  
no other man among mortal men who can contend with you.  
We shall follow you eagerly; I think that we shall not  
come short in warcraft, in so far as the strength stays with us.”

45 Then resourceful Odysseus spoke in turn and answered him:  
“So I will tell you the way of it, how it seems best to me.  
First, all go and wash, and put your tunics upon you,  
and tell the women in the palace to choose out their clothing.  
Then let the inspired singer take his clear-sounding lyre,  
50 and give us the lead for festive dance, so that anyone  
who is outside, some one of the neighbors, or a person going  
along the street, who hears us, will think we are having a wedding.  
Let no rumor go abroad in the town that the suitors  
have been murdered, until such time as we can make our way  
55 out to our estate with its many trees, and once there  
see what profitable plan the Olympian shows us.”  
So he spoke, and they listened well to him and obeyed him.  
First they went and washed, and put their tunics upon them,  
and the women arrayed themselves in their finery, while the inspired  
60 singer took up his hollowed lyre and stirred up within them  
the impulse for the sweetness of song and the stately dancing.  
Now the great house resounded aloud to the thud of their footsteps,  
as the men celebrated there, and fair-girdled women;  
and thus would a person speak outside the house who heard them:  
65 “Surely now someone has married our much-sought-after  
queen; hard-hearted, she had no patience to keep the great house  
for her own wedded lord to the end, till he came back to her.”  
So would a person speak, but they did not know what had happened.  
Now the housekeeper Eurynome bathed great-hearted  
70 Odysseus in his own house, and anointed him with olive oil,  
and threw a beautiful mantle and a tunic about him;  
and over his head Athene suffused [spread over] great beauty, to make him  
taller to behold and thicker, and on his head she arranged  
the curling locks that hung down like hyacinthine petals.  
75 And as when a master craftsman overlays gold on silver,  
and he is one who was taught by Hephaistos [Greek god of fire] and Pallas Athene  
in art complete, and grace is on every work he finishes;  
so Athene gilded with grace his head and his shoulders.  
Then, looking like an immortal, he strode forth from the bath,  
80 and came back then and sat on the chair from which he had risen,  
opposite his wife, and now he spoke to her, saying:  
“You are so strange. The gods, who have their homes on Olympos,  
have made your heart more stubborn than for the rest of womankind.  
No other woman, with spirit as stubborn as yours, would keep back  
85 as you are doing from her husband who, after much suffering,  
came at last in the twentieth year back to his own country.  
Come then, nurse, make me up a bed, so that I can use it  
here; for this woman has a heart of iron within her.”  
Circumspect Penelope said to him in answer:  
90 “You are so strange. I am not being proud, nor indifferent,

nor puzzled beyond need, but I know very well what you looked like when you went in the ship with the sweeping oars, from Ithaka. Come then, Eurykleia, and make up a firm bed for him outside the well-fashioned chamber: that very bed that he himself

95 built. Put the firm bed here outside for him, and cover it over with fleeces and blankets, and with shining coverlets.” So she spoke to her husband, trying him out, but Odysseus spoke in anger to his virtuous-minded lady:

100 “What you have said, dear lady, has hurt my heart deeply. What man has put my bed in another place? But it would be difficult for even a very expert one, unless a god, coming to help in person, were easily to change its position. But there is no mortal man alive, no strong man, who lightly could move the weight elsewhere. There is one particular feature

105 in the bed’s construction. I myself, no other man, made it. There was the bole of an olive tree with long leaves growing strongly in the courtyard, and it was thick, like a column. I laid down my chamber around this, and built it, until I finished it, with close-set stones, and roofed it well over,

110 and added the compacted doors, fitting closely together. Then I cut away the foliage of the long-leaved olive, and trimmed the trunk from the roots up, planing it with a brazen adze [axe-like tool], well and expertly, and trued it straight to a chalkline, making a bed post of it, and bored all holes with an auger.

115 I began with this and built my bed, until it was finished, and decorated it with gold and silver and ivory. Then I lashed it with thongs of oxhide, dyed bright with purple. There is its character, as I tell you; but I do not know now, dear lady, whether my bed is still in place, or if some man

120 has cut underneath the stump of the olive, and moved it elsewhere.” So he spoke, and her knees and the heart within her went slack as she recognized the clear proofs that Odysseus had given; but then she burst into tears and ran straight to him, throwing her arms around the neck of Odysseus, and kissed his head, saying:

125 “Do not be angry with me, Odysseus, since, beyond other men, you have the most understanding. The gods granted us misery, in jealousy over the thought that we two, always together, should enjoy our youth, and then come to the threshold of old age. Then do not now be angry with me nor blame me, because

130 I did not greet you, as I do now, at first when I saw you. For always the spirit deep in my very heart was fearful that some one of mortal men would come my way and deceive me with words. For there are many who scheme for wicked advantage.

from Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad and the Odyssey* of Homer. Reprinted in *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1993), 524–528.

## Discussion Questions

1. **Recognizing Effects** How does Penelope respond before she is sure that Odysseus is her husband?
2. **Clarifying** What proof does Odysseus give that he is Penelope’s husband?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Based on your reading of this excerpt, what kind of person do you think Penelope is?