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Why Is Penelope Still Waiting? The Missing Feminist Reappraisal of the *Odyssey* in Cinema, 1963–2007

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PENELOPE IN KONCHALOVSKY'S *ODYSSEY*

In Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), when Achilles (Brad Pitt) is too busy worrying about Briseis to devote himself to armed combat, Odysseus (Sean Bean) remarks cryptically to him, 'women have a way of complicating things'. Unfortunately, women scarcely complicate the plot of *Troy* at all. Hecuba does not feature, Helen possesses not one iota of mysterious power, and Briseis is amalgamated with both Chryseis and Cassandra. Yet alongside the reduction of the *Iliad's* already meagre female quotient, and the wholesale deletion of the authoritative and eloquent old queen of Troy, the movie does doff its cap in the direction of its emancipated third-millennial female audience members by allowing Briseis to stab Agamemnon in the neck. Her action is presented as a feisty post-feminist refusal to be complicit in her own victimhood, when the brutal patriarchal overlord is about to take her captive.

David Benioff's otherwise lacklustre screenplay here dared—however tentatively and briefly—to rewrite the Homeric poem in a way that does not diminish but enhances its presentation of female agency. It is an important moment from the perspective of anyone thinking about women in movies set in ancient Greece and Rome. The physical initiative taken by Briseis (Rose Byrne) in her own self-defence shows that even in Hollywood it is possible to think creatively about female roles in ancient Greece and in ancient Greek epic. It is a shame that the possibility that Homeric epic could be changed to make it less demeaning to women had never struck Andrei Konchalovsky and Chris Solimine when they

adapted the *Odyssey* as a miniseries for NBC, first aired in 1997 and subsequently distributed as a film on VHS and DVD.

From the perspective of a female spectator, the movie (which Konchalovsky also directed) is perhaps the most depressing cinematic excursion into ancient Greece ever to have been made. Armand Assante, who played Odysseus, struggled manfully with the inadequate dialogue, but Greta Scacchi seems to have given up before she started. She is an intelligent actress, well known for her commitment to women's equality. She has turned down roles (including the predatory Alex Forrest played instead by Glenn Close in Adrian Lyne's gynophobic *Fatal Attraction* [1987]) precisely because they pandered to male fantasies. But she nevertheless seems to have been rendered powerless by the script and the directing style in Konchalovsky's *Odyssey*. She was prevented by them from displaying almost any of the emotions for which Penelope's situation cries out. Rage at abandonment? Grief at being denied further children? Pleasure at being in charge of her own Ithacan fiefdom? Boredom with her narrowly confined domestic environment? Desire for a 'suitor'? Retaliation against being sexually harassed on a daily level? Irritation with Telemachus for throwing his weight about with her? An urge to go and find out for herself what had happened to Odysseus? Hardly.

Her one plausible emotion given more than one scene (and one for which no explicit basis is to be found in Homer) is her sexual frustration, giving rise to the suspicion that Greta Scaachi was offered the part less because of her apt age (late thirties) than because of her rather racy reputation. This was not something she deserved, nor had courted, but a result of the perceived sensuality of her outstanding beauty when she was a very young woman. She was only offered roles entailing sex scenes and nudity, earning her the unwanted journalists' soubriquet 'Scorchy Scacchi'. Konchalovsky's conception of the role of Penelope interacts not with the actress's skills but with her reputation, since she is presented as a now ageing sex goddess. When, residing on Calypso's island, Odysseus dreams of Penelope, it is as the nubile girl he used to chase around the marital bedroom in sex games on Ithaca; in the concluding scene she is even made to beg Odysseus for reassurance that she has not aged too badly. Yet Scorchy Scaachi is not even assertive sexually. When not cooling off her groin in rippling sea waves and orgasmically murmuring the name 'Odysseus', she is actually required to spend almost the entire film on the verge or actually in tears, and to exude a sense of utter fragility. Typically, she faints like a maiden in a Victorian novel after smiling too hard when she finally finds Odysseus in her bedroom.

This helpless note is struck in the opening sequence, when Penelope is not even allowed to give birth bravely or without Odysseus intervening. The very first shot shows Odysseus sprinting, bow in hand, across Ithaca

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to reach her. She is wincing in labour (although looks far too slim to be nine months pregnant), and so he masterfully picks her up, carries her bodily to the house, tells her to imagine she is lying on a beach, and improbably commands ‘give me the pain!’ She moans pathetically while he expropriates the sole heroic role—producing a child—only a woman can in nature play, as the camera focuses on him pulling (rather than her pushing) the baby from her body. He then walks with the newborn round Ithaca, and it is he, not Penelope, who gloats in a voice-over, ‘this day was the proudest day of my life!’

Odysseus is almost immediately taken off to war, informing us that he is Odysseus and (all too accurately) that ‘this is *my* story’ [*my* italics]. He says long good-byes to his mother Anticleia (Irene Papas) and to a shrine of Athena, but to the again tearful Penelope he delivers an instruction that will shape her entire future (to remarry if he does not return—but only when Telemachus is grown to manhood). This she accepts, lugubriously, but without any demur or curiosity. From here onwards, the film could potentially have developed Penelope’s stature, since (unlike the *Odyssey* for most of the wanderings) it does intercut Ithacan scenes with those of Odysseus’ adventures. But in these Ithacan scenes Penelope’s status as a character deteriorates from insipid to inane. She fails to stand up to Anticleia over the upbringing of Telemachus. She then fails to dissuade Anticleia from suicide. She indiscreetly tells Telemachus the secret of the olive-tree bedroom, and the film excises completely her careful testing of Odysseus’ trustworthiness at the climax of the action. Since the film also ends with their bedroom reunion, and no sense whatsoever that Odysseus might have to leave Ithaca once again as predicted in Homer’s poem, the complicated reactions Penelope might have experienced to this news are avoided—or evaded. Penelope has kept her legs together, and her virtue has apparently been sufficiently rewarded by a sex bout with Odysseus after two decades. There is no sense that this has ultimately cost her any sacrifice.

What are we to make of this dismal portrayal of one of antiquity’s most famous heroines? I have heard the argument from some male scholars that the figure of Odysseus as quest-hero is a ‘universal’ psychological archetype with whom anyone, regardless of gender, can identify, certainly in such an intimate and psychologically compelling medium as cinema. But surely this argument was repudiated long ago by Laura Mulvey, when she explored how the female spectator in the cinema is coerced into looking at narrative through male eyes, being positioned between an idealized, active, powerful male ego and a passive, powerless

one identified as female.¹ In more psychoanalytical terms, if women do enjoy adopting this masculine point of view as they identify with Odysseus-questers enjoying multiple sexual relationships or interesting travels, it is because as little girls they experienced a pre-Oedipal, phallic fantasy of omnipotence; nevertheless, the spectatorial position they take on in the cinema is temporary and 'transvestite': the recovery of the long lost aspect of their sexual identity can only be uncomfortable and partial, and they must always oscillate between identification with Odysseus and with Penelope.²

Alternatively, Konchalovsky's Penelope might hypothetically be defended on the ground that Penelope's chastity and patience are celebrated in the original *Odyssey*. This is, at the crudest level, true. But Konchalovsky was happy to interfere with the prototype when it suited him. More importantly, he has actually interfered with the poem in order to stress Penelope's libido and downgrade even further her agency and the extent of the depictions of her subjectivity. The Homeric Penelope has some great speeches and dream narratives which reveal some of her inner thoughts, and even she is a good deal tougher and more assertive than the figure produced in Konchalovsky's version. From the Renaissance onwards, numerous dramatists and opera composers responded to the Penelope they found in the Greek text by making her the centre of emotional stage works, from Giambattista della Porta's Counter-Reformation *Penelope* (1591) and the seminal *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* of Claudio Monteverdi and Giacomo Badoaro (1640) onwards.³ Homer's Odysseus values Penelope's intelligence, and the poem celebrates the desirability of 'like-mindedness' within a marriage (*Od.* 6.181–4). It was to Penelope to whom Odysseus delegated the responsibility for his household by making her his regent (*Od.* 18.259–70). The satisfactory outcome of the poem depends as much upon Penelope's qualities as on those of Odysseus. This makes her almost unique in Greek mythology, where clever women have a tendency to misbehave, and feminine docility is valued more than shrewdness. The Homeric Penelope is also more complex, mysterious, and nuanced than this screen substitute. She has developed interesting relationships that are nothing to do with him. It is explicitly said in the poem, for example, that she preferred the company of one of the suitors to that of the others; moreover, the female-female complexity of her relationship with Melanthis, a 'disloyal daughter' figure on whom she lavished love as a child, has huge dramatic potential.

¹ Mulvey ([1975] 1989a: 20).

² Mulvey ([1981] 1989b: 37).

³ See Hall (2008), Chs. 3 and 9.

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Indeed, the problem of Penelope's tortured consciousness should be a screenplay writer's gift, offering a combination of intense moments of interiority combined with an almost detective-plot style mystery. She is so multi-layered and paradoxical that she has long frustrated scholars bent on tracing a consistency or unilinear development in her portrayal. The enigma begins when she summons the beggar, outraged at the suitors' treatment of him. This, she says, could never happen if Odysseus came back. At this point Telemachus sneezes and *Penelope laughs* (*Od.* 17.543–50). No such mysterious reaction, or underlying sense of humour, is suggested in the film. Before she has met the beggar, the Homeric Penelope tells the suitors to bring bridal gifts; the narrator comments, 'Odysseus saw with glee how she lured them to make presents to her, stealing their souls with persuasive words though her heart meanwhile was set elsewhere' (*Od.* 18.281–3). This raises the possibility that Penelope really believes that Odysseus is about to return, or even that she has seen through his disguise, neither of which is remotely suggested in Konchalovsky's version. The picture of Penelope built up subsequently in the Homeric poem is perplexing. Does the archery contest occur to her because she believes that the crisis must be resolved one way or another? Does her *subconscious* mind recognize Odysseus while her consciousness does not? Is she an irrational creature so emotionally confused that it is pointless to look for consistency of motive? Whichever way the Homeric story is read, it is certainly sexist: we are asked to collude with this woman's husband and son in scrutinizing her misery. Yet the narrative incontrovertibly offers a range of interesting interpretations of Penelope that have been entirely overlooked in the filmmaking process.

Indeed, the potential to make Penelope more interesting was not completely overlooked by earlier film writers and directors. It is disheartening to discover the extent to which the cinematic Penelope has actually regressed during the precise period when we might have expected her to emancipate herself somewhat from her patriarchal plotline. The Penelope of Mario Camerini's *Ulisse* (1954), played with such dignity and eloquence by Silvana Mangano,⁴ has far more of a mind of her own than Konchalovsky's, even being allowed to show revulsion at the violent revenge taken by her husband. The movie relating to the *Odyssey* that has reached the widest audience, on account of the fame of its director, is Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963); this film puts the Penelopean experience centre-stage. It centres on the making of a film of the *Odyssey*, of which the director is Fritz Lang, acted by himself. One of the

⁴ See Joanna Paul's chapter in this volume.

snippets of the embedded film that is seen during the scrutiny of the rushes sequence offers a striking image of Penelope, standing against a bright yellow wall, adorned with heavy make-up suggesting Mycenaean frescoes.

Yet the important Penelopean figure here is Camille (Brigitte Bardot), the wife of the ‘internal’ screenwriter Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli), with whom she is becoming increasingly disenchanted. The film was adapted from Albert Moravia’s novel *Il Disprezzo* (1954, usually translated as *A Ghost at Noon*), which is narrated by the Odysseus figure. But, for the film, Godard took the radical decision consistently to adopt, through subtle use of the camera and careful writing, the wife’s perspective. This is particularly remarkable because, in casting the stunning Bardot, he ran such a high risk of completely pandering to the desiring male gaze. But instead he uses Bardot to signify the endlessly reversible nature of the cinematic image, which ‘solicits our emotional involvement with the characters while at the same time making us see those characters as actors’.⁵

Camille does eventually get killed off, perhaps in a symbolic enactment of the providential destiny of unfaithful women in the Western cultural tradition, but she has been allowed a remarkable degree of moral autonomy and even commentary on the emerging narrative line. She runs, with a curious detachment, through a series of obscenities to see how her husband will react. She also reads a book arguing that it solves nothing to murder a sexual rival, which brings to mind not only her husband’s jealousy of the love rival Prokosch, but also the carnage in *Odyssey 22*. The degree to which Godard rewrites Penelope’s archetypal role is a result of his fascination with the process of translation itself—not only between languages and historical periods, but also between media. As Godard has himself insisted, written discourse ‘automatically’ changes when it is turned into film. *Le Mépris* is a radical adaptation of a novel which Godard despised (he described it as ‘a vulgar and pretty trash novel [*roman de gare*], full of classic and outmoded feelings’), and, as Nicholas Paige has put it, Moravia’s trite love triangle is ‘systematically undermined by Bardot’s Camille’, through her incessant ‘back-and-forth between love and contempt’.⁶ Moravia’s novel, moreover, itself ‘translates’ the ancient epic into a radically different idiom; this complicated process, of screening a novel that adapted a poem, resulted in a film which Godard claimed could actually have been entitled *In Search of Homer*. Since the *Odyssey* itself is irrecoverable, fragmented into an ever

⁵ Paige (2004: 15).

⁶ Paige (2004: 14).

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increasing number of different retellings, what is the problem with retelling the experience of Penelope and Odysseus themselves? Both Camille and Paul are products of Godard's interrogation of the Western tradition which, it is discovered, cannot and will not answer back. But they are both victims of a modernist cultural anomie and interpersonal isolation.⁷

In the 1960s, then, it was possible to explore the ideas that Penelope was the most significant figure in the Odyssean plot, and that the negative experience of her marriage might be cinematically interesting. Three years after *Contempt*, as Jon Solomon has pointed out, there are Odyssean reverberations Arthur Hiller's comedy *Penelope* (1966), starring Natalie Wood. Although by no stretch of the imagination a 'feminist' film, the star of the show was nevertheless a proactive woman who felt so neglected by her banker husband that she robbed his bank.⁸ The slightly subversive undercurrent to this plot in economic as well as gender terms must have had something to do with the politics of the man whose novel was adapted for the screenplay: although writing under the pseudonym of E.V. Cunningham, he was none other than Howard Fast, the communist author of the novel *Spartacus*, and no stranger to classical material.

The portrayal of Penelope in Konchalovsky's movie could have learned much from Camerini, Godard, or indeed Fast's novel. This recent screen *Odyssey's* reactionary sexual politics are all the more noticeable since it was made two decades after Feminism, at least in the West, had begun to win the public argument. Much of the crucial legislation was passed in the UK during the 1970s, which also saw the first International Festival of Women's Film, held in New York in 1972, and the International Women's Film Seminar in Berlin in 1974.⁹ At the same time, feminist critiques of film began to circulate. But the figure of Penelope in Konchalovsky's movie has been entirely unaffected by, for example, Claire Johnston's foundational 1973 critique of the stereotypes of women in film, which drew on both Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to demonstrate how classical cinema produces the ideological sign 'woman' entirely in subsidiary relationship to the sign 'man'.¹⁰ Konchalovsky's Penelope only reaffirms the audience stereotypes of the female psyche as masochistic and depressive or hysterical, a definitive typology which Mary Ann Doane has identified in the woman-centred melodramatic films of the 1940s.¹¹

⁷ Paige (2004: 8).

⁸ Solomon (1995–6: 126).

⁹ Rosenberg (1983).

¹⁰ Johnston ([1973] 1991: 25–6).

¹¹ Doane (1987).

Konchalovsky's audience scrutinizes Penelope's pain and sometimes her desire, rather than being allowed to explore her subjective experience of them; this is a telling instantiation of Teresa de Lauretis' hypothesis that women's subject position, as depicted in the cinema, is fundamentally in conflict with the life experience of female spectators who know that they are 'real', historically situated subjects.¹² Konchalovsky certainly has not heard the news, supposed by some overly optimistic film theorists to have been universally heard, that the white heterosexual male subject is in crisis in the cinema, with his masculinity becoming increasingly denaturalized and fragmented.¹³

There are major flaws, therefore, in the argument that the inbuilt sexism of the *Odyssey* gives the modern writer no choice but to make Penelope feeble. Not only earlier *Odyssey*-related films, but also Homer's own epic portrait as well as feminist film theory, have all been pointing for decades in other, more interesting directions. It is therefore time now to turn to the numerous well-known movies, in the more than thirty years since Barry Levinson's baseball epic *The Natural* (1984), whose plots and, visual images explicitly make reference to the *Odyssey*, or which can be shown by external testimony to have been influenced by it. Indeed, the cultural penetration of the *Odyssey* and its status as the archetypal biography, romance, action adventure story, quest story and revenge narrative all in one produce regular allegations that parallels have been drawn between it and movies where the screenwriters may consciously have drawn none at all. Recent examples of films which were allegedly influenced by the *Odyssey* include both the original 1960 film *Little Shop of Horrors* and its 1986 remake, *WaterShip Down* (1978), *Waterworld* (1995), Zacharias Kunuk's devastating Inuit *Atanarjuat* (2001), *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (also 2001, an adaptation of Louis de Bernières' novel, directed by John Madden), Tim Burton's *Big Fish* (2003), and even the maritime adventures in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004), which include monocular foes and an angry sea god.

One reason for the complexity of the relationship borne by the *Odyssey* to the film industry is that it has held a special place in aspiring screenwriters' lore since Christopher Vogler's bestselling handbook *The Writer's Journey* (1992). The formula for a successful screenplay that Vogler advises is structured around quotations and archetypal figures that he traces to the *Odyssey*—the wise elder figure (Mentor or Obi Wan Kenobi in George Lucas' 1977 *Star Wars*), the Herald figure (Hermes or

¹² de Lauretis (1987: 20).

¹³ Easthope (1986).

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the telegraph clerk in Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952)), the Shape-shifter (Proteus and countless morphing superheroes and their adversaries), and so on. Another analysis of Hollywood plot structure emphasizes the importance of the 'classical storytelling technique' that involved two parallel (and invariably male) protagonists who pursue, simultaneously, different courses of action although they end up working together towards a shared goal.¹⁴ This formula is exemplified in Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* (1987), but it could have been lifted straight from the *Odyssey*, with its separated father and son's parallel travels and eventual reunion. The important point is no longer whether any particular screenwriters have drawn on the *Odyssey*, or indeed ever read it, but that they would almost all self-consciously cite the *Odyssey* as a key text in the history of adventure narrative. This epic's status, at least in Hollywood, has once again—and in a new sense—become a matter of legend. Yet the films whose relationship to the *Odyssey* is difficult to prove need not detain us long here. This article is about the role of relatively direct cultural descendants of Penelope in modern cinema, and—bizarrely—in none of the films named in the previous paragraph does the male protagonist have a wife or even female love interest with anything like the importance of Penelope in the Homeric *Odyssey*.

Yet the same principle, astonishingly and regrettably, applies to the films in which the relationship with the *Odyssey* is indeed demonstrable. There is not a single film among these in which the figure based on Penelope has anything like the status of the Odyssean hero, whatever criterion is used to measure that status—aesthetic, ethical, degree of psychic interiority, or simple number of minutes in which the camera considers her situation or replicates her gaze. This is despite the feminist reassessment of Penelope in contexts other than the movie industry. It was Helene Foley who as long ago as 1978 first showed how the *Odyssey* uses 'inverted sex role' similes to underline the tensions in the marriage and under patriarchy—for example, when Penelope finally accepts her husband and clings to him like shipwrecked men who grasp dry land (*Od.* 23.233–8).¹⁵ It is now more than twenty years, moreover, since the feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun delivered her seminal lecture 'What was Penelope Unweaving?', which argued that women were actually trapped by the narratives in which their roles had been defined—which emphatically did not include the role of quest hero, or indeed of anything much other than object of desire or self-denying mother, always dependent on male authority and power. Heilbrun urged that women needed to

¹⁴ Thompson (1999: 44–7).

¹⁵ Foley (1978).

produce new narratives which gave them role models with agency, a variety of experiences, intellectual range, and adventures independent of love and marriage. They needed to ‘unweave’ the old stories which underpinned patriarchy and reweave them in ways that nurtured in women, rather than discouraged, a sense of autonomy, independence and curiosity.¹⁶

Two years later, in 1987, Sheila Murnaghan’s outstanding *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* broke new ground within Classics by arguing that Penelope is construed as a heroic type who achieves her goals by cunning intelligence, only to be knocked down as such by an ideological imperative inimical to male-female equality. Marilyn Katz’s *Penelope’s Renown* (1991) is perhaps the first feminist study to make a virtue out of the ambiguity of Penelope’s presentation, showing how the poem’s audience is kept guessing about the type of wife that she will turn out to be—an adulterous Helen, a murderous Clytemnestra, or an exemplar of fidelity and virtue. Penelope, as the constantly evolving and least determinate figure in the poem, is thus the paramount symbol of its poetics. Three years later, Nancy Felson-Rubin acknowledged Penelope’s power as a signifier of open-endedness, but focused on the engagement of the listener/reader with the unfolding of the story to ask whether subjective ways of identifying with the emotional vicissitudes in this text are in themselves irredeemably gendered. An excellent range of approaches to all the female figures in the *Odyssey*, not only Penelope, are presented in the 1995 collection of essays edited by Beth Cohen.

Had she lived, Heilbrun would no doubt have been gratified also to see that few Greek or Shakespearean heroines have not been the subject, over the last two decades, of feminist re-envisioning in creative media as well as academic circles: Clytemnestra has been justified, Jocasta transformed into a freethinker, Shakespeare’s Kate from tamed shrew to rape victim, and Penelope has indeed been allowed, outside the cinema, to weave her own subjectivity. Just two years after Heilbrun’s incendiary lecture, the first of several novels rewriting the *Odyssey* was published in Austria—Inge Merkel’s *Odysseus and Penelope: An Ordinary Marriage*.¹⁷ This rewrote the *Odyssey* from the perspective of the women left behind—above all Penelope, but Eurycleia is also upgraded. Merkel’s novel demonstrates ways in which a modern film could make Penelope interesting. Her Penelope eventually finds her sexual starvation agonizing. She develops an eating disorder, varicose veins, and a plausible drink problem. She stops washing and resorts to black magic. She nearly has a

¹⁶ Heilbrun ([1985] 1990).

¹⁷ Merkel ([1987] 2000).

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lesbian affair; she climbs into bed with Amphinomus before getting cold feet; she flirts with Antinous. Merkel asks what constitutes a heroic ordeal: the torment of constant movement or of enforced confinement? Although denying that she is a feminist, Merkel owes much to the self-consciously feminist tradition of reading Greek myths instantiated in Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1975). She finds Homer's picture of his supposedly intelligent queen of Ithaca insulting. Her Penelope knows everything about Odysseus' affair with Calypso (an 'island tart'), and she is not hoodwinked by her husband's vagabond disguise. From a woman's perspective, this makes for a more emotionally satisfying read than the *Odyssey*, where Penelope is scrutinized for the effect men's actions are having on her, rather than *vice versa*.

Merkel's innovative book has received little attention in comparison with the two women-focused *Odyssey* novels published in 2005, Adèle Geras' *Ithaka*, told by an orphaned granddaughter of Eurycleia, and *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood. Unlike Merkel, Atwood makes her Penelope as obnoxious as her Odysseus. She is arrogant, vain, insecure, unsympathetic, and sexually possessive. She is tyrannical with her slaves; it is she who orders the twelve 'disloyal' maids to hang around the suitors 'using whatever enticing arts they could invent'.¹⁸ Penelope has here displaced Odysseus as an epic hero, as Atwood's title implies (at least one scholar, impressed by Penelope's prominence, long ago described the poem as the *Penelopeia*¹⁹). The novel has also formed the basis of a very successful stage version in 2007, a collaborative production by the Royal Shakespeare Company in England and Canada's National Arts Centre, directed by Josette Bushell-Mingo. Penelope is in the stage version granted agency, intelligence, and gifts as a raconteur. She is not likeable, but she is certainly complicated, and a gift for an outstanding actress such as Penny Downie, whose realization of the role was simply stunning.

Other dramatists have updated the *Odyssey* in fascinating female-friendly ways. Derek Walcott's Penelope in *The Odyssey: A Stage Version* (1993) is appalled at the carnage wrought by Odysseus, rebukes him for turning the house into an 'abattoir', demands to know whether it was for such a scene that she kept her 'thighs crossed for twenty years', and forbids him to hang the maids. In Rachel Matthews' radio play *The City at Night* (broadcast on BBC Radio 4, 4th November 2004), Ulee is a former man who has undergone a sex change operation. She is now searching for her fiancé on the Newcastle quayside. *Current Nobody* by

¹⁸ Atwood (2005: 115).

¹⁹ John Finley (1978: 3–4).

Melissa James Gibson, performed at the 2006 Sundance Institute Theatre Laboratory, involves another kind of sex role inversion by having Penelope going away as a war photojournalist, leaving Odysseus at home with a teenage daughter, Tel, who grapples with the cost of her mother's epic ambition. There have also been innumerable Penelopes reassessed by women poets. Linda Pastan's seven-poem lyric cycle 'On Rereading the *Odyssey* in Middle Age' weaves into an imitation of the poem the responses of a mature reader.²⁰ Carolyn White's 'The voyage of Penelope' (1993) presents Penelope's heroic journey through her dream life and her textile;²¹ 'Penelope serves Odysseus breakfast' (2000) by Karen Bjorneby has the wife of a prosperous businessman announce that *she* is going on a cruise. The focus of Louise Glück's lyric cycle *Meadowlands* (1996) is also a failing modern marriage in which Penelope's subjectivity is prominent.²²

ECHOES OF PENELOPE IN OTHER FILMS

Yet despite the significance of Penelope in fiction, theatre, and poetry by women, no film has to my knowledge yet been made which both obviously adopts the *Odyssey* as archetype and also situates Odysseus' wife Penelope as an experiential subject of equal importance as her husband, let alone equal agency or equal right to control the narrative. Some of the films scarcely require further investigation. Eric de Kuyper's German-language gay soft porn movie *Pink Ulysses* (1990), designed to arouse men who desire sex with other men, offers a Penelope who combines a brothel madam's grinning seediness with a rather comforting maternal presence, but she is very much relegated to the background of the scenes of homoerotic mutual pleasuring. She wears striking Knossos-fresco make-up, but is not the centre of anyone's attention, sexual or otherwise, and certainly granted no hint of subjectivity.

If we turn the clocks back to 1984, the *Odyssey* underlay a more mainstream (indeed at the time popular) movie which won four Oscar nominations, including Best Actress for Glenn Close in the 'Penelope' role. But her acting skills were actually wasted since the film objectified her as an exemplar of shining Madonna-like selflessness. The film was Barry Levinson's *The Natural*, starring Robert Redford as Roy Hobbs, an

²⁰ In Pastan (1988); see the excellent study by Murnaghan and Roberts (2002).

²¹ Reproduced in DeNicola (1999: 135–7).

²² See Murnaghan and Roberts (2002), especially 15–24.

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ageing former baseball star who achieves a magnificent comeback. The movie also takes Hobbs back to his long-estranged fiancée Iris, and the son he had unwittingly sired sixteen years before. The prominent Odyssean references consolidate the film's mythic power. When the young Hobbs is first held fast in conversation by Harriet Bird, a combination of Calypso and the Sirens, she is pointedly made to ask him whether he has ever read the epics of Homer. For most of the film the self-controlled, tortured, and mysterious Odyssean persona of the fast-forwarded Hobbs, now in his late thirties, keeps the viewer guessing as to what he had been doing throughout his absence. In addition to Harriet there is another murderous seductress, 'Memo' Paris, who threatens Hobbs' memory of who he really is by appealing, Circe-like, to his animal desires. But the backlit figure of Iris (who always wears white and here seems to have acquired a halo), the patient farmer-fiancée named after one of the Homeric messengers of the gods, can inspire him into heroic deeds of sporting prowess.

The screenplay for the film version of *The Natural* was written by Robert Towne, adapting Bernard Malamud's synonymous 1952 novel, to which the *Odyssey* is both more and less important. The degree of alteration to the novel in the overall plotline of the movie is breathtaking, and actually makes it far more like the *Odyssey*. Iris' significance is enormously upgraded, and she has a grown son by Roy. But her increased significance is entirely in relation to her function as a redemptive influence on the long-absent father of her child; we learn nothing of how she has spent the intervening years, the emotions that seeing Roy again have aroused, or indeed of her life outside her role as their son's mother. Moreover, the new storyline in the movie evades the ethical complexity of the novel, since the couple and their son end up a happily reunited All-American nuclear family back home on their Midwestern farm. The movie ends with a scene of redemptive purity where Roy plays with his son in the golden light of wheatfield.²³ The difference between the novel and the film versions of *The Natural* crystallizes the tension (outside the movies) in current reactions to Odysseus as a hero. In the novel it is precisely the masculine values of sexual appetite, competitive sport, and macho business culture that bring the story of Hobbs—who fails to make a lasting relationship with a woman—to a tragic conclusion; in the movie, it is Hobbs' identity as a decent Midwestern male, rooted in

²³ On the way lighting is used to emphasize Iris' near-divine purity, in contrast with the sordid Memo, see Brown (2002: 161–5).

his soil and his frontier values, that saves him and his docile, saintly woman.

If Iris is an irredeemably, indeed almost risibly two-dimensional fantasy figure serving only male ideological interests, then thankfully matters had advanced somewhat by the time that *Sommersby*, the next Hollywood film saturated in the *Odyssey*, was released in 1993. The background to the presentation in this film of the Penelope figure, Laurel, is however extremely complex, since the screenwriters were ‘translating’ the successful French movie *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (1982). This had used an original screenplay that reconstructed documents relating a real, historical court-case in 16th-century France. The female historian who acted as consultant on the film has pointed out that the screenplay was written by men, and that the picture of the wife in the old documents was entirely created by men; one of them commented on the resemblance she bore to the Homeric Penelope.²⁴ When it came to the American remake, which relocated the story to reconstruction Tennessee, the screenplay writers went back to the Homer and thoroughly reinforced the echoes of the Homeric archetype, even down to making the Odysseus figure, Horace Townsend (Richard Gere), a Classics teacher who is fond of the Homeric epics.

But the role of the waiting wife in the new, Deep South *Odyssey* enacted in *Sommersby* had the potential to be completely rewritten to enhance its portrayal of the wife’s perspective, just as the role of Joseph (Eumaeus) is given rich new resonances by making him a newly emancipated slave. There are indeed a few suggestions of how interesting a character the ‘Penelope’ type can be, especially in the expert hands of the peerlessly intelligent and poised actress Jodie Foster. But the screenplay scarcely gives her a chance. She plays along with Townsend rather passively, although suspecting and soon knowing that he is not her husband but an imposter, falls in love with him promptly (although screen chemistry between her and Gere was unfortunately lacking). Almost instantly, she becomes relegated to the role of accessory to his exciting moral quandaries, his fight with the rival suitor, the stand he takes against racist bullies of the former slaves, his vigorous attempts to create a new tobacco-based economy for the whole inter-racial community, and the court case which dominates the final section of the film. There is nothing particularly wrong with this film, but the role allocated to Laurel is nowhere near as complicated as that of Horace Townsend, Homer’s Penelope, or the wife of Martin Guerre, Bertrande de Rols,

²⁴ Zemon Davis (1997).

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played with such power and charm by Nathalie Beye. This was a remarkable achievement given the constant danger of being upstaged by the potent presence of Gerard Depardieu as the man claiming to be her husband.

The most promising ‘Penelope’ ever to have appeared on screen is surely the figure of Louise in Mike Leigh’s *Naked*, made and financed in Britain, but released the same year as *Sommersby*. The film examines inner city decay and the poverty-stricken underbelly of the Thatcher years, but since its release has been linked by critics with the *Odyssey*. This is a result not of any statement by the director, nor any mention of such a parallel in the publicity literature. Indeed, the *intention* of such a parallel would be difficult to prove, since Mike Leigh’s actors often improvise their own lines, a technique of scene development in which the skill of David Thewlis (who played Johnny, the wanderer figure) is legendary. Yet the undertext becomes almost impossible to avoid during the encounter between Johnny and the waitress. She takes him to the flat she is ‘sitting’ while its owners are away. The lounge is littered with Greek souvenirs, statuettes of gods and hoplites, and translations of Greek authors including a copy of E.V. Rieu’s bestselling Penguin Classic translation of the *Odyssey*, which Johnny brandishes at his reluctant hostess. Of the owner of the flat Johnny enquires, mockingly, ‘Is he a Homer-sexual, yeah?’, and later comments that he doesn’t want ‘to sound Homer-phobic’, before emphasizing that he likes the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, what with Achilles, ‘the wooden horse, Helen of Troy... Cyclops’.

Once this intertextual allusion has been made, Johnny’s violent past, his habitual wandering, his serial encounters with weird individuals, and the constant deferral of domestic closure with his Penelopean woman (Louise, memorably played by Lesley Sharp) cannot fail to remind any viewer acquainted at all with Greek mythology of the *Odyssey*. It is a modern version, however, where the monsters and villains are poverty, unemployment, and existential despair. Johnny is a knowing protagonist, and his references to philosophical questions or literary allusions create a collusive bond between him and the viewer. Thus after his attempt at dialogue with the foul-mouthed young Scot, Archie, he tells Archie’s girlfriend Maggie that Archie has a wonderful way ‘with Socratic debate’. All this is delivered in a stream of deadpan irony.

While waiting for Louise to come home from work, he has sex with the temporary lodger, Sophie, a goth drug addict sporting a Siren-like bird tattoo. She spends much of the movie trying to regain his sexual attention, frustrated by his deep emotional bond with Louise. She thus synthesizes Siren, lotus-eater, Circe and Calypso. Johnny subsequently

leaves the flat after an unsuccessful encounter with Louise, and wanders off into the night, a new member of the London homeless. Johnny's sex scenes are intercut with episodes involving the other male lead. Jeremy, an upper-class sadist, represents the worst aspects of the suitors. Indeed, he moves in to Louise's flat and extracts brutal sex from Sophie by pretending to be the landlord. Meanwhile Johnny, after being mugged, turns up at the flat. The scene is set for what should be the showdown in which Johnny discovers his inner hero and ousts the rival from his latter-day Penelope's residence. In Mike Leigh's universe, however, there is no such thing as a traditional male hero, and Johnny fails miserably. He suffers blows to the head, resulting in a fit, regresses into a childlike state, and is humiliated. It is the marvellous Louise whose raw courage and psychological cunning drive Jeremy away. But the tender reunion of Johnny and the resourceful, resilient Louise proves fleeting, because Johnny staggers off again at the film's conclusion, to life as a London vagrant.

In *Naked*, the Penelopean heroine suggests some ways in which an imaginative, sensitive screenwriter could develop the role of the Odyssean hero's patient woman. Mike Leigh is no sexist, and the film is in one sense an extended critique of masculinity, from the moment when it opens with Johnny apparently committing a rape in a Manchester side street. But Louise's role still remains extremely slight in comparison with the extended adventures and non-stop verbal pyrotechnics that constitute Johnny's role. The other *Odyssey*-related movie to have been made in Europe during the last two decades followed fast on the heels of *Naked*, and is equally in no way a sexist film, but scarcely offers an identifiable role for Penelope at all. Theodoros Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze*, released in Greece in 1995 as *Vlemma tou Odyssea*, is well deserving of its title: the mental perspective throughout the film is emphatically that of its émigré Greek hero, a film director named just 'A' (Harvey Keitel), a modern Odysseus who returns from the USA to his homeland in search of three histories: his own, that of south-eastern Europe, and that of the medium in which he works.

Like Odysseus, 'A's' personal psychic biography is defined by a series of women, including his mother, and four younger women all played by the same powerful Romanian actress, Maia Morgenstern. How wonderfully this titan of Romanian theatre might have played an intact, single Balkan waiting wife with an interesting story all of her own! Yet the (ultimately Freudian) merging of Odysseus' women has been a tradition in male-authored narratives since Joyce associated Leopold's Calypso and Penelope, and Camerini made Mangano play both Circe and Penelope; Angelopoulos clearly feels that it was appropriate to follow suit. The

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result is that although women, plural, are crucial to 'A's' experiences and subjectivity, not one of them is an authentic subject in her own right. Indeed, 'woman' in the film is a construct which fragments, like coloured-glass beads refracted a hundred times in a kaleidoscope, in 'A's' memory and filmic travelogue. His most serious old love interest, and therefore, perhaps, his potential Penelope, is the enigmatic woman he glimpses in the street in Florina, the town in north-western Greece where his film is being shown at the beginning of Angelopoulos' movie. But the sexual passion in the film is mostly directed towards Kali, a woman whom 'A' encounters in a museum and on a train; she is a Calypso figure, who shares his journey and becomes involved with him erotically, but whom, like Odysseus, he leaves in Konstantza, telling her that he cannot love her.

The third woman gazed upon by this Ulysses is another seductress, but this time Morgenstern plays a widow in Bulgaria in 1915. She tries to force 'A' into assuming the identity of her deceased husband by dressing him in her husband's clothes; she offers him her body as if, Circe-like, she can transform his inner soul and thus make him her captive by appealing to his physical appetites. But finally, Morgenstern appears as Naomi, a modern version of Nausicaa, the daughter of the curator of the Sarajevo Film Archives at which 'A' arrives during the siege of the early 1990s. Naomi dances with 'A' to a modern rock tune, but the music becomes transformed into a much older melody, perhaps from the 1950s, and Naomi morphs into the mystery woman whom 'A' had left behind in Florina many years ago. Naomi herself is gunned down, along with some children and her father, and the movie ends with the implication that she somehow represents all the women with whom 'A' has been involved. *Ulysses' Gaze* does not set out to offer a woman's perspective on history and memory, but the decision to make one woman play all 'A's' lovers, however interesting from the perspective of his subconscious reactions to the world and women, made it quite impossible for any single, important female role to develop at all in the film as a whole.

If Penelope is written out of Angelopoulos' response to the *Odyssey* through fragmentation, she is written out of *Ulee's Gold* (1997) altogether by having died six years before the action even begins. This is an excellent film, directed by Victor Nunez, which portrays a Florida Vietnam veteran (Ulee Jackson) struggling to keep his family together after his neglected son goes off the rails and receives a prison sentence. His daughter-in-law Helen has become a drug addict and run away with the lowlife criminals who enticed his son into crime, and Ulee has to act to save all his womenfolk, including his grand-daughter Penny, from these villains when they break into his house and take them captive. But

the original Penelope, his wife, is dead. Curiously, in her absence, a sense of her indubitable importance to this family does come over rather better than in most films where the Penelopean woman is physically present. Her not being there actively causes Ulee's intense loneliness, the problem he has in taking a moral lead, and the pain of his son and grandchildren. She is, moreover, replaced by the significantly named Mrs Hope, the divorcee next door. Mrs Hope is portrayed sympathetically: her own perspective is represented by several camera shots as she becomes more and more impressed by Ulee's moral toughness, and she has her own tale of childlessness and love of the countryside to tell. Yet this film overwhelmingly belongs to Ulee (brilliantly acted by Peter Fonda), an uptight, ageing man who discovers in himself a capacity for true moral as well as physical heroism.

A far more commercial example of a movie with an obviously Odyssean plot is Anthony Minghella's *Cold Mountain* (2003), which portrays the most sanitized Odysseus and frustrating Penelope of all time. The movie is an adaptation of Charles Frazier's 1997 novel of the same name, in which the connection with the *Odyssey* is more explicit. It is set, like *Sommersby*, at the end of the Civil War, and a destitute soldier is returning, although this Odysseus, a carpenter called Inman (Jude Law), is no impostor. The state is not Tennessee but the town of Cold Mountain in North Carolina. Here the Penelope figure, Ada Monroe (Nicole Kidman) moves with her ageing preacher father. There is little moral complexity in the film's drawing of any of the 'good' characters (who hate violence) and the 'bad' ones (who use it constantly). There is only one suitor (Teague), and despite the appalling conduct shown by him and his gang, there is no sense of the emotional need for revenge on the part of either Ada or Inman. There is no neglected child and no testing of fidelity or identity.

The disappointment created by Kidman's Ada for anyone looking for an interesting cinematic Penelope is exacerbated because there are some moments when Ada *almost* springs into life as a complicated subject in her own right—for example, when she studies the pictures of the war dead posted in the town. The novel, moreover, divides the plot equally between Ada and Inman, and the film attempts to follow suit. It begins with Ada's voiceover reading a letter to Inman in which she expresses her fear that the war will change them both beyond their reckoning. The camera then cuts to Inman at war, and then back in time to the day when they met on Cold Mountain. But Kidman's looks are the dominant interest in the scenes relating to their courtship, especially in the sequence in which he gazes at her through a window as she plays the piano at a party. A totemic importance attaches to her objectified

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physical appearance, established when she gives him the photograph of herself before he leaves.

Part of the problem is the failure of the romance between Inman and Ada to light any sparks. If two people who hardly know each other and have only kissed once are to hang on to their fantasies and memories for five celibate years, then we need at least to feel some sexual chemistry, but the awkwardness of their early scenes together ‘defies belief.’²⁵ Part of the problem is that this Penelope is young, coy, pert, posh, has not experienced either sexual intercourse or motherhood and is completely incompetent when required by sudden poverty to work as a peasant householder. Moreover, she is completely upstaged by the powerful, lively, glowing Renee Zellweger as Ruby Thewes, the tough-minded country girl who teaches her how to survive;²⁶ it is as if Frazier and Minghella have literally split the Homeric Penelope and put more than half of her in the lower-class woman. The Inman/Ada symmetry is entirely destabilized by the presence of this character.²⁷

There is yet another character who actually steals all the rest of Ada’s Penelopean thunder, and that is Sara, Natalie Portman’s superb cameo portrayal of the young widow with whom Inman stays but does not make love. From the moment when he hears her sick baby son’s cries from outside her house, the film becomes electric. Finally, we are faced with the real cost of the war to waiting women; her baby is suffering from a high fever and won’t feed, and Sara’s yearning for the safety a man’s protection might bring her is achingly, painfully vivid. Inman’s body is presented to the camera from her perspective, as she yearns for his benign physical proximity. When they are brutally awoken by Yankee soldiers, she is raped while the baby screams outside; the violence of the reactions of both Inman and Sara (he cuts down one of her persecutors with an axe, while she shoots another) suddenly put the viewer into terrifying touch with what women under threat in time of war must really feel like. This sequence in the film is important because it shows what a powerful effect could be made by a Civil War *Odyssey* that took Penelope seriously as anything much more than eye candy.

One recent film whose link with the *Odyssey* is speculative nevertheless warrants discussion here because, again, the woman who has been left behind by the restless Odyssean wanderer, however brief her role, suggests an interesting direction in which a modern cinematic Penelope could be developed. The film is the German director Wim Wenders’ *Don’t Come Knocking* (2005). It was immediately linked with the

²⁵ Romney (2003).

²⁶ Berry (2003).

²⁷ Ignatieff (2004).

Odyssey,²⁸ a poem whose evocation of landscape had been praised by Wenders in a speech delivered in 2003.²⁹ His obsession with the *Odyssey*'s poet was already apparent in the old storyteller, actually named Homer, in the Berlin of his *Der Himmel über Berlin* (1987, usually known outside Germany as *Wings of Desire*). Wenders' Homer 'is the representative and bearer of collective memory, the spirit of history. He is also the spirit of Berlin, who laments the vanishing of the city in the war.'³⁰ *Don't Come Knocking*, written by and starring Sam Shepard, seems to be ironically informed by the story pattern of the *Odyssey*. This Odysseus, an actor named Howard Spence, has fallen on hard times. A former star in Westerns, at the age of sixty he has only drugs, booze and sex to help him face his declining career. After yet another debauched night in his trailer, he gallops away from the film set in his cowboy costume to rediscover his soul.

He gradually loses his movie star identity, acquiring the clothes of a ranch hand, and discovers he has a child in a depressed Montana ghost town. He tracks down his former lover (a waitress named Doreen, played by Jessica Lange, Shepard's real-life wife) and his grown-up son. Wenders' earlier collaboration with Shepard in *Paris, Texas* (1984) is widely regarded by cinema scholars as a dark take on the story of Odysseus and Penelope—Wenders' 'interpretation of Homer's saga of the man longing to find his lost home'.³¹ But the details of the earlier part plot of this 'second idiosyncratic Western *Odyssey*', as *Don't Come Knocking* has been marketed, are in fact far closer to the ancient poem, since the son is now adult, and Doreen is middle-aged. Lange's hilarious performance rests on her conviction that 'What's wonderful about Doreen is she's actually a really happy woman. She has a son she adores, and she doesn't harbour any resentment until this guy shows up and won't leave her alone. That makes her a very interesting character to play.'³² Here is a fully realized, middle-aged, independent woman who has managed perfectly well without the onetime lover who inseminated her. The only problem is that we see so little of her relative to him.

Jessica Lange, a great beauty who struggled in her early career to be offered parts that asked her to do anything more emancipated than scream as she was picked up in the mighty ape's fist in John Guillemin's *King Kong* (1976), relished the humour and complexity of her thoroughly grown-up and grounded Doreen. Although the role is very much a 'supporting' one, subsidiary in every way to Howard's, movie

²⁸ See e.g. the review in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, for 24th August 2005.

²⁹ Wenders (2003).

³⁰ Kolker and Beicken (1993: 151).

³¹ Salles (2008: 22).

³² 'Production notes' (2006).

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roles of this calibre for middle-aged women are few and far between. Another intelligent actress who is also middle-aged and a mother is Holly Hunter, who recently complained that film actresses over the age of 38 only ever get offered a particular role type in Hollywood, ‘cast opposite a big movie star. You’re playing his wife, and he’s cheating on you with someone else. The story doesn’t depend upon your thoughts and actions’.³³ It is unlikely that she would include in this category of roles her appearance as Penny McGill in the Coen brothers’ Odyssean comedy *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000). Yet the overall effect of Penny’s contribution to the film is complicated. Its ‘take’ on the Homeric wife is certainly more open-minded and ideologically subversive than in any of the other examples which have been discussed here, and yet Penny is, in the manner of the films of the 1930s and 1940s that are being parodied, certainly trapped on screen as an exotic object for scrutiny in a particular male comedic idiom. The Coen brothers’ Penelope points the way forward to new cinematic possibilities for reassessing the ancient heroine, while simultaneously distancing the audience from her emotionally in reading her marriage to Everett almost entirely from his perspective.

Penny has certainly not been faithful. In Everett’s absence she has produced seven daughters, apparently all by different fathers. Moreover, she has told the girls that their official daddy is dead, having been hit by a train, and that she is planning to marry her fiancé, Vernon T. Waldrip, simply because he’s ‘got a job. Vernon’s got prospects. He’s bona fide!’ This Penelope is an impoverished single mother struggling to look after her children in tough economic circumstances. In the contemporary world, it is indeed a prison sentence being given to their husbands that probably causes most modern Penelopes’ predicaments, and the movie makes no bones about the unglamorous reason why Penny was deserted, nor about her need to choose a man who can support her financially.

Everett can’t even stand up as a fighter to his rival for his wife’s hand, being defeated in the fistfight with Vernon in Woolworth’s. He is also given misogynist rhetoric that recalls Agamemnon’s language in the *nekuia* of the Homeric *Odyssey* (11.501–34), denouncing Penny as ‘Deceitful! Two-faced! She-woman! Never trust a female, Delmar! Remember that one simple precept and your time with me will not have been ill spent! . . . Truth means nothin’ to Woman, Delmar’.³⁴ But Everett does win Penny over by convincing her that he has financial prospects through the success of his song recording, and through

³³ Levine (2008).

³⁴ Siegel (2007: 231).

accomplishing the quest for her wedding ring. The film ends with a suggestion that Everett is facing a life being bossed around by the controlling Penny, a denouement that is suspended vertiginously between empowering her as a female and playing along with the pernicious sexist stereotype of the hen-pecking wife.

CONCLUSION

On 16th October 2008, as the idea for this article was taking shape, the online edition of the entertainment weekly *Variety* broke the news of a planned collaboration between Warner Brothers and Brad Pitt's production company Plan B. They want to make a new futuristic movie version of the *Odyssey* which is set in outer space. Pitt, who of course starred as Achilles in Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), is expected to portray Odysseus; the planned director is George Miller, famous for the *Mad Max* action adventure movies. None of the advance publicity has yet mentioned Penelope: we have to hope that this new extra-terrestrial *Odyssey* does not follow the precedent of the animated children's series *Ulysses 31* (originally broadcast 1981–2) in excising her from the fun but puerile thirty-first century Sci-Fi adventures of Ulysses and Telemachus altogether.

Perhaps there is hope of a powerful new Penelope from another quarter, since during the same week as the *Variety* article, a project was announced by Ridley Scott, apparently another variation on the 'Odysseus in space' theme. Scott described his proposed film *Forever War*, a screen adaptation of a 1974 novel by Joe Haldeman, as 'the *Odyssey* by way of *Blade Runner*'.³⁵ The Haldeman novel features a relatively adult partnership between the 'returning' hero William Mandella and his fellow soldier and wife Marygay; this offers a glimmer of hope that there may be an interesting 'Penelope' role in the Hollywood pipeline. Ridley Scott has, after all, been known to create films with strong roles for women out of genres traditionally dominated by men, such as the road movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991). But what we really need is a complete rethink of the Homeric epic in cinematic terms, written and directed by women. The Coen Brothers had the right instincts in their insouciant rewrite of the Penelope role and in casting Holly Hunter; all she needs is Margaret Atwood to provide the

³⁵ Akbar (2008).

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screenplay and Jane Campion (as in *The Piano*, 1993) to direct. Another possibility would be Kathryn Bigelow, who directed the fascinating police woman Megan Turner, played by Jamie Lee Curtis in *Blue Steel* (1990). If creative modern women such as these once decided to put the record straight on Penelope, they might indeed, in the words of Sean Bean's Odysseus in *Troy*, 'have a way of complicating things'.

OUP UNCORRECTED PROOF – REVISES, 27/7/2013, SPi