

Cunning as a defining characteristic

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



At its core, *The Odyssey* is a story that centers around the cunning of its main characters. Throughout the epic poem, both Odysseus and his wife, Penelope, are known for their mental capabilities. Odysseus is constantly referred to as “godlike,” and Penelope is called “circumspect.”

Circumspect, as defined by Dictionary.com, means “heedful of circumstances and potential circumstances; prudent,” and Book 23 clearly illustrates the circumspection of both Penelope and Odysseus. In this book, Odysseus uses his cunning to rid his home of the unwelcome suitors, and Penelope, in turn, uses her cunning to protect not only herself, but her people as well, by forcing Odysseus to prove his identity to her. Closely interwoven with the plot in this book is also the theme of using disguises and hidden identities to achieve one’s desired results. This is something Odysseus and many other characters do, and it plays an especially important part in this book. Ultimately, the scene in Book 23 in which Penelope tests Odysseus’ true identity serves to emphasize the importance of cunning as Odysseus’ means of survival, as well as Penelope’s means of survival; most importantly, though, it emphasizes the fact that their mutual cunning forms the basis for an unbreakable link that binds them unwaveringly together. Circumspection is Penelope’s defining characteristic, and nowhere is this more evident than in Book 23. From Eurykleia’s first mention of Odysseus’ return, Penelope is wary. She responds to the nurse’s claim by saying, “Dear nurse, the gods have driven you crazy.../ They have set you awry...” (XXIII, 11-14). Though her emotions manage to get the better of her momentarily, “...Penelope in her joy sprang up from the bed, and embraced the old woman, her eyes streaming/ tears, and she [Penelope] spoke to

her.../ ' Come, dear nurse, and give me a true account of the matter,/ whether he has really come back to his house...' (XXIII, 32-36), she refuses to allow herself to believe because she must first consider all the possibilities. She finds it most likely that Odysseus' ostensible return is but a ruse of the gods. She says, "' You [Eurykleia] know/ how welcome he would be if he appeared in the palace:/ to all, but above all to me and the son we gave birth to./ No, but this story is not true as you tell it; rather,/ some one of the immortals has killed the haughty suitors in anger...' (XXIII, 59-64).

Though she wants nothing more than for what Eurykleia says to be true, she is still ruled by her circumspection. She is fully cognizant of the fact that if she allows herself to believe, she is putting herself at risk emotionally and allowing for the possibility of additional pain and severe disappointment. Because of this, she is unwilling to accept the possibility that Odysseus has indeed returned until she can discover for herself, without any doubt, if this is true. Also augmenting Penelope's unwillingness to accept Odysseus' return is her awareness of the results of the trickery of the gods. She believes that the Trojan War was caused by the meddling of the gods and she refuses to allow herself to become part of a similar event. She says, "' The gods granted us misery,/ in jealousy... For there are many who scheme for wicked advantage. For neither would the daughter born to Zeus, Helen of Argos,/ have lain in love with an outlander from another country,/ if she had known that the warlike sons of the Achaians would bring her/ home again to the beloved land of her fathers./ It was a god who stirred her to do the shameful thing she/ did...' (XXIII, 210-223). By being wary, therefore, she is protecting not only herself, but also her people. Helen's acts brought much strife and

destruction to her land and her people, and Penelope was unwilling to do the same. Penelope and Odysseus are both gifted with an understanding of the gods and their ways that allows them to achieve much more favorable results when dealing with the gods than can be achieved by most mortals. This is witnessed time and again on Odysseus' journey home, such as when he deals with the Old Man of the Sea (IV), Kalypso (V), Polyphemos (IX), and Circe (X). In each of his dealings with the gods, Odysseus manages to settle things favorably. The mental capabilities of Odysseus and Penelope not only allow them an advantage in dealing with fellow mortals but also with the gods. After rousing herself to go and see the dead suitors and the man who killed them, Penelope finally comes face to face with Odysseus. Even as she descends the stairs, though, she remains ambivalent as to her course of action. She thinks to herself, "...whether to keep away and question her dear husband,/ or to go up to him and kiss his head, taking his hands" (XXIII, 86-87). As always, her mind prevails over her heart and she chooses the former course of action. Even under the reproach of her son and Odysseus himself, she refuses to give way, saying, "...[I]f he is truly Odysseus,/ and he has come home, then we shall find ways, and better,/ to recognize each other, for we have signs that we know of/ between the two of us only, but they are secret from others'" (XXIII, 107-110). She is determined to follow her plan through to the end, and Odysseus is surprisingly receptive to the idea, smiling in response to her suggestion. Odysseus, whose cunning is world-renowned, exhibits it once again in Book 23 both in dealing with the suitors and his wife. As with Polyphemos and the Old Man of the Sea, Odysseus recognizes that he cannot overcome the swarm of suitors with brute strength

- he must use his intelligence. Because of this, he assumes the disguise of a beggar when he returns to Ithaka, thus allowing him to enter his household without raising suspicion. Having gained successful reentry, he then plans and executes the deaths of the suitors. Once again, he knows that he must plan things out and think things through in order to succeed. When Penelope announces her intention to test his identity, his initial response is to smile. Despite all that he has gone through in order to return safely home, his wife presents one more obstacle to their reunion, but he is nonetheless able to accept it. He smiles because he recognizes Penelope's cunning in such a move and is reminded of the bond that they share through their mutual appreciation of each other's mental capacities. He is more than willing to prove himself to the woman with whom he shares such an incredible bond. Penelope's attempt to ascertain Odysseus' true identity, however, does not involve straightforward questioning such that we have seen in the other instances where a host attempts to discover the identity of an unknown guest. The norm, except in the case of Polyphemos (IX), is to feed the guest and then question him once the meal is done. This is seen time and again when Odysseus travels to Pylos (III), Sparta (IV), Scheria (VI), and Aiolos (X). Penelope instead chooses to trick Odysseus by suggesting that their marriage bed, which was built around a living olive tree, be moved. The only way the bed could be moved, however, is if the tree has been cut down. Odysseus, of course, knows this, and so he responds angrily, saying, ““ What you have said, dear lady, has hurt me deeply. What man/ has put my bed in another place? But it would be difficult/ for even a very expert one, unless a god, coming/ to help in person, were easily to change its position./ ...There is

one particular feature/ in the bed's construction. I, myself, no other man, made it./ ... I do not know now,/ dear lady, whether my bed is still in place, or if some man/ has cut underneath the stump of the olive [tree]..." (XXIII, 183-204). Following this, Penelope is at last able to allow herself to accept that Odysseus is indeed the man before her: "...[H]er knees and the heart within her went slack/ as she recognized the clear proofs that Odysseus had given;/ and then she burst into tears and ran straight to him, throwing her arms around the neck of Odysseus, and kissed his head..." (XXIII, 205-208). Odysseus' journey has, at last come to a temporary end, and he is finally reunited with his soul mate. At the end of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus and Penelope are allowed to live out their days in peace. This, however, was not something that was just given to them; rather, they earned it by living by their minds rather than their hearts. Because they did not live by rash, heat-of-the-moment, emotional decisions, but instead were restrained and collected, they obtained the life that so many mortals seek. In the end, their love and their relationship proved as solid and unchangeable as their marriage bed, of which it was symbolic. As the bed was built around the living tree, so their marriage was also built around a living foundation – their undying connection of love and their unbreakable bond of mutual cunning.