



## Exploring the classical world

*Homer's people*

### Chris Emlyn-Jones

Now for something rather different. Later in book IV the scene has shifted back to Ithaca. Telemachus' mother, Penelope has discovered not only that her son has gone for news of his father, but the suitors are planning to murder him on his way home. This is her reaction. You will find the passage in *Odyssey IV*, lines 703-41 and it's in the *Odyssey* set book, pages 83 - 4. Listen to the passage read and, as before, consider again what kind of passage this is and how Homer presents the details. Think particularly about how Homer characterises Penelope.

### Lucie Fitchett

So he spoke and her knees gave way and the heart in her. She stayed a long time without a word, speechless and her eyes filled with tears. The springing voice was held still within her. At long last she found words to speak to him and answer. Herald, why is my child gone from me? There was no reason for him to board fast running ships which serve as horses for men on the salt sea and they crossed the expanses of water. Must it be so that even his name shall be gone from men's minds?

Medon then, a thoughtful man, spoke to her in answer. "I do not know whether some God moved him or whether his own mind had the impulse to go to Pylos in order to find out about his father's homecoming or what fate he had met with".

So speaking he went away back into the house of Odysseus and a cloud of heart-wasting sorrow was on her. She had no strength left to sit down in a chair, though there were many there in the palace, but sat down on the floor of her own well wrought bed chamber, weeping pitifully. And about her, her maids were wailing, all who were in the house with her, both young and old ones. To them, weeping constantly, Penelope spoke now, "hear me dear friends, the Olympian has given me sorrows beyond all others who were born and brought up together with me, for first I lost a husband with the heart of a lion and who among the Danaans surpassed in all virtues and great, whose fame goes wide through Hellas and mid most Argos and now again the storm winds have caught again my beloved son, without trace from the halls and I never heard when he left me. Hard-hearted, not one out of all of you then remembered to wake me out of my bed, though your minds knew all clearly when he went out and away to board the hollow black ship. For if I had heard that he was considering this journey, then he would have had to stay, though hastening to his voyage or he would have had to leave me dead in the halls. So now let someone make her way quickly and summon the old man Dolios, my own servant whom my father gave me to have as I came here and he keeps an orchard full of trees for me, so that he may go with speed to Laertes and sit beside him and tell him all. And perhaps he, weaving out the design in his heart, may go outside and complain to the people of those who are striving to waste away his own seed and that of god-like Odysseus."

### Chris Emlyn-Jones

Like the previous passage, this one consists of narrative and speech. Here the mood is very different. The poet is depicting extreme emotion. Lines 703-5 present the physical and internal aspects of Penelope's feelings with telling use of the epithet in 705, "springing" of her voice, the Greek means basically fresh or vigorous. This epithet is frequently attached to voice, a usage which is often described as ornamental, that is, a descriptive word conventionally attached to a noun without adding anything specific to the meaning. But here, I think there might be a specific nuance intended. Doesn't the description gain pathos from the contrast with reality? Her voice is far from springing.

The following line, introducing her speech, 706, is also given an individual touch. It's a long time before her emotion allows Penelope to speak. When she does, her words are sharply characterised. "My child", 707, and the striking image of ships serving as "horses for men on the salt seas", 708-9.

The final idea is a characteristically Greek one. Telemachus' death will deprive him and his family of kleos, that vital renown living on after his death and Penelope's question is even more poignant if you remember that, as far as she is concerned, her husband Odysseus is almost certainly dead.

Further description of her emotion, from line 716, is put into sharp relief by the matter of fact reply by the herald, Medon in 711-14 and this time Homer broadens it out to consider the physical and social surroundings. As a woman under constraint from the suitors downstairs she is confined to her bed chamber and we can just imagine the noise of all her maids wailing. This is Mediterranean emotion, not decorous tears into a scented handkerchief!

Penelope's second speech starts almost with the formality of a lament. For her it's as if Telemachus is already dead.

Later in the speech, starting at line 734, she turns to practicalities and they are pathetically unrealistic, to rouse the old and infirm Laertes, Odysseus' father to try to persuade the people to do something. And you may remember, from reading book II, exactly how effective the Ithacan people are likely to be.

I would like you to listen to another short passage. You will find this in book IV, lines 787-94.

#### **Lucie Fitchett**

But she in the upper chamber, circumspect Penelope, lay there fasting. She had tasted no food, nor drink, only pondering whether her stately son would escape from dying or have to go down under the hands of the insolent suitors. And, as much as a lion, caught in a crowd of men turns about in fear when they have made a treacherous circle about him, so she was pondering, when the painless sleep came upon her and all her joints were relaxed, so that she slept there, reclining.

#### **Chris Emilyn-Jones**

I've returned to Penelope for this brief passage because it contains an important Homeric figure of speech, the simile or comparison, something similar, "simile" is the Latin for like. The poet frequently enlarges our perception of a person or a situation by comparing them I've returned to Penelope for this brief passage because it contains an important Homeric figure of speech, the simile or comparison, something similar, "simile" is the Latin for like. The poet frequently enlarges our perception of a person or a situation by comparing them to someone or something very different, but which, nevertheless, makes a striking connection in our minds with the person compared. The listener knows that a simile is approaching, since Homeric similes, as here, have standard words to introduce the comparison and the thing compared, using the form of words "as ...so" as in lines 791-3. Here, in these lines, we have the simplest kind, which often occurs, a picture, drawn from nature, of wild beasts. Penelope is compared to a lion surrounded by hunters. Through deft touches the poet identifies with the lion "in fear", "treacherous", 792. This is an obvious and simple identification with Penelope's actual situation. She is desperately pondering what to do under pressure, fearfully hemmed in as she is by treacherous suitors. But the choice of a lion is interesting. Other animals frequently used by Homer to describe victims might seem more appropriate here: a frightened deer or a sheep being chased - by a lion. But no, the comparison with a lion, a characteristically aggressive beast, suggests that Homer wishes to imagine, amid the fear and terror, Penelope's strength and powers of mental endurance almost a heroic status in the face of great odds.

I hope studying this whole passage has given you some idea of the range of Homer's imagination and insight. His world is mostly a man's world with value put on what men do, fighting and enduring with male qualities of strength and assertiveness but, as we've seen

here, he can also present and characterise the emotions and attitudes of women and Penelope's situation is, in its way, as extreme as any faced by male heroes. In her own way she has to endure too, facing isolation and the destruction of her family. The poet emphasises her physical confinement upstairs in her bedchamber and powerlessness. With Odysseus, and now Telemachus, gone who is to help her? But note the apparently ornamental epithet, "circumspect", line 787, which is frequently attached to Penelope but here is cleverly inserted by the poet when, on the face of it, she least merits it, lying in distress in her upper chamber. It surely reminds us, amid the apparent hopelessness of her situation, that she does, in the end, preserve her integrity, 'keep her head' we might say, until later in the poem her husband finally returns.

Many aspects of Homer's artistry tend to repeat themselves, for example, the similes, so you should find familiarity increasing.