

Odysseus's Women
By
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Logline: Odysseus awakes in Elysium, believing it is the day Penelope joins him, but the women of his past, as retold in *The Odyssey*, visit him to deliver his judgment.

Dramatis personae

Odysseus's women, all played by the same actress (her costume may include separate masks or the different characters can be differentiated through various affectations and clothing)¹:

- Penelope – wife of Odysseus who remained loyal to him while he was away for twenty years
- Circe – a sorceress, lover of Odysseus' who originally changed his men to pigs
- Kalypso – Sea goddess and a lover of Odysseus' when he stayed on her island for seven years
- The servant women of Odysseus, whom he hanged for treachery, so to speak, during his absence

Odysseus – famous Greek hero of the Trojan war, deceased and in the underworld

Place: Tartarus

Time: Eternity

Clothing need not look to mimic the ancient Greek. If modern dress, please keep it basic, and bland for Odysseus with no writing on any of his clothing. Odysseus women may be vibrant, save for Penelope, who like, Odysseus is in the underworld, a place described by Homer as a world of shadows, colorless, etc.

The songs sung by the women and Odysseus are in the public domain.

¹ It is preferred but not required that one actress play these parts.

In the darkness a woman is heard singing the third verse of “The Blackest Crow”. Lights slightly rise, on Kalypso washing Odysseus who is asleep on the ground. He lies on a simple mat. She gently wipes him with a cloth.

KALYPSO

(Singing) And when you're on some distant shore think of your absent friend
And when the wind blows high and clear a light to me pray send.

Odysseus stirs.

ODYSSEUS

Penelope? What's that song?

KALYPSO

(Singing) And when the wind blows high and clear pray send your love to me
That I might know by your hand light how time has gone with thee.

Odysseus' eyes open. He scampers away from Kalypso. Lights full.

ODYSSEUS

My arms. My arms! Where are my weapons? How...how did you find your way here?

Kalypso approaches but seeing Odysseus' skittishness she holds.

KALYPSO

Goddesses are not normally welcome here. Hades prefers his domain to himself, but Persephone told me of your habitation here –

ODYSSEUS

Leave. Your enchantments will not work here.

KALYPSO

I wanted to see you.

ODYSSEUS

And I do not wish to see you. Are you here to torment me, Kalypso?

KALYPSO

Answer a question.

ODYSSEUS

Leave me!

KALYPSO

Careful in raising your voice, Penelope might hear.

ODYSSEUS

I shall...

Pause.

KALYPSO

You shall what? You are no longer a king, a hero, you are all men. It didn't have to be that way. *(Short pause)* Answer my question.

ODYSSEUS

No.

KALYPSO

(Beat) I shall ask it nonetheless. Have you heard of Homer?

ODYSSEUS

No. Now leave.

KALYPSO

Have you heard him sing of your triumphs? Have you heard him recall the night you returned to the bed of Penelope; that Athena held back dawn's horses to afford you more hours in the night together as you recounted your travels? Homer doesn't mention whether you mentioned me.

ODYSSEUS

I owe you no answer.

KALYPSO

I gave you seven years; you owe me an answer. Did you tell her about us?

ODYSSEUS

I did. I told her an enchantress held me captive on her island for seven years.

KALYPSO

Captive? My dear, Odysseus, you are mistaken. You were free to leave at anytime.

ODYSSEUS

Then why didn't you release me from your charms?

KALYPSO

We were in love.

ODYSSEUS

You are mistaken. I performed my duty to see another day, and do all I could to return to my son and wife. There was no love. There was only the soldier's will. And my charm won the day.

KALYPSO

It was Zeus' will that won the day. When Hermes came to tell me that I could not keep a human lover, I obeyed, though I spoke my mind. The men of Olympus have their trysts and philander. We immortal women are never allowed such pleasure. The fate of a mortal man means more to Zeus than the heart of female goddess.

ODYSSEUS

Here I thought my story melted your heart – that the love for my wife, mortal though we were, meant more than immortality.

KALYPSO

It was lovely. I believed it, and I've no reason to doubt it. But do not play innocent that what we had for those seven years was not love.

Odysseus shakes his head.

ODYSSEUS

I only loved Penelope. What we had was not love...

KALYPSO

Is it so hard to conceive that a person may love more than one person? You harm me when you say it was not love. You harm me more to say you were captive. Did I not show you the trees by which you built your boat to leave? Did I not give you the tools? Provisions for the journey, and my robe? (*Odysseus is about to answer regarding the robe but Kalypso raises her hand to stop him.*) The robe washed up on my shore twenty or so days after you left. A cruel joke that Zeus and his brother played. I mourned you: wandered up and down my beach for I don't recall how long. Night and day, I scanned the sea and hoped to see your body wash ashore. Then I would cleanse your body, anoint it in oil –

ODYSSEUS

And yet here you are to torment me.

KALYPSO

I would have given a ceremony for the hero I believed you to be until I read Homer's account, and I didn't believe it to be true. Until now. (*She is face to face with Odysseus*) Should Penelope enter, I'll let the myth play on. But know, forever (*She gives him a quick peck on his lips*) you broke my heart.

She disappears into the shadows of the stage. Odysseus touches his lips. He looks toward where she exited. Suddenly, Circe is behind him, holding a knife to his throat.

CIRCE

(Singing, quickly) “Now you have had your wil, good sir,
And put my body thus to shame,
Even as you are a courteous knight,
Tel me what is your name.”

Odysseus hears, listens, cannot identify the voice.

ODYSSEUS

Penelope?

CIRCE

(No emotion) Oink. Oink.

ODYSSEUS

Circe...

CIRCE

(Singing quickly) “A shepherd’s daughter as I was
You might have let me be
I’d never come to the king’s fair court
To have craved any love of thee.”

ODYSSEUS

Circe!

CIRCE

The very same, but wiser now. *(Beat)* I warn you, tense one more muscle and I will slit your throat. I know the soldier, the master tactician in you is wondering, how might I disarm this poor woman? And I know the soldier, the master tactician has discovered how he will do so, but...the muscles in your body have tensed. You will use your weak arm, which has seized in the shoulder, thinking I will expect your war arm to act first, but it is in your neck, on the weak side - I feel that first. Ah...your leg tenses now, plan B: take out my knee. But your kick will cause me to bolt forward - if you sense my other arm’s placement - and you shall fall into the blade.

ODYSSEUS

Circe, this is silly. I am already dead.

CIRCE

In this desolate place, even death is not the end.

ODYSSEUS

Why this dishonor?

CIRCE

Justice.

ODYSSEUS

Justice? What wrong have I done you?

CIRCE

Tense the neck muscle one more time, soldier, master tactician. I am cheek to cheek with you, a headbutt will do no good.

She releases him, pushes him to the ground and lowers the knife.

ODYSSEUS

Why did you do that?

CIRCE

Because I no longer fear you. To show you that I can best you. That outside my embrace, I will still out maneuver you.

ODYSSEUS

No. Why did you put a knife to my throat? We were lovers. For one glorious year, we shared in Aphrodite's sacred rites.

CIRCE

And does your wife know this?

ODYSSEUS

No.

CIRCE

Does she know that you violated –

ODYSSEUS

Violated the sanctity of our marriage bed? No, but she would understand. I gave myself to you in sacrifice to my men – to bring them back from pigs, to give them a respite when they were fully broken.

CIRCE

You gave yourself in sacrifice?

ODYSSEUS

It pained me every time I took to your bed. For the disgrace I caused.

CIRCE

What disgrace? Tell me quickly.

ODYSSEUS

Must I name it again?

CIRCE

Yes. Now.

ODYSSEUS

No.

CIRCE

Do you know?

ODYSSEUS

Yes. *(Beat)* To save my men, I submitted to your charms.

CIRCE

Wrong answer! When you came to me, bearing the amulet that little bastard Hermes lent you, to deflect the work of my magic, you came at me with your sword.

ODYSSEUS

(Stammering) And you kissed me because, because, because you had seen a real warrior –

CIRCE

A trickster.

ODYSSEUS

And you, you kissed me.

CIRCE

You held a sword to my throat, forced your lips to mine, and with a master swordsman's gently violent skill, pressed the blade to my throat to force me down lest I have my throat slit, until my head was even with your loins, and then head against the wall, throat to the blade you opened your tunic –

ODYSSEUS

You kissed me!

CIRCE

Against that wall, against the blade, you used your free hand to open my mouth –

ODYSSEUS

I am a hero! *(He tries to slap her, but in his swing, Circe, swipes nonchalantly with the knife causing Odysseus to slice his hand. He howls in pain.)*

CIRCE

I thought you were dead. How can that hurt?

ODYSSEUS

I am innocent. If I did anything wrong it was to dishonor my wedding bed. You know as well as I that you kissed me.

Silence.

ODYSSEUS

How dare you accuse me of such base and disreputable behavior!

CIRCE

Accusation? No, I've done that. My words... this...*(licks the blood off her blade)* this is the gods' judgment.

ODYSSEUS

What do you mean?

CIRCE

I ask you again: Have you told Penelope about us? Have you told your wife the truth?

Circe fades into the shadows.

ODYSSEUS

The gods' judgment? To hell with the gods. You say...well then I SAY! Who have the gods declared victorious? I am in Elysium. That is all I need to know of their judgment. Clearly my word – no the odes sung by Homer declare my innocence.

PENELOPE

(Unseen, from the shadows) Innocence of what?

ODYSSEUS

Penelope? My love.

PENELOPE

Yes, I am here.

ODYSSEUS

Please, dear wife, show yourself.

Penelope enters.

ODYSSEUS

What have you heard?

PENELOPE

All.

ODYSSEUS

Believe some but not all.

PENELOPE

Remember our bed?

ODYSSEUS

Of course. It was our secret. Our code. You tricked me, you minx, by telling me you'd have it moved into a separate room.

PENELOPE

That was quite clever, I suppose. But only natural given that the suitors tried innumerable ruses to bed me, yet I never succumbed.

ODYSSEUS

My love, please know that what I did, I did to return home. The people who brought me home wanted me to marry their princess Nausicaa. Too close to home, no, even so far, I refused. I yearned to see you, our son. All I wanted was to be home.

PENELOPE

I suppose.

ODYSSEUS

Can you doubt it?

PENELOPE

I doubt nothing but that all you wanted was glory. To be a hero, and have your glory sung into the ages. Which it has.

ODYSSEUS

Has it?

PENELOPE

It makes for better truth in the poetry of the blind to say you only longed for home and did what need be done. Do you know what day it is?

ODYSSEUS

The day you join me in Elysium.

PENELOPE

It's long after your death, when I was left a widow. And I had the poets come and sing dirges in your honor. As a good wife, I mourned in our bedroom, but heard their stories of your triumphs while sitting on our bed.

ODYSSEUS

Which I made from olive trees, roots sunk deep into the ground, which no mortal could move because our love, like those roots, sunk deep into the earth.

PENELOPE

As the poet sang the odes, the bed sunk. The roots shriveled.

ODYSSEUS

Because the earth knew it was time you join me.

Penelope has faded into the shadows. The lights change, and now the stage is awash with shadows emulating that of the German expressionist movies on the 1920s and 1930s. The shadows resemble people hanged. A servant woman emerges, neck cocked, as she died from hanging. But her voice is not raspy, but sonorous.

WOMAN

The gods be praised that my voice is clear.

ODYSSEUS

Penelope!?

WOMAN

Your wife summons us.

ODYSSEUS

Who are you?

WOMAN

Deputies of the Eumenides. And Athena's rhetorical tricks will not absolve you now.

ODYSSEUS

Who are you really?

WOMAN

Witnesses. Dead. Hanged by treachery. Survivors.

ODYSSEUS

My servants. The ones who dishonored my home, copulating with dishonorable suitors to gain favor. Exposed my wife's ruse with Laertes's shroud. I trusted you. *(Beat)* I gave you too good of a death

WOMAN

But not the gods for you. *(Silence)* We are the voiceless workers of your home. The ones who nursed your child, bathed your wife...but before all that, we were the nameless, the nameless in your youth who would be splayed over pigpens by you at your whim, touched, grouped and groped before you placed inside us the magic of life that we would bear and raise without your consideration. We were chattel, and in the end, your palace was our abattoir.

ODYSSEUS

Fine words for traitors. I am in Elysium!

WOMAN

So you say, and where you are, you shall remain. But you witnessed Sisyphus and Tantalus.

Woman fades into the shadows.

ODYSSEUS

I did. *(Short pause, Penelope enters, unseen, behind Odysseus. Odysseus whimpers softly then, singing):* "Come me own one, come me fair one, come now unto me. Could you fancy a poor sailor lad, who has just come from sea?"

PENELOPE

You believe this is the day I died and returned to you, my beloved hero. But it is not. Today is eons. Today shall be repeated for eons more. I am not wife. I am not woman. I am justice...

She wraps a garrote around Odysseus' neck. As she strangles him she sings:

PENELOPE

(Singing) "You are ragged love, and you're dirty love, and your clothes smell much of tar. So begone you saucy sailor lad, so be gone, you jack tar."

He falls, lifeless. Blackout. In the darkness, Kalypso is heard singing her song. The cycle has begun again.

End