

Penelope

A One-Act Poetic Drama

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

PENELOPE	Queen of Ithaca; wife of Ulysses and mother of Telemachus
ULYSSES	King of Ithaca; husband of Penelope and father of Telemachus
TELEMACHUS	their adult son and heir
MENTOR	elder of Ithaca, loyal to Ulysses
TIMARETE	wife of Mentor
MEDON	the elder attendant and herald
IASOS	the page
LYKOS	a nobleman in the hunting party
PHAON	an affected courtier
MENEKRATES	an older sea captain who has sailed under Ulysses.
ELDERS	
ATTENDANTS	
GUESTS	
CITIZENS	
RECRUITS and MARINERS	

SCENES

One. An Idle King

Two. By This Still Hearth

Three. The Sceptre And The Isle

Four. To Make An End

Five. There Lies The Port

SETTING AND STAGING

The royal palace and harbour of Ithaca, late summer, twenty years after Ulysses's homecoming.

SCENE ONE — AN IDLE KING

Early afternoon. The royal hall of Ithaca. At rise, the hall is empty. A single structure stands bare at centre. The palace and steps rising through Ithaca are suggested to one side of the stage; the harbour on the other.

PENELOPE enters from the palace side with MEDON, the elder attendant and herald, and IASOS, the page. Household ATTENDANTS follow.

She directs the preparation of the hall, working alongside the ATTENDANTS. IASOS brings in a broad cloth, and together they spread it over the bare structure. Cups, platters, and provisions follow; the structure gradually becomes the banquet table. Their work continues throughout the opening exchange.

MENTOR and TIMARETE, the loyal elder and his wife, enter from the palace side. PENELOPE receives them.

PENELOPE

You are early, my friends. We are almost set.

TIMARETE

Penelope, it's been too long.

She gives her a hug.

MENTOR

The last time must have been your son's wedding.

TIMARETE

Mentor means the royal hall. You haven't thrown a banquet here in ages.

PENELOPE

Well, fifteen years was much too long ago.

TIMARETE

That's right. It was when Telemachus and Polycaste finally showed off their tiny prince. Remember all the gifts?

MENTOR

Oh I remember, Timarete.

He pulls his pockets inside out and shrugs at PENELOPE. She smiles.

PENELOPE

Five years already.

MENTOR

So what brings us here tonight?

TIMARETE

Whatever it is, we wouldn't miss it. But a day's notice isn't like you, Penelope.

PENELOPE

Oh, it wasn't my idea this time.

MENTOR

No?

TIMARETE

Polycaste?

PENELOPE

Still in Pylos with Persepolis.

TIMARETE

Not Telemachus?

PENELOPE

Nope.

MENTOR

Who?

Beat.

TIMARETE

You ought to get that husband of yours out of the palace more often.

PENELOPE

That's Ulysses for you. He calls Telemachus home from Pylos, just so they can run off into the woods and hunt for a month. Then he sends word that I should have the cobwebs cleaned off the hearth when they return.

TIMARETE

Oh, so you invite half of Ithaca to help clear cobwebs?

ATTENDANTS hand PENELOPE more items then exit. She shrugs and smiles, then continues to set the table.

MENTOR

A month! How the king still keeps so young.

He places his hand on his lower back and arches, stretching his aged body.

Where are they now? I'd like to see my old friend.

LYKOS, a nobleman, enters harbour-side and interrupts the conversation, a pair of dead meagre pheasants in hand.

LYKOS

Old? Best to call him ancient, Mentor.

MENTOR

Aren't we all getting up there?

LYKOS

But if you saw our king, you'd think he was your elder.

He drops the pheasants on an empty platter on the banquet table, then helps himself to a bottle of wine.

PHAON the courtier enters palace-side, ahead of the other GUESTS. PENELOPE moves to greet in the background, but remains attentive to the entire hall. TIMARETE goes with her.

PHAON

Is that you, Lykos?

LYKOS

The one and only Lykos.

He holds a passing ATTENDANT by the arm, snatches two cups from him and hands one to PHAON.

PHAON

Strong and capable as ever.

LYKOS

And brave. Cheers, Phaon.

PHAON

What news of the hunt?

LYKOS

The royal party dawdles. I came ahead with the best of their game—got a stag at the gate.

Hey you there—help haul it in.

He walks over to MEDON who is busy taking direction from Penelope. She looks decisively at LYKOS.

PENELOPE

No, Medon can't do it. Iasos will help you.

LYKOS

A boy? For a man's job?

PENELOPE

Yes. A boy.

IASOS looks to her hesitantly. She nods to him.

LYKOS

You heard her, boy. Get to it.

She speaks quietly to IASOS, walking him partway towards the harbour-side exit. He continues out alone; she returns to her work with MEDON.

PHAON

Tell me, Lykos, are the rumours true?

LYKOS

The city women are like fine dining, but Ithaca's country girls are—

PHAON

An acquired taste?

He sips his wine.

Not those rumours.

LYKOS

Then which ones?

PHAON

The king, of course.

MENTOR

What of our king?

LYKOS

I told you, Mentor, he grew old out there. He just watched while his boy directed the hunt. Who do you think killed that stag?

PHAON

Not you?

LYKOS

Well—no, but I brought it in. And those two birds on the table there.

MENTOR

Then say who.

LYKOS

Telemachus.

PHAON

Ohh, the prince.

MENTOR

Then Telemachus led well. The king does not grow lesser when his son is ready to command.

PHAON

Now there's a man that can work.

LYKOS

And that bow Ithaca sings about—the one no other man can string? Ulysses never drew it once.

He spits.

PHAON

Then let's toast.

MENTOR

To what?

PHAON

If Ulysses can't keep the bow up, then let's toast to youth and the next generation who can.

LYKOS

I'll drink to that.

MENTOR doesn't raise his cup. PENELOPE finishes her work and joins them, bringing the platter with the pheasants.

PENELOPE

And to whoever brought us this wonderful bounty. It's yours, isn't it, Lykos?

LYKOS

Yes, ma'am. I worked very hard for those kills.

PENELOPE

It shows. Look at this neck. Oh, and these feet. Not much meat on the bones, but it should feed Iasos.

LYKOS

Where is that boy by the way? He ought to pluck them after he finishes working the stag.

PENELOPE

You mean the work that's only fit for a man?

LYKOS

Of course.

PENELOPE

A strong, capable, brave man?

LYKOS

Yes.

PENELOPE

Someone like my son?

PHAON and LYKOS together

Yes.

PENELOPE

Well he's not here yet. What about you, Lykos?

She brushes up beside him and looks up, holding his gaze.

LYKOS

I am.

PENELOPE

Good. I'm glad that's settled. Now haul in the stag yourself.

She plops the platter in his hands.

And let Iasos know he can stop gathering firewood.

MENTOR

Ha! Timarete, come here.

Speechless, LYKOS exits harbour-side.

PENELOPE

Phaon, will you lend me your advice? We're running late now and I have to finish the preparations.

PHAON

I am but a loyal servant of the royal house, Your Majesty.

PENELOPE

Then look here. We usually have four, but Polycaste is still in Pylos with little Persepolis. So tonight it's just us three.

She indicates the empty chair at the head of the table.

PHAON

Ah, that gap says it all.

PENELOPE

Says what?

PHAON

Trouble for Telemachus and Polycaste.

PENELOPE

Then I'll remove it.

She tries to pull away the chair.

PHAON

No! You can't do that, Your Majesty.

PENELOPE

No?

PHAON

It would be sacrilege.

She hesitates then pulls the chair to the palace-side.

PHAON

Not there either.

PENELOPE

Oh my...help me.

He bows low then moves Polycaste's seat to the harbour-side, arranging the places as he speaks.

PHAON

There. The magnificent prince, you, Ulysses then Polycaste.

PENELOPE

Are we safe yet?

PHAON

The Fates may leave Pylos and Ithaca in peace.

PENELOPE

Forget fate—what about the court?

PHAON

Serve her dinner. Pour her wine. She'll dine with us in spirit.

PENELOPE

All they will see is an empty chair.

PHAON

You are right. When the hall toasts your house, have your servant raise her cup. Her praise for Telemachus will still rise highest in all the Ithacan court.

PENELOPE

As should his wife.

She sighs.

Twenty years without Ulysses, and not one courtier half as loyal as you.

He stands up straight and clears his throat.

PHAON

Some stars must dim, that younger lights may rise
To take their place and light our common sky.

Pause.

PENELOPE

Then let me reward such loyalty.

She places a fifth seat at the corner beside Polycaste's.

PENELOPE

Your place is with us tonight, Phaon.

MENTOR

Penelope!?

PHAON bows very low.

PHAON

Surely a simple courtier should not intrude upon the family table.

PENELOPE

Simple!? After your counsel?

MENTOR

Penelope. No.

PHAON

A man of your standing, Mentor, understands not to refuse an honour bestowed by the Queen.

MENTOR

I'd have you know when not to accept one.

PHAON

There are honours enough in Ithaca for all of us.

MENTOR

I don't want your chair.

PHAON

Nor would I presume to take it—had Her Majesty not placed me there.

TIMARETE

Come, dear. Let's enjoy the party.

She yanks MENTOR along with her. As they move away, he grumbles loudly.

MENTOR

Why would she ever let that thing near them?

LYKOS enters harbour-side looking dishevelled, with grime on his hands and clothes. He helps himself to an appetizer and tries to join the party.

PHAON

Ah, Lykos, where have you been? I've just been granted a seat at the royal table.

LYKOS

By who?

PHAON

He looks filthy, Your Majesty.

PENELOPE

You are right, Phaon. This is a dinner party, Lykos. Go and wash up.

PHAON

I'll tell you all about it.

PHAON trails behind LYKOS towards the palace-side exit. LYKOS turns back to speak.

LYKOS

When is dinner by the way?

PENELOPE

When the men get in.

TELEMACHUS enters from the harbour-side, directing the returning hunting party.

ATTENDANTS, including IASOS, follow with game and stores.

TELEMACHUS (to the hunting party)

Drop off your weapons and gear at the armoury, then wash up. We'll sort out the mess after the banquet.

(to the ATTENDANTS)

Bring the game around back to the butcher and cooks. The stores to the kitchen and cellar.

And my father's bow—bring it here to rest on the mantel again. It doesn't belong with the rest.

IASOS

Yes, sire.

TELEMACHUS

Hello, Mother.

PENELOPE

Telemachus, you're finally home.

TELEMACHUS

It's only been a month.

PENELOPE

And a month before that in Pylos. You left as soon as you landed in Ithaca.

Where is your father? We will take our places once he arrives.

TELEMACHUS

He'll be in. I rushed up to direct the men and left him at the gate.

MEDON approaches and bows courteously to TELEMACHUS, then speaks to PENELOPE.

MEDON

Your Majesty, we are ready. The king is here.

PENELOPE

Places, everyone!

PENELOPE grabs TELEMACHUS by the hand and pulls him off palace-side, while MEDON takes centre stage. Trumpets blare and the room goes quiet.

MEDON

Esteemed guests and citizens of Ithaca. The royal family.

The hall applauds as PENELOPE and TELEMACHUS appear from the palace-side and stand by their seats. ULYSSES appears harbour-side, walking slowly toward his seat. She gestures them to remain standing.

PHAON enters, pulls out Polycaste's seat and stands behind his own. ULYSSES stares hard at him. The applause stalls and the crowd begins to murmur. They sit.

MENTOR (to TIMARETE)

I still don't know why she should elevate that vain man.

TIMARETE (chuckling)

Oh I think she knows what she's doing.

PENELOPE

This hall has gone quiet for many years. Thank you all for filling it again with your laughter. Feast and meet and keep each other's company tonight—and for new nights to come.

She holds up her cup.

From our family to yours.

One by one, the hall joins her in the toast. Seeing Polycaste's cup remain on the table, PHAON takes it and raises it beside his own.

FIRST GUEST

Phaon?

ELDER

Whose family is he?

SECOND GUEST

Why is he holding Polycaste's cup?

Pockets of laughter break through the murmuring.

SECOND GUEST

Does Polycaste approve?

The hall erupts in laughter, gossip, incredulity and protest. PHAON hesitates and looks around the room. His smile dies as he looks to PENELOPE who has stepped away to mind the party.

MENTOR

Oh!

He looks at TIMARETE, who is already laughing, and joins in as they approach the table.

MENTOR

Ulysses! How are you, old friend?

ULYSSES

I am well, Mentor. Hello, Timarete.

TIMARETE

Ulysses. Your Penelope is just brilliant.

ULYSSES

She is.

TIMARETE

Lykos barged in boasting about the stag—

MENTOR

Which Telemachus killed.

TIMARETE

—then Penelope lent him Iasos to help bring it in.

MENTOR

Then he whined. Said a boy couldn't do a man's job.

ULYSSES

So she made him do it.

TIMARETE

How did you guess?

ULYSSES looks off to PENELOPE across the room.

ULYSSES

Because that's her.

He looks back to them and points at PHAON.

ULYSSES

That explains him.

GUEST

Speech! Speech!

The guests echo the call as it spreads through the hall. PHAON lifts his cup and begins to rise.

ULYSSES

Sit.

ANOTHER GUEST

Speech!

MENTOR

They call for you, Ulysses.

TELEMACHUS leans forward and looks to ULYSSES who hasn't moved.

TELEMACHUS

Father?

ANOTHER GUEST

Speech, Telemachus!

GUESTS

Telemachus! Telemachus!

ULYSSES does not move. Pause. TELEMACHUS rises and walks forward.

TELEMACHUS

Good people, citizens and honoured guests
Of this great isle—I welcome you, my friends.
Tonight we dine together once again,
And fill the hall with all of Ithaca.
Let's pause and recognize the many hands,
Without whose labour we'd not feast today,
Nor ever feast: attendants, butchers, cooks;
My party who followed through rain-brushed dusk,
Whose arrows found their mark beside my own;
My mother who brought us all together,
Who knows each one by face, by name, by voice;
And you who answer her now with your presence,
What purpose has this hall without its guests?
But lastly, to my father, without whom
There'd be no hunt, no feast. He called, I answered—
And glad to trek these hills beside him now,
When as a boy I wandered them alone.

All hail, to the king!

GUESTS

Hail!

ELDER

King Ulysses!

MENTOR (to ULYSSES)

He reminds me of you.

The crowd applauds. TELEMACHUS remains standing to greet guests approaching from all sides.

FIRST GUEST

Prince Telemachus, don't leave for Pylos again. We want you here.

TELEMACHUS

Ithaca is my home.

SECOND GUEST

May I speak to you about purchasing game from the royal hunt?

TELEMACHUS

Why, when it goes to feeding Ithaca for nights to come?

THIRD GUEST

I need your counsel on a claim against my house, Telemachus.

TELEMACHUS

In the morning at court. For now, have a drink with me.

TIMARETE approaches PENELOPE who is off to the side admiring her son as he commands the room.

TIMARETE

You must be proud of him.

PENELOPE

Very much.

IASOS walks up to TELEMACHUS and hands him ULYSSES's bow.

IASOS

Sire, where on the mantel would you like it?

TELEMACHUS

Right—Father's bow.

TELEMACHUS takes it and walks to the mantel, unaware the room has stilled and all eyes follow him.

TIMARETE (to PENELOPE)

Watch this.

(Calling across the hall)

String the bow, Telemachus!

A GUEST

The bow!

The room echoes approval and joins in chanting his name. TELEMACHUS turns around confused, then looks at ULYSSES, who says nothing and makes no gesture to proceed. MENTOR looks to ULYSSES. TIMARETE looks to PENELOPE.

GUESTS

Telemachus! Telemachus!

TELEMACHUS strings it with ease and raises the bow for all to see. The room erupts in wild applause.

MENTOR

He is his father's son.

ULYSSES

He is his own man.

TIMARETE

He looks so much like Ulysses, doesn't he?

PENELOPE

My Telemachus is all grown up.

ANOTHER GUEST

Now the king!

GUESTS

Ulysses!

MENTOR

Come on, Ulysses. Show them you still have it. They can't sing of Troy and the Cyclops forever.

MENTOR backs up and leaves them in the spotlight. The room continues cheering.

TELEMACHUS unstrings the bow and offers it to ULYSSES.

TIMARETE

Will he?

PENELOPE

Of course he will. Would you ever doubt *that* man?

TIMARETE grips PENELOPE's arm in anticipation, while PENELOPE straightens. ULYSSES rises and looks down at the bow, then around at the room still animated.

He does not take it.

PENELOPE

Oh...

Silence. Then whispers break through the hall. He speaks quietly, only Telemachus within earshot.

ULYSSES (softly)

I am become a name.

TELEMACHUS

Father?

ULYSSES

Herald.

MEDON

My king?

ULYSSES

It is time. Send word through the city. Tomorrow, Telemachus will be king.

ULYSSES exits harbour-side and leaves TELEMACHUS still holding out the bow.

MENTOR

Ulysses?

TELEMACHUS

Father?

The hall remains stunned in silence. PHAON stands and raises his cup to TELEMACHUS.

PHAON

To the King.

GUESTS

To Telemachus.

The royal hall cheers and erupts in applause. TELEMACHUS holds the room until it quiets down.

TELEMACHUS

Thank you all. I was not expecting this. I must retire for tomorrow's ceremony. I thank you again for coming to the banquet tonight.

He walks palace-side and sees the guests out one by one, receiving congratulations, praise, gifts, hugs and kisses.

ELDER

You are ready, my boy. Congratulations.

FIRST GUEST

We were told only Ulysses could string the bow...to see it done in person, instead of hearing it in song...

SECOND GUEST

And by his son!

TIMARETE

Penelope, dear, are you alright?

PENELOPE

I'm okay...

TIMARETE

Look, he really is all grown up: the people at his call, a wife and child of his own, now the crown waiting for him. Your son is ready.

PENELOPE

Yes...

TIMARETE

Why else would he call Telemachus home? This must have been Ulysses's plan all along.

PENELOPE

You're right...

TIMARETE

I think it's good. Now he is only a husband.

PENELOPE

Yes, only...

MENTOR

There you are, Timarete. Where have you been hiding?

TIMARETE

Just here with Penelope.

MENTOR

Shall we go?

TIMARETE

Yes, it's late. We'll see you at the coronation, Penelope.

MENTOR

Good night.

TIMARETE and MENTOR exit. ATTENDANTS work in the background to clear the banquet items from the central structure. TELEMACHUS exits palace-side with the last of the guests. PENELOPE is left alone.

End Scene One

SCENE TWO — BY THIS STILL HEARTH

Late at night. The guests have gone. As ATTENDANTS clear the remains of the feast, they gather the banquet cloth around the central structure. Its folds catch a low glow; the table becomes a hearth. PENELOPE remains to direct cleanup.

PENELOPE

Thank you all for your service. You may leave now. Iasos, can you take the firewood back? We won't need to keep it going.

IASOS and the rest of the ATTENDANTS exit. TELEMACHUS enters to find her staring into the fire.

TELEMACHUS

What a night. You must be exhausted, Mother.

PENELOPE

I'll manage.

So—King Telemachus. How does that sound?

TELEMACHUS

Like something I have to get used to.

PENELOPE

You have a lifetime for that.

TELEMACHUS

I just wish Polycaste and Persepolis could see me tomorrow. I couldn't wait to sail out after the hunt ended...

PENELOPE

To come right back? You're all due back at the end of the month.

TELEMACHUS

But then I'd get to chase Persepolis around, and listen to the patter of his little feet. And how he laughs when he picks himself up after falling down.

PENELOPE

Just like you were at his age. You'd run full speed and bump your head, then you'd laugh it off instead of crying.

TELEMACHUS

I still do.

PENELOPE

You make your mother worry. Perhaps being crowned tomorrow is a good thing.

TELEMACHUS

To protect my head?

PENELOPE

The summer is nearly over, Telemachus. Let your family meet you here. Then you need not risk another crossing.

TELEMACHUS

But the Ionian is only water.

And Polycaste is on the other side of it.

PENELOPE

A little water won't keep you from her, then?

He handles the bow with extra weight and care, then places it by the hearth.

TELEMACHUS

I've had a good example.

She smiles at him.

PENELOPE

Come, tell me about the hunt. Your men brought us wagons all month. You did very well.

TELEMACHUS

We did.

PENELOPE

We had plenty of fowl until you brought us back the stag.

TELEMACHUS

Yes.

PENELOPE

And your father? What did he catch?

He hesitates.

TELEMACHUS

He didn't catch anything.

PENELOPE

Oh well. Not every hunt can be a success. What matters is the effort.

TELEMACHUS

He also didn't try.

PENELOPE

Was it a contest?

TELEMACHUS

I rarely saw him outside of camp.

PENELOPE

Because he let you lead.

TELEMACHUS

No, Mother. That's why I want to talk to you.

She looks directly at him.

TELEMACHUS

When I joined them a few days in, the men were already asking what was wrong with Father.

She crosses her arms.

PENELOPE

Rumours.

TELEMACHUS

I didn't overhear gossip around a fire. They came up to me and reported as if in the court.

She takes the poker and tends the fire.

TELEMACHUS

When I gave orders, he stepped back—didn't even watch me closely.

As if he was glad I took over.

She turns the coals one by one with the poker.

PENELOPE (sighing)

See that?

TELEMACHUS

What?

PENELOPE

It looks spent.

She turns a coal. A glow appears beneath.

PENELOPE

Not yet.

He shrugs.

TELEMACHUS

When we made camp for the night, he barely spoke to anyone. Even me.

She stops to look at him.

PENELOPE

Ah—I told Iasos too soon. I could use that firewood now.

She searches around the hearth.

But it will keep burning—it just won't roar.

TELEMACHUS

He was quiet when there was still need for him. It's not like we didn't want him there.

PENELOPE

I'll have Iasos bring more in the morning. These coals may last till—

TELEMACHUS

Mother. I was there.

Pause.

TELEMACHUS

Find me when you want to talk about Father.

He exits palace-side and leaves her still tending the fire. She sets down the poker and smooths the bow as if it were a bedspread.

PENELOPE

What am I missing, Ulysses?

She looks toward the harbour.

When have I had to ask? I know you through
Your voice alone: in sentences half-formed,
Still undecided on which thought to take;
Yet I can hear your answer in the dance
Of syllables in step with syllables,
The way your cadence sways before it halts
At the little dot.

She steps toward the centre and stops short of crossing. Pause.

In these intervals,
I know the different sounds your breath will make,
If it will sharpen for command, or ease
With tenderness. When has your silence passed
Beyond my senses? Have I not known you
Through twenty years of absence and across
Every sea? And tonight I find no answer
When you but stand a single call away.

She sits by the hearth and tends the fire until she begins to doze. Setting the poker aside, she lies beside the bow and falls asleep with her arm across it.

TELEMACHUS reenters already speaking.

TELEMACHUS

And another thing. When I offered him the bow, he said—

He stops at the sight of her asleep by the hearth and kneels beside her.

PENELOPE

Ulysses?

Beat.

TELEMACHUS

No, Mother. Telemachus.

He lifts her into his arms and exits palace-side.

End Scene Two

SCENE THREE — THE SCEPTRE AND THE ISLE

Morning. The royal court after the coronation. The central structure has become a dais, the same cloth now spread across it as a ceremonial covering. The people of Ithaca mingle as they wait for TELEMACHUS's first assembly. TELEMACHUS speaks easily with them from the dais. ULYSSES stands apart below it.

MEDON approaches ULYSSES and bows.

MEDON

My king.

ULYSSES

He is your king now.

He points to TELEMACHUS.

MEDON

I want to say it has been an honour to serve you and this house for as long as I have. This is it for me as well.

ULYSSES

Retire from your post, but not from your work, Medon.

MEDON

You're right, my—yes, sir.

ULYSSES

Will you do an old friend a favour—find me Penelope?

MEDON bows and exits palace-side. PENELOPE enters shortly after.

PENELOPE

Yes, dear?

ULYSSES

Dearest.

He holds out his hand to her. She studies him, then frowns.

PENELOPE

Your collar is ruffled. And your cloak...

She turns him around and smooths his collar, cloak and hair. He turns back to her, smiling.

PENELOPE

So what did you want to talk to me about?

He hesitates, glances toward the harbour then back to her.

ULYSSES

Medon is retiring.

PENELOPE

Where have you been? He's been saying that for years.

ULYSSES

Today he means it.

They turn to take stock of the room and settle their gaze on TELEMACHUS. ULYSSES deliberately takes her arm in both hands. She leans her head on his shoulder.

PENELOPE

At least our son wears the crown, not like you this morning—carrying it under your arm like a parcel.

ULYSSES

It is right for him. He is ready.

PENELOPE

You've done well, dear.

ULYSSES

I?

He kisses her hand. She tilts her head in amusement.

You.

PENELOPE

Us.

So what now?

ULYSSES

He works his work, I mine.

PENELOPE

Yours?

MEDON reenters holding a stave, takes the dais and addresses the court.

MEDON

Attention, people of Ithaca. The first assembly of King Telemachus will now convene. Nobles, commons, soldiers, sailors, merchants, and the rest—approach with your petitions, both public and private.

The court organizes itself. ULYSSES takes his place beside MENTOR and the other elders up front. TELEMACHUS takes the dais. PENELOPE circles to her place farther back. CITIZENS fill the space between them.

TELEMACHUS

The first petition.

ULYSSES

I.

TELEMACHUS

Father?

The people look left and right, whispering as ULYSSES steps onto the lower steps of the dais and accepts the stave. PENELOPE freezes.

TELEMACHUS

Speak, Lord Ulysses. Is your purpose public or private?

ULYSSES

Private. I ask to purchase one of the King's ships and outfit it at my own expense for an extended voyage.

FIRST ELDER

An extended voyage? What business takes the former king away from Ithaca?

ULYSSES

I do not sail on her behalf. The purpose is my own.

SECOND ELDER

But you have no need beyond Ithaca.

FIRST ELDER

Your home, your family—a kingdom at peace. What else is wanting?

ULYSSES

I have not said anything is wanting.

FIRST ELDER

Then where do you sail?

ULYSSES

West.

TELEMACHUS

What is out west, Lord Ulysses?

ULYSSES

I do not know.

The court reacts with shock, laughter, ridicule, curiosity.

FIRST ELDER

With what crew?

ULYSSES

Only volunteers—no man bound by service to Ithaca.

MENTOR

Then I will go.

He struggles to his feet, leaning heavily into his cane. The crowd laughs at him.

TIMARETE (from across the court)

Sit down, Mentor!

SECOND ELDER

Why ask when you can take? The isle is yours, Ulysses.

ULYSSES

It is the king's.

TELEMACHUS remains quiet.

FIRST ELDER

Who will captain her?

ULYSSES

I will.

FIRST CITIZEN

He's lost his mind.

FIRST ELDER

Who would follow him?

MENEKRATES (from across the court)

Only one who knows he hasn't.

The crowd stops and watches MENEKRATES, the sea-captain, approach the dais. ULYSSES smiles in acknowledgement.

ULYSSES

Menekrates.

MENEKRATES

I know where to find some of my old crew, sir.

ULYSSES

Retired?

MENEKRATES

Some. Others have only just finished their term.

ULYSSES

They will not hurry to take up the oar again.

MENEKRATES

Not for the Fleet. But when their old captain calls—

ULYSSES

Then you have learned to command well.

MENEKRATES

You are my captain, sir.

Pause.

TELEMACHUS

Herald.

MEDON

Yes, my king.

TELEMACHUS

Once this court adjourns, have a ship provisioned for Lord Ulysses. Give him no delay to sail.

MEDON bows. ULYSSES returns the stave to MEDON. ULYSSES and MENEKRATES bow to TELEMACHUS and turn to exit harbour-side.

MENEKRATES

Most of them live by the harbour. We can have everyone ready by dawn. Best not lose this weather.

ULYSSES

Lead the way.

They exit. Silence.

SECOND CITIZEN

Dawn?

FIRST ELDER

King Telemachus, call him back. He has not thought this through.

TELEMACHUS

He is of sound mind.

FIRST ELDER

Without a heading?

FIRST CITIZEN

Or a crew.

SECOND ELDER

Telemachus, your father is not what he used to be.

TELEMACHUS

Lord Ulysses will manage.

SECOND ELDER

His only crew shouldn't be men like myself—or Mentor.

MENTOR

I would if I could.

FIRST ELDER

Only another mad mariner would follow.

TELEMACHUS

Who has sailed under Lord Ulysses himself. If anyone knows my father's fitness at sea, it is Captain Menekrates.

FIRST CITIZEN

Maybe he's making up for missing Troy.

SECOND CITIZEN

He's my age though—he couldn't have rowed with Ulysses.

SECOND ELDER

None of that crew came back.

TELEMACHUS

One of them did.

SECOND CITIZEN

But my king, why does your father leave us? He flies from Ithaca as a gull from a cliff.

FIRST CITIZEN

If oars could be wings.

MENTOR

Ulysses has never done anything without a purpose.

FIRST CITIZEN

Then what's he doing, chasing Sirens?

TIMARETE

Stick your nose into someone else's life. The nerve of you all.

The court grows louder, voices overlapping in argument. MEDON looks to TELEMACHUS, bows, then places the stave on the dais. He steps away from his post. TELEMACHUS rises with the royal sceptre held high.

TELEMACHUS

Enough. I have ruled. Your counsel is noted.

TIMARETE

King Telemachus, how are you holding up?

He gives her a little smile.

TELEMACHUS

I have granted the former king his due. His matters are private and belong to him.

PHAON (from across the room)

How is the Queen?

The court hushes. Heads turn until all eyes settle on PENELOPE, standing silently at the back. She approaches the dais, picks up the abandoned stave and holds it high.

PENELOPE

Ithaca, listen to your Queen.
By what right do you hold a claim
Against your former king—to whom
You paid an empty honour when,
Not one hour past, he laid aside
His crown and blessed his son's new reign?
Vile words out viler mouths now spit
Upon the balding head as soon
You learned the crown had hid his age.
When does the office finally end,
The public's cries for bellies fed;
And nurseries go still when babes
No longer need their spoons held out?
You make an ending of the man,
When only kingship reached its end;
Yet Ulysses begins again.
What know you of the man uncrowned?

His sword, drawn high, had shone unsheathed
Across ten years on foreign sands—
for Ithaca; and ten more years
Of roaming god-wracked seas to find—
His Ithaca; and now away,
No longer aimed toward his home,
But to the west, and for himself.
Why must he justify his cause,
When it serves none but him alone?
Have you not fed enough, or must
You hoard his final ounce of life,
That flight becomes your injury,
That oars become the wings of madness?
What know you of the man alone,

Kept from the ones he loves the most?

And look—there on the dais, crowned,

Our son, our own Telemachus—

To whom I'd leave my final breath—

Whom you have ratified with praise,

And whom his father has judged fit

To bear the sceptre and the isle:

If you now doubt that judgement, strip

Each king the honour he is due.

The weight of Ithaca has passed;

Another burden calls, where splinters

split the skin, oaken pinions sweep

And lift on skies of salt and foam;

And ever onward in pursuit—

Each purpose followed to its end.

What know you of my Ulysses—

By what right do you claim my husband?

She points the stave around the court. They turn away, averting their eyes from hers.

PHAON

Then let me ask it this way—why does he leave you, Penelope?

Those closest recoil and stand back from him. Gasps of disgust, shock, shame and sympathy break through the crowd.

Silence. She places the stave back on the dais.

PENELOPE

That's for me to find out.

Blackout.

End Scene Three

SCENE FOUR — TO MAKE AN END

Night. The bedchamber. The central structure is now ULYSSES and PENELOPE'S marriage bed; the same cloth lies across it as a bedspread. Two spotlights illuminate the bed, one for each side.

ULYSSES sits on his end of the bed, absorbed in working a knot into a length of rope. His palms are red.

PENELOPE enters from the palace side carrying their pillows. She approaches her side of the bed and watches him work. He does not notice her.

ULYSSES (to himself)

There. That will hold.

PENELOPE

There you are. When did you get in?

ULYSSES

While you were in the bath.

He turns to her with a radiant smile, continuing to work the rope without conscious effort. She smiles back, restrained, then sits on her side of the bed.

PENELOPE

Where have you been?

ULYSSES

The harbour. We visited what was left of the old crew.

PENELOPE

Any takers?

ULYSSES

All.

PENELOPE

Oh...

ULYSSES

All wished they could. Half have the strength to sail, and fewer—the will.

PENELOPE

Mariners who turn down the oars?

ULYSSES

Who know the open sea, yes.

PENELOPE

How many?

ULYSSES

Not enough, but more may come at dawn. Menekrates searches for recruits.

She watches him handle the rope, then takes his hands and examines the reddened palms.

PENELOPE

Dear—your hands!

ULYSSES

They will callus. But they still know their work.

PENELOPE

Tying knots?

ULYSSES

The tightest of knots.

PENELOPE

Enough to hold a ship?

ULYSSES

If anchorage is the goal.

PENELOPE

Show me—on the bedpost there.

He smirks. He unties the knot and smooths out the rope. Taking her hands, he shows her how to tie it.

ULYSSES

Tying is only half the trick.

PENELOPE

Then I'm only half a captain now. Perhaps I'll start as deckhand.

ULYSSES

That is too high a rung.

PENELOPE

Stowaway then.

ULYSSES

Stowaways take what the captain gives them.

PENELOPE

And if she's hungry?

ULYSSES

He gives her food.

PENELOPE

Thirsty?

ULYSSES

Drink.

PENELOPE

Tired?

ULYSSES

A bunk.

PENELOPE

No private beds aboard?

ULYSSES

Only the captain's.

PENELOPE

This knot should keep her there.

ULYSSES

She'll wake filthy. There are no baths aboard.

He tucks a curl around her ear.

PENELOPE

Is not the sea but a bath of water?

ULYSSES

Only to those who sing of it.

Pause.

PENELOPE

But for you?

ULYSSES

Cold and terrible and salty.

PENELOPE

Yet you still mean to cross it?

ULYSSES

Yes.

PENELOPE

West—of the Pillars of Hercules?

ULYSSES

Farther.

She smirks.

PENELOPE

How far—the sunset?

ULYSSES

Farther.

Beat.

PENELOPE

What if you don't...

She studies his eyes. Then she slaps him. Silence.

PENELOPE

Why would you do this?

ULYSSES

Because I must.

PENELOPE

Must what? What is out there you haven't found at home?

ULYSSES

I must...know.

PENELOPE

I don't understand you, dear.

He looks toward the harbour.

ULYSSES

That it's not over.

PENELOPE

But you might not return.

He nods.

PENELOPE

You may die.

He nods again. Pause.

PENELOPE

And if you stay...

He looks at his reddened palms.

PENELOPE

Then I will come with you.

ULYSSES

Then I do not go.

PENELOPE

Why?

ULYSSES

I risked war and gods and fate itself at sea. Will I risk you?

PENELOPE

Yet you came home.

ULYSSES

Yes.

PENELOPE

To me.

ULYSSES

To you.

PENELOPE

Did you?

I waited for you then. You've been back twenty years—why am I still waiting?

ULYSSES

Dearest—

PENELOPE

Don't dearest me! When Telemachus was young, do you know the weeks and the months he begged me to bring you home—and the years he stopped when he accepted you weren't?

Do I have to do that with Persepolis too!? He will ask *me* what his grandfather looked like when he was young because Telemachus can't answer it. Only I know you apart from song.

For twenty years, I held this kingdom together without its king because I knew you were coming back. But now you sail for good—from me!

She runs her hands along the bed frame, steadying herself before speaking.

PENELOPE

Do you remember when you came home how I knew you were my husband?

ULYSSES

You tried to move the bed and I said it was impossible.

PENELOPE

Because you built it into this olive tree.

ULYSSES

Years before I ever left.

PENELOPE

These roots held our bed together.

ULYSSES

They still hold.

PENELOPE

Must these be uprooted?

ULYSSES

No.

She studies his reddened hands.

PENELOPE

And if I hold you, what becomes of these hands?

Silence.

PENELOPE

And us?

He interlocks their fingers.

ULYSSES

We remain.

PENELOPE

Will we?

ULYSSES

Ask it, then. Ask me to stay and I will stay.

PENELOPE

What have I been doing this whole time?

ULYSSES

In the way you did before all of this—before Troy, before the crown: the way you would whisper in my ear as if you held a secret, but it's only my name—shared with me alone.

She recoils.

PENELOPE

You used to call me just to watch me answer to your voice. When did you stop calling *my* name!?

She tears away from him and lies down in bed, her back turned.

Go, Ulysses!

The spotlight over ULYSSES's side goes out; PENELOPE's side remains lit. A long silence passes until she stops tossing in bed and her breathing settles.

The second spotlight reappears, cast onto ULYSSES sitting on the floor, his back against the bed frame. He rises and looks down at PENELOPE.

ULYSSES (aside)

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move...

He takes a few steps from the bed, stops and looks at her, then turns back harbour-side.

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains: but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more,

A bringer of new things; and vile it were
For some three suns to store and hoard myself—

He reaches the edge of the spotlight.

—And this gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought...

He lingers, taking a last look at his wife.

ULYSSES (softly)

Penelope...

End Scene Four

SCENE FIVE — THERE LIES THE PORT

Dawn. A pale first light enters the bedchamber. The sea is heard beyond it. PENELOPE sleeps alone in the marriage bed, the cloth still lying across it as a bedspread.

ULYSSES (offstage)

My mariners—

PENELOPE stirs, reaches toward ULYSSES's side of the bed, then wakes and sits up.

ULYSSES (offstage)

Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me—

PENELOPE

I know that voice.

ULYSSES (offstage)

That ever with a frolic welcome took

The thunder and the sunshine—

She rises. Drawn by his voice, she crosses over to his side of the bed and, for the first time, the harbour-side.

PENELOPE

Ulysses!

She rushes out toward the harbour.

MARINERS enter from the harbour side with coils of rope, taking up work around the central structure as the bedchamber gives way to the quay. The structure now marks the threshold between shore and vessel; the cloth lies gathered at the vessel, ready to be rigged.

For the first time, ULYSSES enters from the palace-side, descending to the quay. He pauses at the sight of the harbour. A quiet chuckle escapes him as he opens his arms slightly.

ULYSSES

There lies the port.

He boards the vessel and begins rigging the cloth as a sail. PENELOPE enters quietly from the palace side and stops at a distance to watch him work. He does not see her.

ULYSSES

Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.

He finishes the rigging. Enter MENEKRATES and RECRUITS.

MENEKRATES

Ulysses.

ULYSSES

Menekrates.

MENEKRATES

Your crew, sir. Come have a look.

Let's go, form up!

The experienced hands file into rank while novices hesitate and follow suit.

MENEKRATES

This is it. Not many more sailors than we found last night.

ULYSSES

We will make do. They all know the cost?

MENEKRATES

Yes, sir. I turned many away who came for a story to bring back home.

As they inspect the crew, ULYSSES smiles in recognition at familiar faces and shakes their hands.

ULYSSES

Where do you come from?

FIRST RECRUIT

The countryside.

ULYSSES

Never been to sea?

FIRST RECRUIT

No, sir.

ULYSSES

It is treacherous. What brings you here?

FIRST RECRUIT

Herding is all I know. I have never asked why.

ULYSSES nods and moves on.

ULYSSES

And you?

SECOND RECRUIT

I have no profession. I find work if I can get it.

ULYSSES

This work will take you as far as possible from Ithaca.

SECOND RECRUIT

I know, sir.

ULYSSES

You know we have no heading and no landing?

SECOND RECRUIT

I'd like to know how far I can go.

ULYSSES

Medon?

MEDON

I found my next post, sir.

ULYSSES

It will be difficult, my friend.

MEDON

I think this is worth it.

ULYSSES

You are sure about this?

MEDON

Ulysses, yesterday at court—they all attacked you after you left...after they had just applauded you.

ULYSSES nods.

MEDON

But Penelope...I have never heard her speak that way. I never had the words for what I already knew about you. She is why I follow you here.

They shake hands.

MEDON

I hope she will be alright. Does she understand?

ULYSSES

She will, in time.

He finishes his inspection.

MENEKRATES

Dismissed.

These aren't your men from Troy.

ULYSSES

No one can replace them.

MENEKRATES

If only I was born a little earlier, I'd have been there with you all.

ULYSSES

You might have been dead these forty years.

MENEKRATES

Sailing is my life and the only one I've wanted.

ULYSSES

Gather the men. We still must hoist the sail.

He walks to the mast and takes up the rigging. The men fall in behind.

ULYSSES

Together, on me. Pull!

Under his direction they begin to hoist the sail, uncoordinated at first.

ULYSSES

Again. Heave!

MENEKRATES

On the captain, mates. Pull as one.

They pull again and fail.

MARINER

Look at us, sir. We ain't no crew.

ULYSSES steps away and evaluates the men, repositioning them on the line.

ULYSSES

Each man has come aboard by choice. Young and old, strong and spent, practiced and green.

We may not be mariners, but we are a crew.

He waves his arm for cadence.

Heave!

If we cannot come together—we motley crew—then let us never leave our Ithaca.

Heave!

Let us sit sheltered from the storm, yet hunger all our days for what we might have known or become!

By the gods, heave!

Let them stop us. Let their waves shatter our oars, their winds tear sail from mast.

Heave!

But not even gods can rule your will. That is yours alone to yield.

Heave!

He takes up his place on the line.

Let us together earn the glory of that sacred name—Mariner.

Now heave, my Mariners!

The sail catches the wind. The crew looks toward it.

ULYSSES

The vessel puffs her sail!

MENEKRATES

Quick. The lines.

The experienced hands move at once. Others hesitate. ULYSSES assigns the uncertain men places at the oars.

ULYSSES

Come, my friends,

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

PENELOPE leaves her place at the edge of the quay and slowly boards the vessel.

ULYSSES

Push off, and sitting well in order smite

The sounding furrows—

She stands behind ULYSSES, unseen. The MARINERS notice her and fall still. ULYSSES notices the change in them, but does not turn.

ULYSSES

For my purpose holds

to sail beyond the sunset—

She raises a hand toward his back.

ULYSSES

and the baths

Of all the western stars until I die.

She stops.

ULYSSES

Though much is taken, much abides. And tho'

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are.

PENELOPE (aside)

This. This is what I missed. In every note,

The sound of something lost yet still alive

Within your flutter of syllables tuned

For me to dance beside. This is the sound

That wandered over distant shores, and echoed

Across the wide seas, reaching for my name;

This is what armies must have heard and felt

Ringed beneath their helmets, and a god

Stands shaken by the voice of mortal man.

I need no crown or legend, only this—

This lifelong note: for ever I will dance

With you, led by the timbre of your soul.

And there you stand again before your wife,

My king, my husband, mine own—

She whispers his name in his ear, inaudible to the audience.

He turns his head, enough to witness her step back onto the quay. She reaches for the final mooring. Only then does he turn toward her.

PENELOPE

Though we must part once more upon this shore

And Ithaca now yields you to the sea,

Our love still holds. Let all our rooted years

Ballast you west beyond the sinking sun.

She unfastens the line and casts it free.

Go, my Ulysses.

The MARINERS take in the line. The vessel drifts farther from shore. He remains facing her.

She watches from the quay, then lowers her head.

ULYSSES (distant but audible)

Penelope.

She looks up toward his voice and smiles when she sees him still facing her.

END

