

Heroides 1: Penelope to Ulysses¹

KYLE GERVAIS

Dear dawdling Ulysses, from your Penelope:
don't waste time writing—send *yourself* to me!
So Troy has fallen. The girls of Greece rejoice.
But Priam's Troy was hardly worth this price!
I wish, as Paris sought his Spartan port, 5
the furious sea had wracked the homewrecker's fleet.
Then I wouldn't shiver alone in an empty bed,
demand the time in a quavering voice, upset
at the hours' slow creep, and cramp my widow's hands
weaving away the night that never ends. 10

I always feared the worst (worse than the danger
you faced, but love is always afraid). I would conjure
brutal Trojans swarming you. I paled
daily at Hector's name. When someone told
how Antilochus was defeated by the foe, 15
Antilochus made me dread how *you* might fall.
When they told me how Patroclus perished in false
armour, I wept that trickery sometimes fails.
Tlepolemus' blood warmed up the Lycian's blade:
Tlepolemus' death renewed my cares. In a word: 20
every butchered Achaean could suffice
to freeze my loving heart as cold as ice.

But a kindly god looks down on my loyal love:
you're alive and well, and ash is all that's left

¹ I thank my friend and colleague Neil Bernstein for his suggestions, general and specific, which substantially improved this translation.

of Troy. The altars smoke for our men's return. 25
 Our fathers' gods are given foreign plunder.
 Brides bring gifts in thanks for their husbands' safety;
 husbands hymn their fated victory.
 Their tales make old men tremble and young girls quake;
 their wives are rapt in wonder as they speak. 30
 A man at dinner maps the fierce campaign,
 paints all Pergamum in a splash of wine:
 "Here lies Sigeum, here the Simois;
 here once stood old Priam's lofty palace.
 Achilles' tent was there, and there Ulysses'; 35
 here mangled Hector spooked the galloping horses."

I heard all that from your son: sent off to find you,
 he heard it from Nestor, and brought me back the news.
 He told me, too, of Rhesus' and Dolon's slaughter:
 sleep betrayed the one, and fear the other. 40
 You dared (too much! and didn't care about us!)
 to creep at night among the men from Thrace
 and kill so many with just one man at your side.
 I'm *sure* you were careful! I'm *sure* I was on your mind!
 My heart fluttered with fear until I heard 45
 how you drove the Ismarian horses in triumph homeward.

What good to me that you've torn Troy apart?
 That city walls have fallen down to the dirt?
 I waited while Troy still stood, and still I wait.
 Will you ever come back? Will I be forever without 50
 my husband? Pergamum has yet to fall
 for me, though conquering Greeks now till its soil.
 There's wheat where Troy was: a bumper crop in good,
 rich earth that's fertilized with Phrygian blood.
 Ploughshares thud on men's half-buried bones, 55
 and crops grow on the ruins of their homes.
 But you're gone! And why, and where you've hid from me,
 hard-hearted man, remains a mystery.

Whenever a foreign ship puts into port,
 I grill the captain for news. When he departs, 60
 I write a letter and give it to him, in case
 he can pass it on to you somehow, someplace.
 I sent to Pylos, where Neleus' son, old Nestor
 rules; the report from Pylos was unsure.
 I sent to Sparta; Sparta didn't know. 65
 Have you settled somewhere? Are you dawdling even now
 somewhere? I wish that Phoebus' walls still stood
 (see, I'm fickle as you—I hate the wishes I made):
 I'd only have the war to terrify me,
 and have the whole homefront to weep beside me. 70

I'm crazed with fear, but don't know what to fear:
 with nothing sure, there's space for every care.
 Every danger there is on sea and land
 is the reason why, I think, you've been gone so long.
 While I stupidly fret like this, are you prisoner of 75
 (like a typical, lustful man) some foreign love?
 Laughing about your bumpkin wife, the fool
 who's only good at beautifying wool?
 I pray I've made an empty accusation!
 I pray you're not away of your own volition! 80

My father Icarius shoves me from my bed,
 and rails at my delays that never end.
 Let him rail! I'm yours, rightfully yours. I'll be
 forever Ulysses' wife, Penelope.
 And anyhow, my chaste, devoted prayers 85
 are swaying him, and he's reining in his force.
 From Samos and Zacynthos and Dulichium
 in thronging dissolute mobs the suitors come.
 No one can stop them ruling in your hall,
 tearing apart your wealth, our family's vitals. 90
 Why name each monster? Medon, Pisander, Polybus,
 greedy Eurymachus, grasping Antinous,
 and the rest who, in your shameful absence, dine
 on all the riches that you bled to win.

Irus the bum and your goatherd Melanthius 95
add the finishing touch to your ignominious losses.

We're an army of three, and not one fighter among us:
your weak wife, old Laertes, our boy Telemachus—
and *him* the suitors nearly took from me,
as he left for Pylos, with their treachery. 100

O gods, make destiny run in the right order:
let him close my eyes, and yours. I have supporters:
your aged wet-nurse, the keeper of your herd,
and your pigsty's loyal guardian is the third.
But Laertes lacks the strength to rule as lord 105
by the edge of the sword with enemies all around.

Telemachus (if he lives that long) will grow
to a warrior's age—but needs his father now.
And *I* can't drive your rivals from our home!
It's you we need, our refuge, our safe haven. 110

You have (and will keep on having, I pray) a son,
who ought to be raised by his father. Take pity on
Laertes: he lingers here, hoping your hand
will seal his eyes on the day he meets his end.
And me? You left a girl when you sailed away. 115
Hurry back to see her old and grey.

