



Odysseus & Penelope: The Long Journey

Kari Halker-Saathoff

The Unseen Universe of the Human Heart



Ceramist and illustrator Kari Halker-Saathoff presents the classic story of Odysseus with a reimagined characterization of Odysseus’ wife Penelope. Graphite illustrations are layered with white paper cut outs, backed in black to mirror the ceramic glazing on low fire red clay vessels. Odysseus occupies framed illustrations, capturing images inspired by Homer’s Greek poem. Penelope’s story, carried on ceramic vessels, is inspired by her courage and resistance against unwanted suitors as well as current events, including the Women’s March of 2017. Their stories alternate and connect as the viewer travels through the exhibition, titles of the illustrations are inspired by the text of the Odyssey while Penelope’s draw from current events. Viewed together, Halker-Saathoff illuminates the many parallels between the present and 650 B.C.E.

Halker-Saathoff describes Penelope’s situation, “Suitors invaded her home, ate her food, threatened her son, assaulted her servants, and pressured her to remarry. In resisting the suitors Penelope had to use all her resources, showing herself to be as courageous, wily, and brilliant a figure as Odysseus. The courage of her resistance is the inspiration for my interpretation and the struggle of women’s persecution and

The Man of Twists and Turns | Image 1: Portraits of Zeus, Athena, Hermes, and Muse

Homer opens The Odyssey with an invocation to the Muse of epic poetry. He asks for guidance in telling this story of a man who has experienced many twists and turns of fate. Odysseus is the only Greek survivor of the Trojan War who has not returned home. It has been twenty years since he has seen his family and motherland of Ithaca. He is being held captive by the Goddess Calypso on the island Ogygia. Calypso wants Odysseus for her husband. Meanwhile on Mount Olympus, Athena pleads with her father, Zeus, to take pity on Odysseus and allow him to return home. Athena convinces Zeus to dispatch Hermes to liberate Odysseus from Calypso while Athena goes to Ithaca to advise King Odysseus’ son, Telemachus.

The Bridge | Vessel 1

Penelope, Odysseus’ wife, fends off over 100 suitors who have invaded the royal palace, seeking her hand in marriage, a chance at ruling Ithaca, and indulging in large amounts of food and wine. The couple’s son, Telemachus, is just coming of age and is at a loss as to what to do about the suitors. Mother and son yearn for Odysseus’ return. Strong compartmentalized images weave together, demonstrating the strengths of Penelope.

Again off Course – The Will of the Gods | Image 2: Portraits of Odysseus, Hermes, and Calypso

When Hermes delivers Zeus’ news to Calypso on the island of Ogygia, she isn’t pleased; she wanted to keep Odysseus. Male gods carouse with mortal women but female gods are condemned when they take mortal lovers - a double standard indeed. Calypso provides a raft and supplies for Odysseus but doesn’t escort him as his journey continues.

We can be Heroes | Vessel 2

Penelope maintained she would choose a husband when finished weaving a burial shroud for her elderly father-in-law, Laertes. But each night, she carefully unwove her progress, ensuring the wrap would never be finished. The size and detail of Penelope’s portrait emphasizes her power and presence for her family and the layered silhouettes of Odysseus and Telemachus present a design inspired by the 2017 Women’s March Logo.

Heart Sick on the Open Sea – Make His Name By Sailing there | Image 3: Portraits of Antinous, Eurymachus, Telemachus, and Penelope

Disguised as Mentos, an old friend of Odysseus, Athena counsels Telemachus. She predicts that his father will return and insists the prince must stand up to the suitors and seek more information about Odysseus. When the assembly gathers the next day, wise old Aegypius points out that the group has not met in session since King Odysseus left for the Trojan War some 20 years before. He commends the citizen who was bold enough to call for the meeting. Encouraged, Telemachus effectively makes his case against the suitors and asks them to desist. Dueling eagles suddenly swoop near the assembly, which the seer Halitherses interprets as a sign of Odysseus’ return. Eurymachus, a suitor, interrupts the aging prophet and threatens Telemachus. With the aid of Athena, who poses as Mentor and sometimes as Telemachus himself, the prince secretly prepares and sets sail for Pylos.

She Was Warned | Vessel 3

Back in Ithaca, the suitors have discovered Telemachus is gone and plan to ambush his ship on its return. Penelope is distraught to learn of her son’s trip and the planned assassination but is soothed by a vision sent by Athena. Homer leaves the plot of Telemachus dangling as selected suitors board a vessel for the surprise attack. Antinous, the main suitor, puts the blame on the “queen of cunning,” Penelope (2.95). He tells the legendary tale of the shroud Penelope wove for the eventual funeral of Odysseus’ father, Laertes. One of Penelope’s maids betrays her, revealing Penelope’s plan to unweave the shroud each evening. **She was Warned** and had to complete the shroud.

But, If you only Knew | Image 4: Portraits of Athena, Poseidon, and Nausicaa

Poseidon, returning from a visit to Ethiopia, spots Odysseus on the open sea. The god raises his trident, sending a swamping storm that nearly drowns Odysseus. With the help of Athena and Leucothea, a sea nymph, Odysseus makes it to the shores of Scheria, an island where Princess Nausicaa later discovers him.

Nevertheless | Vessel 4

Pressure builds for Penelope to remarry; Nevertheless she stands firm in rebuffing suitors and risks waiting for Odysseus.

Who Receive Him Kindly | Image 5: Portraits of Odysseus, Alcinous, Arete, and Nausicaa

King Alcinous and Queen Arete rule the seafaring Phaeacians on the island of Scheria. The morning after Odysseus’ arrives, Athena (disguised as a friend) sends the daughter, Nausicaa, and some of her handmaidens to wash clothes near the spot where Odysseus has collapsed. Classic beauty Nausicaa is attracted to the strange traveler. She tells him how to find the palace and how to endear himself to the queen, guaranteeing his safe passage home. Odysseus follows her instructions and is received at the royal household.

She Persisted | Vessel 5

At times, Homer portrays Penelope as flighty and excitable but also clever and steadfast in her devotion to her husband. Penelope persisted against adversity and harassment; a cause shared with the 2017 Women’s March.

The Phaeacians | Image 6: Portraits of Queen Arete, Odysseus, and King Alcinous

Phaeacians are not great warriors, but they excel at seamanship, dancing, and sports. During an exhibition of athletic skills, a youngster called Broadsea embarrasses King Alcinous by openly mocking Odysseus and challenging his athletic skills. The great Ithacan promptly hurls a discus farther than any of the younger men can manage. He is equally adept at wit and conversation, convincing his hosts that he is no ordinary wayfarer. When Demodocus, the blind bard, sings of the exploits of those at Troy, Odysseus weeps, causing King Alcinous to suspect that a hero of the Trojan War is among them. Odysseus finally identifies himself and agrees to recount the story of his wanderings.

#metoo | Vessel 6

Penelope is constantly resisting an onslaught of suitors and if her voice could be heard today, we would hear her say #metoo. Many women have been bullied, harassed or assaulted by men and nothing could be done. The #metoo movement has given a voice to the mistreated and began as part of a grassroots campaign promoting “empowerment through empathy” among women of color who have experienced sexual abuse. Social activist and community organizer Tarana Burke created the phrase “Me Too” on the Myspace social network in 2006.

Nobody – Eighth Circle of Hell | *Image 7: Portraits of Odysseus, a cup of wine, Poseidon and a wild goat*

After having a banquet on an offshore island, Odysseus and his men could have continued sailing. Instead, Odysseus is curious about who lives on the mainland and takes a dozen of his men, and some strong wine, to investigate. Discovering a cave with a lavish abundance of food, the men want to seize it and sail away, but Odysseus selfishly insists on staying, thinking the hospitable owner would love to have them. Polyphemus, their Cyclops host and son of the sea god Poseidon, has no such inclination and welcomes his guests by devouring two of them for supper and trapping the rest inside his cave for later. When the Cyclops leaves, Odysseus devises a plan to get Polyphemus drunk and stab his eye with an olive wood trunk the giant uses as a club. As he is drinking, the Cyclops demands to know Odysseus’ name. Odysseus says his name is “Nobody”. When the Cyclops passes out, the remaining sailors immediately seize their opportunity and bury the lance into the Cyclops’ single eye, blinding him. The Cyclops screams and cries for help, but when other Cyclopes arrive outside and ask who is hurting him, Polyphemus can only answer, “Nobody, . . . Nobody’s killing me now by fraud and not by force!” (9.454-55). The next morning, blind Polyphemus let his rams out and Odysseus and his men escape under the bellies of the animals.

Suitors Being Sued | *Vessel 7*

Today, Penelope’s disgust with the suitors would lead to a lawsuit. A worldwide wave of sexual misconduct allegations against famous and powerful people began in the United States in October 2017. Numerous sexual abuse allegations were reported against film producer Harvey Weinstein, precipitating a national reckoning against sexual harassment.

Kleos | *Image 8: Portraits of pig, Circe, and Elpenor*

Having escaped the Cyclops, Odysseus and his men arrive at the home of Aeolus, master of the winds. Aeolus aids the crew by capturing all the winds that might drive the ships off course and gives them to Odysseus in an ox-skin pouch.

Only the West Wind is left free to blow them toward Ithaca and after ten days of sailing, Odysseus sees the home fires burning. Exhausted, Odysseus falls asleep. Curious and suspicious, his men open the ox-skin pouch, expecting to find treasure but instead release heavy squalls blowing them back to Aeolus’ island. The wind god refuses to help them further so the Greeks must row. They come upon the land of the Laestrygonians, cannibalistic giants who attack and devour the seamen, hurling boulders at the ships and spearing the men like fish. Only Odysseus’ ship escapes, sailing to the island of Aeaea, home of the beautiful but dangerous goddess, Circe.

Circe promises to help but first they must visit the Land of the Dead to consult with the spirit of the blind prophet, Tiresias. The last night on Circe’s island is one of over-indulgence. Crewmember Elpenor spends the night drinking and falls asleep on Circe’s roofs. When he awakes at dawn, he falls from the roof in a drunken stupor breaking his neck, dying instantly. The urgency of their task leaves no time to bury the dead man.

Nasty - The Truth Comes Out | *Vessel 8*

Suitors angry with Penelope for not making a decision, plot to kill her son Telemachus. The mob presented in Nasty is inspired by another 2017 event: the tiki torch march on the University of Virginia’s campus. White nationalists carried torches in Charlottesville, where city officials moved to eradicate symbols of the city’s Confederate past. Outrage over the march quickly turned to mockery as users pointed out the irony of white nationalists using Polynesian tiki torches.

Breathless Dead | *Image 9: Portraits of Odysseus, Anticleia, Tiresias, and Elpenor*

Odysseus follows Circe’s instructions to attract the dead. He encounters Elpenor, who requests a proper burial and Odysseus’ mother, Anticleia. The deceased prophet Tiresias warns Odysseus that he will arrive home “a broken man – all shipmates lost” (11.130) unless he makes sacrifices to Poseidon for blinding his son (Polyphemus, the Cyclops) as well as pursuing other quests and instructions.

The Silence Breakers | *Vessel 9* Athena, Penelope, and other women of the household suffered abuse from the suitors and are portrayed on the vessel The Silence Breakers. Inspired by the 2017 Time Magazine Person of the Year, artist Halker-Saathoff selected women who broke their silence to represent the women in Penelope’s household: Melody Walton, Adama Iwu, Isabel Pascual, and Ashley Judd.

Sirens and Scylla | *Image 10: Portraits of Zeus, Sun God, and Death* Odysseus is the lone survivor. His crew has fallen to the six-headed monster Scylla and to Charybdis the giant whirlpool with the remaining sailors destroyed by the Sun God Helios for slaughtering sacred cattle. *Sirens and Scylla* depicts Odysseus traveling tied to the ships mast in order to save him from the mesmerizing voices.

Meaningful Action or The Fall Out | *Vessel 10*

The suitors have agreed to postpone assassinating Penelope’s son, Telemachus. Penelope confronts the men but the slimy Eurymachus cuts her off in turn. Meaningful Action or The Fall Out features men removed from power due to their sexual misconduct including actor Kevin Spacey; former Minnesota Senator Al Franken, studio executive, Harvey Weinstein; and Alabama Republican Senate Candidate, Roy Moore. In the background there are silhouettes of President Donald Trump - asking the question, will his time come?

Reunited | *Image 11: Portraits of the bow, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and a noose*

Athena meets Odysseus on Ithaca and disguises him as an old beggar. Even his loyal swineherd Eumaeus does not recognize him while Athena guides Telemachus safely past the suitors’ ambush. Odysseus reveals his identity only to his son, and they work out a plan to defeat the suitors.

Reignite | *Vessel 11*

Penelope assembles a contest of the bow and axes to test her suspicions that the beggar is her Odysseus. Suitors string a great bow to shoot an arrow through a dozen axes with Penelope promising: whomever can perform the feat will be her next husband. Meanwhile, Telemachus gathers and hides the suitor’s weapons to prevent the ambush and an old nurse discovers the beggar’s identity and is sworn to secrecy. Penelope however has accepted the beggar as her long-absent husband after witnessing his reaction to the possible destruction of his bed. Young Odysseus shaped and carved his bed from a living olive tree growing in the palace courtyard.

Nothing Feebler than a man – Fraught with Grave Foreboding | *Image 12: Portraits of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus*

Penelope announces the contest and retrieves Odysseus’ bow. For sport, Telemachus attempts to string the bow and fails three times. He is about to succeed on his fourth try when Odysseus privately signals him to back off. The suitors then take their turns, their early efforts failing dismally. As the suitors contend, Odysseus meets outside with Eumaeus and Philoetius, his faithful servants; reveals to them his identity; and tells them of his plan. Meanwhile, the suitors continue to struggle with the bow. Antinous suggests that the contest be postponed until the next day, but then Odysseus asks if he might give the bow a try. Odysseus easily strings the weapon and fires an arrow straight through the axes; then he and Telemachus stand together to face the suitors--the battle is on. With Athena’s intervention and encouragement, Odysseus wins the day. All suitors are killed.

The Unseen Universe of the Human Heart

Athena, patron of human ingenuity, sits upon a human heart illustrating the battle scars from our heroine and hero, Penelope & Odysseus.

Heartsick on the Open Sea- Make His Name by Sailing There



Halker-Saathoff is an award-winning multidisciplinary artist and educator. Drawn to stories, she feels compelled to explore and represent lesser celebrated characters, as evidenced in *Odysseus & Penelope*. “I find that reinterpreting a story through art is a powerful way to view the past. Works of historical significance don’t need to linger in the time period in which they were written—they can be viewed through the eyes of today.”

all great stories engage the human heart