

HEROIDES I: PENELOPE TO ULYSSES

After the Trojan War has ended and most of the Greek heroes have returned to their homelands, Ulysses remains away. His wife, Penelope, writes to her husband from Ithaca, where she is hounded by suitors vying for her hand and the kingdom.

Penelope to her late-returning Ulysses:

Don't write back—

just get yourself home!

Troy has fallen, the city that Greek girls detest.

Priam's whole kingdom was not worth the price.

O I wish that when he sailed to Lacedaemon,

Paris, that crazed adulterer, had drowned.

Then I would not have lain cold in my desolate bed,
nor now complain of long days alone.

Nor, as I try to while away the looming darkness,
would weaving weary my widowed hands.

The dangers I have imagined are worse than the real.

(Love is a state of anxiety.)

I imagined wild Trojans rushing upon you,

Hector's name always made me turn pale.

If someone told me Antilochus was dead,

Antilochus became the cause of my fear.

The death of Patroclus in Achilles's armor
made me lament unsuccessful wiles.

If Tlepolemus's blood warmed a Lycian spear,

Tlepolemus's death renewed my grief.

Whenever a soldier in the Greek camp was killed,
your lover's heart turned colder than ice.

But the god of chaste love has looked out for me well:

Troy's in ashes and my husband is safe.

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The Greek leaders are back, our altars are smoking,
 our gods have received the spoils of war.
 Young wives offer thanks for their husbands' safe return;
 men sing how their fate outlasted Troy's.
 Righteous old men and trembling girls are in awe,
 wives hang on their husbands' every word. 30
 Someone traces out battles on a tabletop,
 sketches Pergamum with a drop of wine:

"The Simois River was here; this is Sigeia.
 Old Priam's lofty palace stood here.
 Achilles pitched his tent here, over here Ulysses.
 Hector's torn corpse the horses dragged here."

Old Nestor told your son, who was sent to seek you,
 the whole story, and he told it to me.
 Told how Dolon and Rhesus were slashed by your sword,
 one betrayed by sleep, the other by guile. 40

The risks you took—without a thought for your family—
 sneaking into the Thracian camp by night,
 killing so many men with only one to help you!
 This is caution, this is thinking of me?
 My heart thumped with fear until I heard you had driven
 Ismarus's horses back to friendly lines.

But what good is it to me that your hands have ripped
 Ilion's walls level to the ground,
 If I remain as I was while Troy still endured
 and miss my husband the rest of my life? 50
 Troy was destroyed for others, for me alone it still stands,
 though victor plow it with a captive ox.
 Where Troy was is a wheatfield, ready for harvest,
 the soil enriched with Phrygian blood.
 Heroes' half-buried bones are struck by curved plowshares;
 grass conceals the ruins of houses.
 You conquered, you're still gone. Why, or where in the world
 you are hiding, I am not to know.

No traveler here sails away from our island
 before being thoroughly questioned by me. 60
 And he is given this sheet written by my hand
 to deliver someday, should he ever see you.
 We have sent to Pylos, Nestor's ancestral land:
 the word from Pylos was ambiguous.
 We have sent to Sparta, and Sparta knew nothing
 of your whereabouts, or why you are late.

It would be better if Phoebus's walls were still standing.
 Look at me, going back on my vows!
 I would know where you are fighting and fear only the war
 and be joined by many in my complaints. 70
 I'm going out of my mind not knowing what to fear;
 my worries range in a wide-open field.
 All the perils the sea holds, all those on land,
 I suspect of causing your long delay.
 Am I a fool to worry? Being the man you are,
 you could be in love with a foreign woman.
 Maybe you are telling her how plain your wife is,
 how all she is good for is spinning wool.
 I hope that my accusation is empty, hope that you would
 never stay away if you could return. 80

My father, Icarius, is pressuring me to leave
 my widowed bed without more delay.
 I don't care. I am yours, I will always be called
 Penelope, Ulysses's wife.
 My devotion and prayers are breaking him down,
 and he's easing off on his own account.
 But the men of Dulichium, Samos, Zacynthus
 are swarming upon me to win my hand.
 They reign in your hall, with no one to stop them,
 tearing apart your goods and my life. 90
 Pisander, Polybus, and that mean man, Medon,
 Eurymachus's and Antinous's greedy hands—
 do you want a list? In your shameful absence,
 you are feeding them all what you bled for to win.

Irus the beggar and the herdsman Melanthius
add to your ruin the last touch of shame.

There are three of us, none of us warriors: your weak wife,
old Laertes, the boy Telemachus.

I almost lost him to an ambush recently

when he bucked their will and went to Pylos.

I pray to the gods that our deaths come in order,
that he closes my eyes, and then closes yours.

The cowherd is with us, and the old nurse too;
third is the faithful keeper of the sty.

But Laertes is weak because of his years
and cannot rule surrounded by foes.

Telemachus will become strong, provided he lives,
but now he needs a father's help and guidance.

I have no strength to drive enemies from our house.
Please hurry, O our altar and haven!

You have a son, and I pray you always will,
who should have been trained in his father's ways.
Think too of Laertes, who is holding off death
so that you might close his eyes in the end.

And I—I was a girl when you left. Even if
you come at once, I will seem to be old.

HEROIDES II: PHYLLIS TO DEMOPHOON

Demophoon has left Thrace and Phyllis, his new bride and the king's daughter, to complete his journey home from Troy. After too much time has passed, Phyllis begins to suspect that her husband will not return.

Your hostess, Demophoon, your Rhodopeian Phyllis
laments your absence, longer than planned.

When the horns of the moon touched each other, globe swollen,
your anchor should have sunk in our sands.

Four times the moon has hid, four times her globe rebloomed,
no Sithonian wave brings Actaeon ships.

If you had been counting the days—a talent of lovers—
you would know my laments aren't premature.

Hope, too, has been slow. Late do we believe that which pains us.
You are guilty now against your lover's will.

How often I deceive myself on your behalf, how often
thinking Notus's squalls bring your white sails back.

I curse Theseus! He couldn't bear for you to leave him . . .
but maybe it's not he who slows your course.

Now and then I am afraid. What if when you steered for Hebrus's waves
your ship was wrecked, drowned in froth-white sea!

How often I beg the gods that you are safe (bastard!), mouthing prayers,
I make sacrifice sooty with incense.

How often I see promising winds on the deep or in heaven
and say to myself, "If he is safe, he will come."

My steadfast love has thought of every obstacle a man in a hurry
could face. Excuses are my strength.

But, slow, you're still not here, the oaths you swore by gods don't bring
you back

and you don't return stirred by my love.

You gave to the winds both your word and your sails, Demophoon.
Your sails don't come back, your word lacks faith.