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The Classic Book I'd Like to Re-write

The *ODYSSEY* IS A WONDERFUL WORK of literature. It has extraordinary mythic power and fabulous imaginative scope. But, for women, the overweening male arrogance of Homer can be intolerable. I'm not the first female to put the book down in exasperation.

I have some other qualms too. I think the structure of the *Odyssey* is horribly cumbersome. The first, far-too-long section of the book is mainly a third-person narrative focussing on Odysseus' mini-me son, Telemachus. Only some forty pages in do we come to our hero Odysseus. And then we go *back* seven years into a first-person account for most of the most memorable passages — the encounters with Cyclops, Scylla and Charybdis, Circe, the terrible journey to the Kingdom of the Dead. Afterwards we switch *back* to third-person narration for the bloody homecoming.

This all overcomplicates things. Why can't we just keep everything in the third person and have a simple linear structure and follow Odysseus' journey from Troy to Ithaca? And wouldn't it be better just to cut out Telemachus' journey at the beginning? It gives us nothing.

Then there are the Gods. Let's just remove them too. They are a terrible literary device which heaps fake causality into the narrative and takes personal agency away from the protagonists. Odysseus is surely able to get out of his scrapes on his own — he doesn't need Athena forever disguising him, or wrapping him up in mist or putting him to sleep. We can also do without the big-gun gods. Nobody can write a storm at sea



better than Homer, so why do we have to have Poseidon sending the big waves and Zeus lobbing wind and thunder?

But these points are mere quibbles compared with the central problem that really rankles — and this is the treatment of women in the *Odyssey*. Their thoughts and feelings are simply not taken seriously. And nowhere is this truer than with Odysseus's wife Penelope.

Were I to rewrite this work I think I would sharpen my pencil and start with the scene in the couple's bedroom near the end where Odysseus finally tells Penelope who he is, and she duly wipes away her tears and, heart bursting with joy, falls into his arms.

But this doesn't ring quite true. When he makes his grand revelation I don't believe Penelope would be quite so surprised and delighted. Surely the encounter would pan out differently?

Instead, after all these years, I think she'll be a little cool. She'll say: 'Welcome home Odysseus. I'm glad you finally made it back. And I'm relieved that you have had a bath and got yourself rubbed with oil and dressed in a fresh tunic. From the bedroom window I saw you only an hour ago after you'd slaughtered the suitors and got our son to rip off Melanthius's genitals and feed them to the dogs. At that point you had gore dripping from your fingernails and your thighs were glistening with blood. That just isn't a good look.'

'Darling...'

But Penelope will stop him: 'Don't "darling" me! You know I did reluctantly agree to you going off to war, even though we had a young child. And of course wars are like building projects, aren't they? They always take longer than you expect. But the thing is: after the sacking of Troy everybody else who survived came home. But you didn't. You stayed away *another* ten years and shacked up with beautiful demigoddesses and nymphets.



Don't tell me you were *forced* to sleep with Circe. And did Calypso *really* imprison you in her cave of delights? I find that hard to believe.'

'But you don't understand!' protests Odysseus.

'Oh I do, I do. But I'm afraid I've moved on. While you've been away, I've really worked on my textiles. The maids and I – the ones you haven't hanged – have started a little microbusiness, a cooperative making bespoke decorative shrouds. The suitors found it most annoying — I was always busy at the loom. But the work has really paid off. We are exporting all across the Peloponnese. And now we are hoping to break into the Aegean market. So the girls and I are moving to Thrace.'

'Penelope!' he howls.

'That's only fair', she replies. 'It's your turn now to keep the palace going and look after your old dad. And by the way, I know you are so proud of that bed of yours. But it is getting most uncomfortable. There've been a lot of complaints — you need a new mattress.'

With that, she gave him a little peck on the cheek, pulled down her veil and was gone.