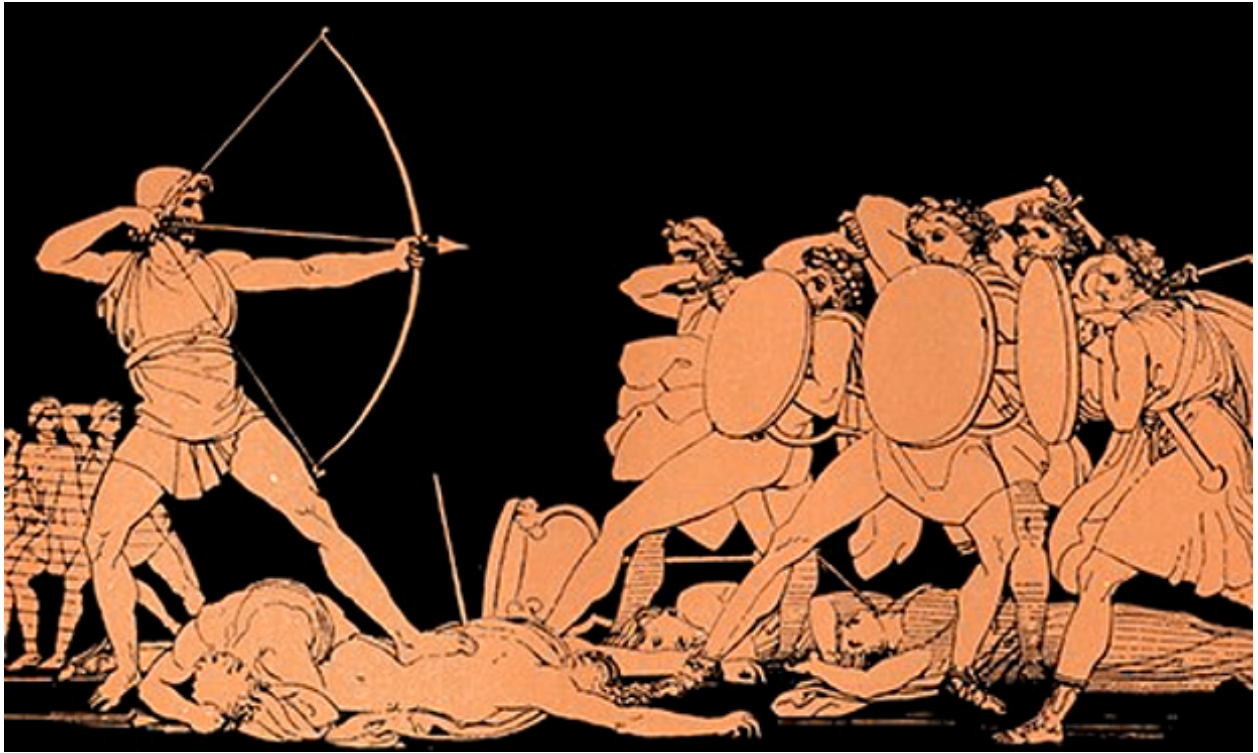


Getting To the Bottom of the Pool
by Jerry James

“Greek legend is hopelessly contradictory.” — Barbara Tuchman



Homer’s *Odyssey* has been a cornerstone of the Western Canon for over 2,700 years. The epic has inspired such diverse works as a masterpiece of literary modernism (*Ulysses*, by James Joyce); a sword-and-sandals epic (*Ulysses*, starring Kirk Douglas); and a Broadway musical (*The Golden Apple*, by John Latouche and Jerome Moross). But never, not even in its gleeful retelling by the Coen Brothers in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* has the *Odyssey* been so deconstructed as in *Penelope*, by Enda Walsh.

Beginning near the end of the tale, Walsh re-imagines the suitors of Penelope at the bottom of a drained swimming pool painted the color of the sea. He re-imagines them as aspirants in a swimsuit/talent show

competition of a reality TV show that is more “The Widow” than “The Bachelorette.” And each suitor has had a similar premonition: Here comes Trouble.

By coincidence, “Man of Trouble” is one of the translations of the name of Penelope’s husband, gone these twenty years. The name “Odysseus” (which is never spoken in the play) was given to the child by his grandfather Autolycus, a master of thievery—just like Shakespeare, who stole that name for *The Winter’s Tale*.

But how did we get here? Picking and choosing among the contradictory threads of Greek legend, we find it might be best to begin with a woman. A woman, and a snub...

Zeus, King of the Gods and his brother Poseidon, Lord of the Sea, were both enamored of the nymph Thetis. The two gods learn of a prophecy that says Thetis will bear a son who will be greater than his father. (Indeed, Thetis will later give birth to Achilles, greatest of the Greek heroes.) Greater than his father? None of that for us gods! Marry her off to a mortal right away in a big wedding! And invite everybody!

Which they do, with one exception—Eris, the Goddess of Discord. Whether this is an oversight or a deliberate breach of etiquette, well, Greek legend is hopelessly contradictory. Whatever the reason, it's a bad mistake, because Eris shows up anyway, bearing her gift, a Golden Apple, which she tosses into the midst of the revelers.

The Apple of Discord is marked "To the Fairest," and three goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite—Power, Brains and Beauty—all contest it. Zeus knows better than to judge *this* contest, so the goddesses finally decide to put it to an impartial juror, a shepherd named Paris.

This is the same Paris who was born a prince of Troy, but whose parents set him out on a mountain to die, due to a prophecy that he would be the cause of Troy's destruction. However, Paris was saved due to the intervention of a kindly shepherd. (Greek legend would be a lot less bloody if there were fewer kindly shepherds: see *Oedipus*.)

Zeus lets Paris set the rules of the contest, so his first rule is to see all the goddesses naked. And wouldn't you know it, he still can't choose a winner.

The goddesses, figuring that all's fair in Golden Apples, immediately offer bribes. Hera offers kingship over Europe and Asia. Athena offers wisdom and skill in battle. These are both pretty good offers, but Aphrodite has noted that what Paris really likes are naked women. Therefore, she offers him the most beautiful woman in the world—Helen of Sparta. Unfortunately, Aphrodite fails to mention that Helen is already married.

Backstory: Sparta was ruled by King Tyndareus and his queen, Leda, with whom Zeus coupled, disguised as a swan. Because Leda was also consorting with her husband at

around the same time, Tyndareus could not be sure which of her four children were his.

But we know that Helen's father was Zeus. When Helen reached a marriageable age, every prince in Greece came seeking her hand, bearing lavish gifts. Tyndareus saw all too clearly what would happen: Whichever one was chosen to be Helen's husband, the others would go to war against that man—and against Tyndareus.

And here we have the first appearance of Odysseus, King of Ithaca, who alone among the suitors had brought no gift—because alone among the suitors, he didn't want to marry Helen. He preferred her cousin Penelope. Odysseus offered to show Tyndareus a way out of this mess, if Tyndareus would secure Penelope for him.

Tyndareus called the suitors together and said he would honor his daughter's choice, but first, all the suitors must swear an oath: Whomever Helen chose, the others must swear to defend and protect that man against any wrong done him that concerned the marriage. And they so swore.

Helen picked Menelaus, Odysseus got Penelope, and all might have been well. Unfortunately, Odysseus would soon find he had outsmarted himself.

Paris, restored as a prince of Troy, comes to Sparta on a visit—Menelaus is now king—and when he leaves for Troy, Helen goes with him. The Oath of Tyndareus is invoked, and the princes of Greece prepare for war.

Odysseus, however, pretends to be insane, plowing his fields erratically and sowing them with salt. (A prophecy foretold that if he goes to war, it will take him twenty years to get back.) But when his infant son Telemachus is placed in front of his plow, Odysseus turns it away, proving his sanity. Outwitted for once, he sails for Troy.

And there the Greeks will stay, through "ten years of futile, indecisive, noble, mean, tricky, bitter, jealous and only occasionally heroic battle." (Tuchman) At last Athena, an enemy of Troy ever since she lost the Golden Apple, inspires Odysseus to devise the Trojan Horse.

It's here that Homer's *Odyssey* begins, as Odysseus loads ten ships with plunder and

sails for home. Ten years later, he will finally get there, alone and in someone else's ship. Why does this happen?

Some say it's because Odysseus failed to make a sacrifice to Athena before leaving Troy; some, because of bad choices made by him later. Others pin the bad choices on his crew. But virtually all of these reasons may be summed up in a line from the Kirk Douglas movie. "The gods are playful—and without mercy."

We all remember at least some of the events in the *Odyssey*: the Lotus Eaters, the one-eyed Cyclops, the Sirens, and Circe, who turns men into swine. If we think very hard, we might recall Aeolus, King of the Winds, the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, the Cattle of the Sun, or Calypso, upon whose island Odysseus will eventually wash up.

But one action looms large: the blinding of the Cyclops. It was necessary for Odysseus to do this in order to save himself and his men. He would have done so even had he known the Cyclops was the son of Poseidon. And even for this, he might have been forgiven. But in his anger, Odysseus had to brag about it:

"Cyclops, if any mortal human being asks about the injury that blinded you, tell them Odysseus destroyed your eye, a sacker of cities, Laertes' son, a man from Ithaca."

The Greeks had a word for this: hubris. And they didn't like it. Public bragging of this sort meant that the rest of the gods just might be willing to let Poseidon teach Odysseus a lesson. Which he did.

And so, ten years after Troy fell, we find Odysseus, bereft of ships and crew, alone on Calypso's island. Calypso wishes to make him immortal, but he keeps refusing, wanting only to return home to Ithaca and Penelope.

And Penelope? Three years earlier, she was forced to cope with a sudden influx of suitors, the finest young men of Ithaca and the nearby islands, all vying for her hand. Her husband was obviously dead, along with their fathers and older brothers, who had sailed with him to Troy long ago. Why would Penelope not choose one of them to wed?

The successful suitor will not take over Odysseus' palace, vineyards, flocks and herds.

These will belong to Telemachus, when he comes of age. But until Penelope chooses one of them, the suitors, relying on the Greek rules of hospitality, will spend their days in the Great Hall of the palace—Walsh's drained swimming pool—consuming as much of Telemachus' patrimony in sheep, pigs, cattle and wine as humanly possible.

Eventually the suitors number more than a hundred. To stall them, Penelope insists she can't make a choice until she's woven a burial shroud for Odysseus' father, Laertes. But each night, she undoes the work she did that day. This goes on for some time, until she's betrayed by one of her maids.

It is now, as Telemachus nears twenty with no sign of his father and with the suitors pushing hard, that Athena sees her opportunity. In disguise, she visits Telemachus and urges him to go in search of news of Odysseus, which he does. She doesn't tell him she's doing this because the suitors plan to kill him.

With Poseidon conveniently off at a ceremony in his honor in Ethiopia, Athena then asks her father Zeus to allow Odysseus to return home.

Seven years is a long enough sentence for hubris, Zeus decides, and orders his release. Calypso fits him out with food and a raft, and homeward he sails. But on his way back from Ethiopia, Poseidon spots him. Figuring Zeus has ordained that Odysseus shall not die, Poseidon doesn't kill him. But for old times sake, he destroys his vessel. Odysseus is washed up on the shores of Phaeacia.

The Phaeacians, to his surprise, turn out to be hospitable in the finest Greek tradition. Odysseus is clothed, fed, feted and taken back to Ithaca in one of their ships. They leave him asleep on the beach and depart. When they near home on their return voyage, Poseidon will turn their ship into a rock.

Odysseus wakes up. Where is he? Athena appears and tells him this is Ithaca, his home.

She disguises Odysseus as a beggar and sends him to the home of his loyal Swineherd, while she brings Telemachus to the same place. The Swineherd greets the Beggar with hospitality, as a Greek should, but Odysseus doesn't reveal himself.

When Telemachus arrives, he sends the Swineherd off to tell Penelope he's returned. Odysseus then reveals himself to Telemachus, who must be convinced by Athena that this is really the father whom he's never really known.

Once convinced, Telemachus is all in on killing the suitors. But how? Two men against more than a hundred? Athena will fight with us, says Odysseus. He will come to the palace disguised as the Beggar, and no matter what the suitors do to him, Telemachus must do nothing. Above all, he must tell no one Odysseus has returned.

Odysseus arrives at the palace. There, lying on a dung heap, is his old dog Argus. The faithful beast recognizes his master, wags his tail—and dies. Inside the Great Hall, the suitors treat the Beggar roughly. Athena keeps egging the suitors on, so that Odysseus will have no reason to show them any mercy.

Penelope asks to speak with the Beggar, hoping he might have some news of her lost husband. While bathing Odysseus' feet, his old nurse recognizes him from a scar on his leg. As loyal as the Swineherd and Argus, she keeps the secret. The Beggar tells Penelope that Odysseus is alive. She replies, Yes, isn't it pretty to think so? She has resolved to set up an archery contest for her hand, in which the Beggar encourages her.

The next day, Odysseus reveals the scar to the Swineherd and his equally loyal Cattle Herder. Overjoyed at his return, they swear to fight beside him and Telemachus.

In the Great Hall, Telemachus sets up twelve axe heads in a row, each with a hole in

it. Penelope will wed the suitor who can shoot an arrow straight through all twelve. But first, they must string Odysseus' bow.

After the suitors struggle to string the bow and fail, the Beggar humbly requests that he might try. The suitors scorn such an idea, but Penelope overrules them. Telemachus agrees, and gently sends his mother away.

The suitors, who have turned back to their revelry, are struck silent by the twang of a bowstring, followed by a crack of thunder from Zeus. Odysseus has strung the bow.

He then fires an arrow right through the twelve axe heads. As Telemachus joins him, Odysseus reveals himself to the suitors, who try to placate him with all manner of promises.

Joined by the Swineherd and the Cattle Herder—all four of them inspired and protected by Athena—Odysseus & Son proceed to kill over a hundred armed men with bow, spear and sword, suffering only scratches in the process. They spare the herald, who was kind to Telemachus, and the minstrel, who was forced to sing.

Odysseus does not boast of his victory. He has learned something about hubris.

But what of Penelope, who is upstairs asleep? She awakens to carnage and a stranger claiming to be her husband. Clever Penelope orders that their marriage bed, a bed Odysseus himself built, be brought out so that the stranger might sleep in it. Odysseus laughs and gives her the correct response: One post of their bed is a live olive tree. It cannot be moved.

After twenty years, Penelope can finally welcome her husband home.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director. Being possessed of an intense curiosity, he found writing this essay immensely satisfying.