

NightwoodTheatre ●●●●

presents

# The Penelopiad

by Margaret Atwood

based on the book *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood

a study guide



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**RESOURCE and BACKGROUND MATERIAL:**

Written and compiled by Jim McNabb of  
The National Arts Centre

Adapted by Nightwood Theatre, September 2011

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This document may be used for educational purposes only.

**This play is suitable for students ages 15 and up**

## About This Guide

This Study Guide contains a large amount of varied resource material to accommodate different classes and levels. Teachers need not use all the material found here but should choose appropriate activities from pages 20 – 22, then select the corresponding backup material. This Study Guide is formatted in easy-to-copy single pages ready to distribute to classes. Topics may be used separately or in any combination that works for your situation.

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## About the Play (page 1 of 3) (see Activity #1)

### **SETTING:**

The play opens in Hades, the abode of the dead, the ancient Greek Underworld. In this gloomy region beneath the earth, Penelope and her maids pass their time as spirits several thousand years after their deaths. Many rivers run through Hades and arriving souls must first cross Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Hades is divided into three sections: the Fields of Asphodel where all souls arrive and wait for judgment, the Elysian Fields (Paradise) where heroes and the blessed are sent, and Tartarus where impious and evil people are sent. Those judged neither completely virtuous nor evil but a combination of both return to the Fields of Asphodel. This is where Penelope resides, perhaps surprising because her reputation has always been that of the epitome of connubial fidelity, a truly virtuous wife.

Hades is also the name of the God who rules the Underworld. Hades and his two immortal brothers, Zeus and Poseidon, divided up the universe after defeating the Titans, Poseidon taking the seas, Hades the Underworld, and Zeus the sky and Mount Olympus.

During the action of the play, we also find ourselves in Sparta where Penelope's parents seek a suitable husband for her, in Odysseus' palace in Ithaca after their marriage, on Odysseus' ship during his long voyage home from Troy, and finally, in a modern court of justice where Odysseus is tried for murdering the suitors and Penelope's maids.

### **CHARACTERS:**

**Penelope** – wife of Odysseus; narrator of the story.

**Odysseus** – king of Ithaca, legendary Greek hero of the Trojan War.

**Helen of Troy** – Penelope's cousin; wife of King Menelaus of Sparta; her abduction by Prince Paris of Troy resulted in the Trojan War.

**Telemachus** – son of Penelope and Odysseus.

**Euricleia** – Odysseus' nurse.

**Mother of Penelope** – a Naiad (water nymph).

**Anticleia** – mother of Odysseus.

**The Maids** – Penelope's 12 young servants.

**Judge** – judge at Odysseus' trial for murder.

**Attorney for the Defense** – Odysseus' lawyer at the trial.

**The Erinyes** – fierce creatures with hair of serpents and wings of bats.

And perhaps the goddess **Athena** will make an appearance.

### **THEMES:**

Margaret Atwood's reworking of the Odysseus legend brings to question the validity of the storyteller. Was Penelope the faithful and virtuous wife as told by Homer? If she told the story would another truth be revealed? If the maids told the story would Odysseus be guilty of murder instead of within his rights as a slave owner? What would be the story of Odysseus' ten-year voyage if the gossipers are right? The teller of a story has a personal reason to include or adjust facts or opinions. The listener chooses what to believe. Penelope chooses to believe the classic story of her husband's adventures although she knows his reputation as a liar. Perhaps Odysseus chose to believe in his wife's fidelity and therefore hanged the maids who could have proven her unfaithful. Ultimately, it's up to the listener to choose a truth.

## About the Play (page 2 of 3)

### **PLOT SYNOPSIS:**

We meet Penelope whiling away her time in Hades, unhappy about being misunderstood by centuries of readers familiar with her as a faithful wife. She has her personal story to tell and she also has her opinions about her famous husband and his exploits to ponder. With her in Hades are her maids, whom Homer says were hanged by Odysseus upon his return. They too have their story of unfair treatment to tell. While Penelope relates her story – that of her birth in Sparta, relationship with her glamorous cousin Helen, arranged marriage, acceptance into Odysseus' household in Ithaca and long wait for him to return from the Trojan Wars - the ghosts of her maids, in true Greek chorus fashion, act out the scenes of the story. Between narrative interludes, the maids also have a chance to explain their situation and plead their case. Penelope's story varies little from the classic tale told by Homer, (see pages 9–12, "Homer and the *Odyssey*" for a summary of the epic poem) except in pointing out that there are other explanations for the heroic escapades. She also points out that she clearly recognized the disguised Odysseus on his return but felt it important to flatter his ego by playing along. Her memory of the actual slaughter of the suitors and her maids is conveniently murky. Her narration continues the story past the time of her death and that of her husband into the 21<sup>st</sup> century where a modern court of justice tries Odysseus for the murder charges. The task of determining the truth surrounding the murders is thwarted by divine intervention however, leaving us to draw our own conclusions.

### **STYLE:**

Although the source material, the *Odyssey*, is epic in nature, Margaret Atwood uses a style for *The Penelopiad* which is decidedly not epic (see page 13 "What is an Epic?"). Atwood chose to call the piece a Cabaret because, as she explains, "*it isn't a play in the usual way, nor is it a 'Musical' in the usual way.*" Cabaret was a style developed in Paris in the 1880s as a means of spoofing bourgeois values and was an entertainment consisting of songs, poems and sketches – often rather naughty – accompanied with plenty of drinking. Cabarets with both erotic and political satire content came to be extremely popular in pre-Nazi Berlin. It lives on in North America in Las Vegas and in comedy houses. The style of *The Penelopiad* also has elements in common with ancient Greek drama (see page 16 "The Development of Greek Theatre"). The single narrator or scenes of two characters in dialogue, the periodic use of a chorus to dance and sing commentary on the action or the background, the involvement of a god (*deus ex machina*) to solve a major problem at the end, are all devices used 2500 years ago.

## Who Helped Put the Production Together? (page 1 of 2) (see Activity #11)

### The Creative Team

Playwright: Margaret ATWOOD  
Director: Kelly THORNTON  
Set and Costume Design by: Denyse KARN  
Lighting Design by: Kimberly PURTELL  
Music by: Suba SANKARAN  
Assistant Director: Audrey Dwyer

### Cast

Megan Follows  
Maev Beaty  
Christine Brubaker  
Sarah Dodd  
Monica Dottor  
Raven Dauda  
Kelli Fox  
Cara Gee  
Patricia Hamilton  
Tara Rosling  
Pamela Sinha  
Sophia Walker  
Bahia Watson



Kelly Thornton

Multi-award winner **Kelly Thornton**, Artistic Director of Nightwood Theatre, Director of *The Danish Play*, *The List*, *Mathilde* and the Toronto professional premiere production of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*.

## Who Helped Put the Production Together? (page 2 of 2)

### Playwright Margaret Atwood – a Bio



Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College.

Throughout her writing career, Margaret Atwood has received numerous awards and honorary degrees. She is the author of more than fifty volumes of poetry, children's literature, fiction, and non-fiction and is perhaps best known for her novels, which include *The Edible Woman* (1970), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983), *The Robber Bride* (1994), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin*, which won the prestigious Booker Prize in 2000. Ms. Atwood's dystopic novel, *Oryx and Crake*, was published in 2003. Ms. Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a retelling of the Odyssey from the perspective of Penelope and her maids was released in the fall of 2005 as part of The Myths Series published by Canongate. *The Tent* (mini-fictions) and *Moral Disorder* (short stories) both appeared in 2006. Her most recent volume of poetry, *The Door*, was published in 2007. Her non-fiction book, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, part of the Massey Lecture series, appeared in 2008, and her most recent novel, *The Year of the Flood*, in the autumn of 2009. Her most recent non-fiction effort, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, published in October 2011, is an account of the author's relationship with the science fiction genre. Ms. Atwood's work has been published in more than forty languages, including Farsi, Japanese, Turkish, Finnish, Korean, Icelandic and Estonian. In 2004 she co-invented the Long Pen™.

Margaret Atwood currently lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson.

### Other Works by Margaret Atwood – If you like *The Penelopiad* try one of these:

***The Handmaid's Tale*** (1985) A look at the near future presents the story of Offred, a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, once the United States, an oppressive world where women are no longer allowed to read and are valued only as long as they are viable for reproduction.

***The Robber Bride*** (1993) The story of a woman who is by turns manipulative, vulnerable, needy and ruthless, and apparently dead, the main characters having attended her funeral. But five years later, she is back.

***Alias Grace*** (1996) A decade and a half has passed since Grace was locked up, at the age of 16, for the cold-blooded murders of her employer Thomas Kinnear and his housekeeper/lover Nancy Montgomery. Her alleged accomplice, James McDermot, was hanged in 1843. Dr Simon Jordan attempts to uncover the truth.

***The Blind Assassin*** (2000) Even now, at the age of 82, Iris lives in the shadow cast by her younger sister Laura. Now poor and trying to cope with a failing body, Iris reflects on her far from exemplary life, in particular the events surrounding her sister's tragic death and the novel which earned her such notoriety.

## People, Places and Things in *The Penelopiad* (page 1 of 3) (see Activity #2)

**One-eyed monster** – The Cyclops was a giant with a single eye in the middle of his forehead, and the son of Poseidon, god of the sea. In one of Odysseus' adventures he and his crew were trapped by the Cyclops in its cave and had to resort to trickery to escape.

**The owl** – Penelope says she screams like an owl when she tries to warn women not to believe Homer's characterization of her as a faithful wife. The owl is a symbol of keen perception and silent observance, true wisdom, and sometimes sorcery. Owls have been associated with death and misfortune, likely due to their nocturnal activity and common screeching call. However, owls have also been associated with wisdom and prosperity as a result of frequently being companion animals for goddesses – especially Athena, goddess of wisdom and the arts, who was often depicted with a small owl sitting on her shoulder. Athena's owl had the ability to light up her blind side enabling her to see, and consequently speak, the whole truth rather than a half-truth.

**Naiad** – Penelope's mother was a Naiad who consorted with her father King Icarius of Sparta. Naiads were one of the three main classes of water nymphs – the others being the Nereids (nymphs of the Mediterranean Sea) and the Oceanids (nymphs of the oceans). The Naiads presided over rivers, streams, brooks, springs, fountains, lakes, ponds, wells, and marshes. They were intimately associated with their specific body of water and could only leave it for a short time. Naiads were demi-goddesses, daughters of a god, such as Zeus, and a mortal, and were often worshipped as divinities of fertility and growth. They were the female sex symbols of the ancient world and were the source of countless stories of their seducing, or seduction by, mortals.

**Oracle** – a seer or prophet of the ancient world. These individuals, often priests or priestesses and often associated with a sacred cave or spring, were highly recognized and sought after in the ancient world in all life's decisions.

**Shroud** – a sheet used to wrap the body for burial, usually woven of wool or linen or any natural fiber. Penelope's father's oracle mistakenly predicted that she would weave his shroud, so he ordered that she should be thrown into the ocean as a baby. (In actual fact she wove the shroud of her father-in-law, Laertes.) The baby was saved by a flock of ducks, hence Penelope's nickname of "Duck".

**Aphrodite** – (a-fro-DYE-tee; Roman name Venus) was the goddess of love, beauty and fertility. She was also a protector of sailors. When poets compared the bride Penelope to Aphrodite she knew it was nonsense because she was homely and shy.

**Siren** – a water deity living near rocky shores who lured sailors to the deadly rocks by singing seductively. The term refers to a woman who uses her sex appeal to destroy men.

**Hermes** (HER-meas) – one of the 12 Olympian gods and a son of Zeus. He was the god of athletics and also of shepherds and thieves among other things. He was also the messenger of the gods because of his speed. The Romans called him Mercury and we see his image used as a logo for FTD Florists. Hermes once stole a herd of cattle from his brother Apollo but was forgiven when he presented Apollo with a lyre, a graceful stringed musical instrument. Hermes was the great-grandfather of Odysseus who inherited his athleticism, trickery and ability to lie convincingly.

## People, Places and Things in *The Penelopiad* (page 2 of 3)

**Ithaca** – a small island of the west coast of Greece and mythical home of Odysseus. In 1200 BCE, the time of Odysseus' rule, the kingdom's wealth and power peaked. It encompassed several neighbouring islands and a portion of the mainland. Navigators and explorers, the Ithacans were known for their daring expeditions beyond the Mediterranean.

**Helios** (HEE-lee-os) – the handsome personification of the sun who drove his chariot of fire across the heavens each day. When Penelope's mother-in-law is described as able to "freeze the balls off Helios" we know that she was a force to be reckoned with.

**Three Fatal Sisters** – In Greek mythology they are known as the Moerae, three sisters/ goddesses – more like witches really – who decide the fates of mortals: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropus. Atropus, the eldest and ugliest, cuts the fine threads of life with a pair of scissors and thus determines how long a life will be; Clotho is the 'spinner' who places the threads into the loom when a person is born; and Lachesis, who determines a person's lot, weaves the person's life.

**Motley and Piebald** – The maids refer to their mothers as "not royal queens, but a motley and piebald collection" which means that they had a spotted or mixed nature, rather like mongrels.

**Artemis** (AR-tem-is) – She was the twin sister of Apollo (the god in charge of the sun) and was the virgin goddess of the hunt, childbirth, fertility, and the moon. Her Roman name is Diana.

**Arachne** (ah-RAK-nee) – As an extremely talented and famous young weaver, her work attracted the attention of Athena, the goddess of weaving. In a contest between the two, Athena became angry, tore Arachne's tapestry to shreds and destroyed her loom. Arachne hanged herself. Athena, remorseful, brought her back to life but turned her into a spider. Penelope's mother, being a watery naiad, had no use for the wifely chores of spinning and weaving that her daughter enjoyed.

**Asphodel** – flower which grows plentifully on Hades' plains and is the favourite food of the dead.

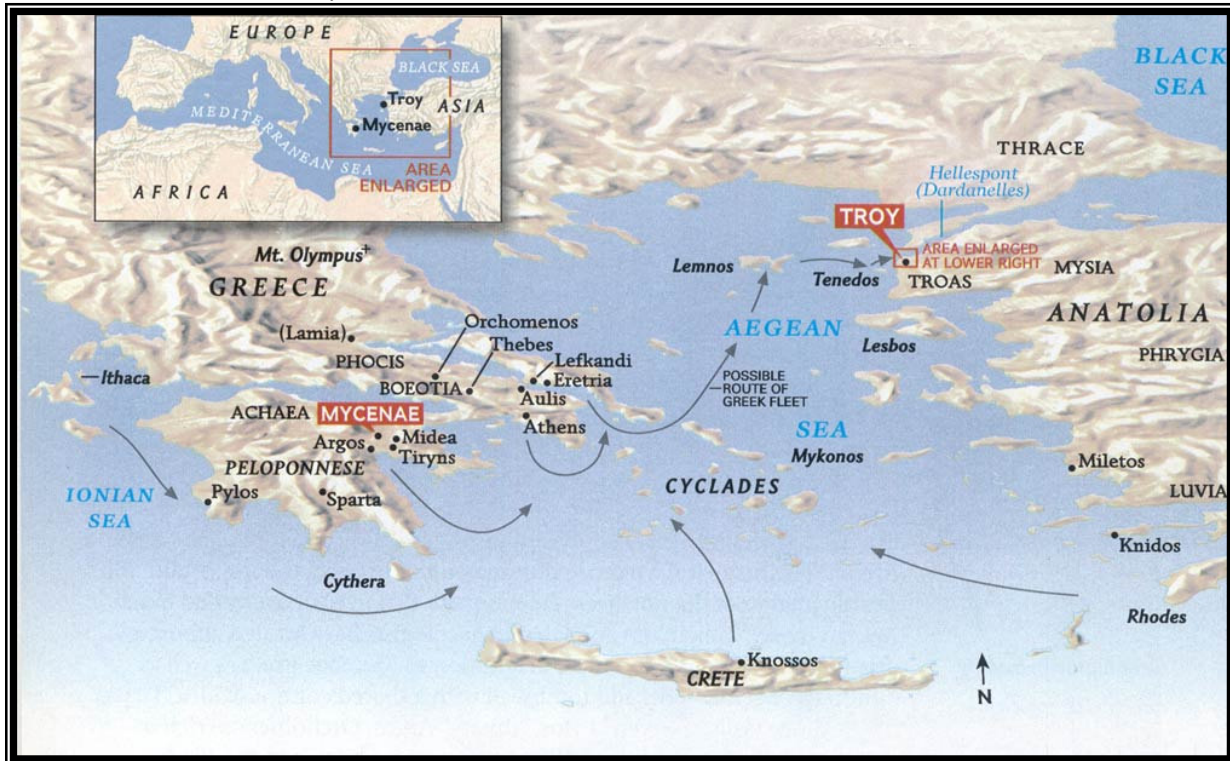
**Autolycus** (ah-TAL-lick-us) – the son of Hermes and the beautiful Chione. Autolycus was a renowned thief and liar (skills passed down from his father, the God of Thieves) and wrestler (which he taught to Heracles). Autolycus stole the helmet that his grandson, Odysseus, eventually wore during the Trojan War.

**Athena** (a-THEEN-uh) – one of the 12 Olympian gods, she was the helmeted goddess of wisdom, weaving and war. As she never had a lover she was referred to as *Athena Parthenos*, ("Athena the Virgin") and her principal temple in Athens (her favourite city) was called The Parthenon. She accompanied and aided many warriors and heroes, especially Odysseus.

**Erinyes** – also called Eumenides or Furies, these horrifying females with hair of serpents, heads of dogs and wings of bats were sent to punish those who broke an oath or committed a sin against nature.

## People, Places and Things in *The Penelopiad* (page 3 of 3)

The **Trojan War** was waged, according to legend, against the city of Troy, located in modern day Turkey near the Strait of Dardanelles, an important trade route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea.



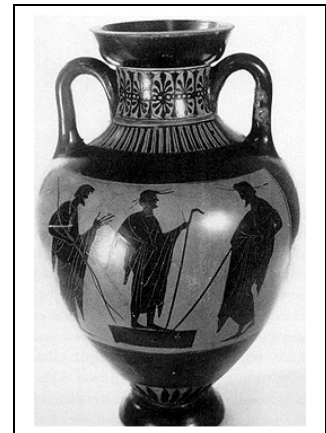
The Achaeans, Mycenaean and other city states including Ithaca and Sparta had earlier formed an alliance agreeing to assist one another. Their combined armies attacked and laid siege to Troy after Paris of Troy stole Helen from her husband Menelaus, king of Sparta. (Odysseus wished to avoid participating in this war since he had a young wife and newborn son. When a delegation of the alliance came to remind Odysseus of his obligation, Odysseus feigned madness and began to plough his fields with salt. Palamedes outwitted him by placing the infant in front of the plough's path, and Odysseus turned aside, unwilling to kill his son. In doing so he revealed his sanity, forcing him to join in the war.) After ten years the siege was eventually broken when Odysseus devised a clever trick. Letting it be known that the Greeks were ending the siege he offered a giant wooden horse to the Trojans as a departing gift. The horse, of course, was hollow and contained soldiers who, after dark, opened the gates from the inside, allowing the city to be conquered and destroyed.

The Trojan War is among the most important events in Greek mythology, and was narrated in many works of Greek literature. The two most famous works are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* relates a part of the last year of the siege of Troy, while the *Odyssey* describes the journey home of Odysseus, one of the Achaean leaders. Other parts of the story were narrated in a cycle of epic poems, which have only survived in fragments. Episodes and related characters from the war provided material for a host of Greek tragedies, including *The Trojan Women*, *Hecuba*, *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Cyclops*, and the trilogy *Oresteia* which includes *Agamemnon* and *The Eumenides* - all of these written approximately six centuries after the event, which attests to the popularity of the material. The war also provided inspiration for Roman poets like Virgil and Ovid.

## Homer and the *Odyssey* (page 1 of 4) (see Activity #12)

### Who Was Homer?

The storyteller Homer (no relation to Mr. Simpson) is thought to have lived in Greece around 750 to 700 BCE. Legend says that he was born either on the Greek island Chios or in Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey) and that he was blind. Two epic poems are attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* (the story of the battle between Greece and Troy, which happened several hundred years before Homer's time, around 1200 BCE) and the *Odyssey* (the story of the long journey home by one of the Greek warriors, Odysseus). Since Homer lived centuries before writing in Greece was invented, these poems must have been handed down for generations orally. This calls into question the authorship of them. Could they possibly be the same as originally conceived? Certainly the events related are legendary but archeology seems to bear them out in many cases. Some parts of the tales are found in legends from many other cultures, so even they are not original. And some parts are clearly fantastically embellished but may nonetheless have a basis in fact. Some people think that Homer didn't really exist at all but the name was simply given to the group of entertainers who originally recited or sang the ancient legends. Others think that there were several authors responsible for the works. Regardless of such uncertainties, whoever wrote them down several hundred years after Homer lived unquestionably recorded masterpieces. They rank among the great works of all Western literature. Not only were they required reading for all scholars in antiquity, they continue to be read in schools to this day some 2500 years later. The Greek poems were composed in lines of poetry called "dactylic hexameter", in which the beat went "DA-de-de, DA-de-de" six times in a row. This probably made it easier for the singers to remember the piece - sort of like a rap. In fact, the performers of these epic narratives were called "rhapsodes", and the vase seen on the right shows the image of a rhapsode standing on a platform holding a stick. A listener stands on each side of him.



### The *Odyssey* – A Summary

- Back story: Paris, prince of Troy has seduced Helen, wife of king Menelaus of Sparta, and taken her back to Troy. Menelaus wishes to attack Troy; Odysseus, king of Ithaca, as well as many other kings of Greek city states, agree to honour an alliance with him. The siege of Troy lasts ten years and is ended when Odysseus tricks the Trojans into opening their gates to receive a giant wooden horse concealing a company of soldiers. The story of the latter part of the Trojan War is told in Homer's *Iliad*.

## Homer and the *Odyssey* (page 2 of 4)

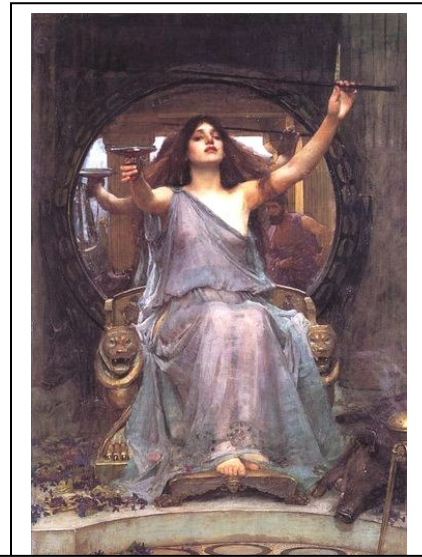
- The *Odyssey* begins ten years after the Trojan War's end. Odysseus' young son Telemachus sets sail to find out why his father is not home yet. After all this time people believe Odysseus has died. Some 120 suitors pursue the "widowed" Penelope, all eager to gain the wealth and throne of Ithaca. The suitors become angry about Penelope's delays in choosing a new husband. She tricks them by saying she must first weave the shroud of her father-in-law, but secretly she unravels her work each night.
- Telemachus travels to Sparta where he learns that Odysseus is alive and has been held captive for the past seven years by the witch Calypso on her island.
- Meanwhile on Mount Olympus, the goddess Athena who numbers Odysseus among her favourites successfully urges Zeus to command Calypso to release Odysseus.
- Poseidon, king of the sea, smashes Odysseus' boat and leaves him to die. Odysseus manages to swim to the remote land of the Phaeacians where he is befriended by the king's daughter and her maids who have been washing clothes at the river.
- By trickery Odysseus enters the king's palace and, upon urging, tells the long story of his adventures since leaving Troy ten years earlier.
- Odysseus relates his tale: *After being blown off course he landed on the island of the Lotus Eaters where some of his men ate the addictive lotus flower and lost all will to leave for home. Odysseus forced the intoxicated men back onto the ship.*
- *Odysseus and his men were captured by a Cyclops on his island and only escaped by blinding the beast's one eye with a stake and then tricking him into letting the company out of his cave. Odysseus told him his name was "No One" and the Cyclops could never determine the name of his trickster.*
- *Odysseus and his men then rested on the Island of Aeolus, the Keeper of the Winds, who made him a gift of a great bag of wind to help power his ship home.*



Poseidon, king of the sea, threatening Odysseus' ship during his epic journey.

## Homer and the *Odyssey* (page 3 of 4)

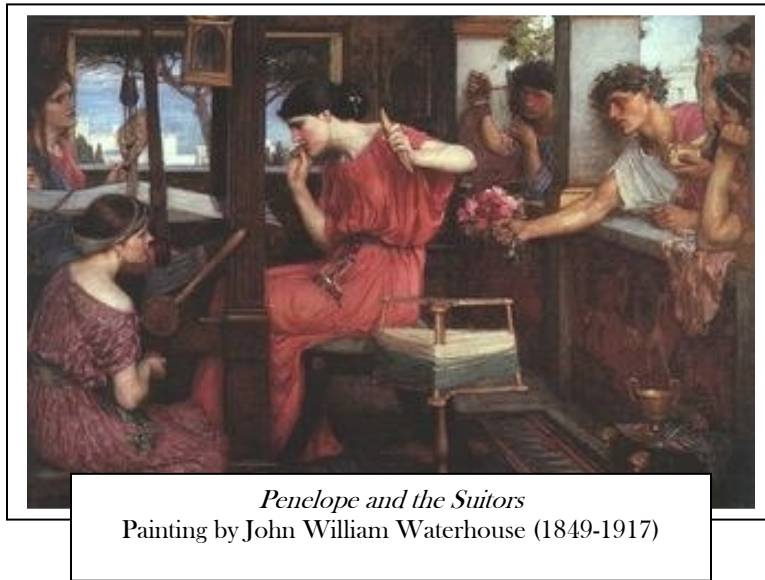
- *The mutinous crew released the wind creating a hurricane which blew them farther off course.*
- *They next came to the land of the Laestrogians cannibals who devoured many of the crew and then smashed most of the ships with huge rocks.*
- *The remaining Greeks then visited the home of the sorceress Circe, who promptly turned some of the crew into pigs with a magic potion. When her spell didn't work on Odysseus she fell in love with him and kept him for a year. She eventually returned the crew to human form and told Odysseus of the best route home, which involved journeying to the Land of the Dead and seeking more instructions once there.*
- *Odysseus next encountered the Sirens whose singing lures sailors to their death on jagged rocks. Odysseus filled the crew's ears with wax and then tied himself to the mast so he alone could hear their song but escape their treachery.*
- *Their route then took them past the fierce whirlpool of Charybdis and then the monster Scylla whose six vicious heads devoured most of the remaining sailors.*
- *A thunderbolt from Zeus then killed the last of the sailors and smashed the ship. Odysseus washed ashore on Calypso's island where he was captured and held for the past seven years.*
- *Satisfied by this wonderful tale, the Phaeacians, who have magical ships, agree to transport Odysseus home and leave him on the shore of Ithaca. Athena disguises him as an old man.*
- *Odysseus is befriended by his old swineherd who, though not recognizing him, takes Odysseus in and cares for him.*
- *Meanwhile, Telemachus returns home and evades the trap set by his mother's suitors. Athena allows Telemachus to recognize his father and the two plot how to overcome the suitors and regain the palace.*
- *Still disguised, Odysseus visits the palace and is goaded by the suitors. Not recognizing him, Penelope speaks with him then orders Eurycleia, Odysseus' old nurse, to bathe him and give him clean clothes. Eurycleia recognizes the scar on Odysseus' leg but is urged not to reveal his identity.*
- *Penelope sets a task for the suitors saying that whoever can string Odysseus' bow and shoot an arrow through 12 axe handles can have her hand. No one succeeds except Odysseus himself.*



*Circe Offering the Cup to Odysseus*  
painting by John William Waterhouse  
(1849-1917)

## Homer and the *Odyssey* (page 4 of 4)

- Odysseus and Telemachus, with the help of Athena, kill the suitors. Odysseus orders the hanging of Penelope's maids who had consorted with the suitors.
- When Odysseus reveals a secret known only to him and Penelope, she finally accepts that he is indeed her husband who has returned home after 20 years.
- Even though the families of the slain suitors want revenge, Athena and Zeus convince them to live in peace.



### Works Derived from the *Odyssey*

- Some of the tales of *Sindbad the Sailor* from *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (*Arabian Nights*) were taken from Homer's *Odyssey*.
- A modern book inspired by the *Odyssey* is James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). (*Ulysses* is the Latin name of Odysseus.)
- Nilos Kazantzakis wrote *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, an incredible 33,333 line epic poem that continues Odysseus' journeys past the point of his arrival in Ithaca.
- The movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* has the basic plot of the *Odyssey*. Joel and Ethan Coen admit to basing their movie loosely on the *Odyssey* but insist that they haven't read it.
- R.A. Lafferty retold the story in a science fiction setting in his novel *Space Chantey*.
- Progressive metal group Symphony X based a 24-minute epic track *The Odyssey* on the story in their 2002 album, *The Odyssey*.
- The Japanese animated cartoon *Ulysses 31* featured a science-fiction tale of a hero trying to get back to his wife Penelope.
- The first half of Virgil's (Roman poet 70-19 BCE) *Aeneid* parallels the *Odyssey* in structure.
- "Ulysses" by Alfred Lord Tennyson, is a poem in which the aged hero reflects on his life.
- Although not derived from the *Odyssey*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* are similar stories based on the monomyth or "hero's journey" story described by Joseph Campbell (see [http://changingminds.org/disciplines/storytelling/plots/hero\\_journey/hero\\_journey.htm](http://changingminds.org/disciplines/storytelling/plots/hero_journey/hero_journey.htm))

## What is an Epic? (see Activity #10)

Epic Poem: a long narrative poem in heightened language telling of characters of high position along with a central heroic figure involved in a series of adventures important to the history of a nation or race.

Epics have six main characteristics:

- the hero is of imposing stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance.
- the setting is vast, covering many nations, worlds, or the universe.
- the action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage.
- supernatural forces—gods, angels, demons—interest themselves in the action.
- the style is one of sustained elevated language.
- the poet retains a measure of objectivity.

Conventions of Epics:

- Opens by stating the theme or subject matter of the epic.
- Writer usually invokes a Muse, such as one of the nine daughters of Zeus, praying for divine inspiration to tell the story of a great hero.
- Narrative opens in the middle of things, typically with the hero at his lowest point. Usually flashbacks show earlier portions of the story.
- Catalogues and genealogies are given. These long lists of objects, places, and people place the finite action of the epic within a broader, universal context. Often times, the poet is also paying homage to the ancestors of audience members.
- Main characters give extended formal speeches.
- Heavy use of repetition or stock phrases.

Other examples of epic poems

- *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c 20th century BCE) (Mesopotamian mythology)
- *Mahabharata* (c 5th century BCE) (Hindu mythology)
- *Aeneid* by Virgil (1st century BCE) (concerns a Trojan who is a founder of Rome)
- *Beowulf* (c 1100 CE) (Anglo-Saxon legends)
- *The Divine Comedy* by Dante (c 1300 CE) (the medieval view of the afterlife)
- *Paradise Lost* (1667) by John Milton (the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden)
- *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Ojibway legends)

Epics in other forms:

- *The Ring of the Nibelung* – opera (mid 1800s) by Richard Wagner (Germanic legends)
- *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy of novels (1957) by J.R.R. Tolkien
- The *Star Wars* series of movies (1977-2005) by George Lucas
- The *Harry Potter* series of novels (1997-2007) by J.K. Rowling

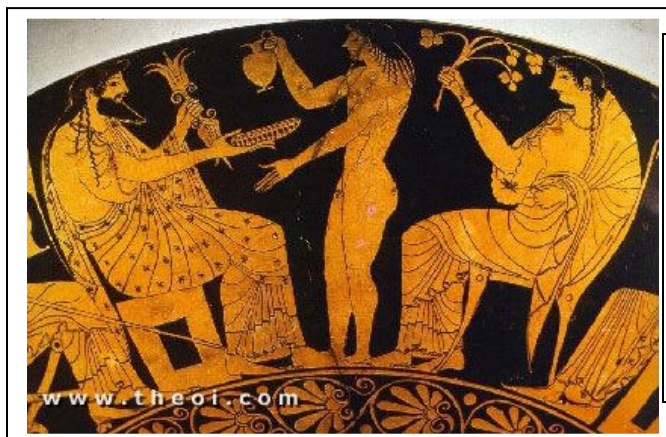
## The World of the Greek Gods and Other Immortals (See Activity #4)

The huge collection of immortals that governed and populated the ancient Greek religious world is called the Pantheon. These beings ranged from the embodiment of the primordial earth, to heavenly constellations, to personifications of human attributes, to protectors of the natural world, to rulers of all human activity. The Pantheon also included giants, monstrous beasts and legendary heroes. Since divine beings were associated with every aspect of their world, ancient Greeks regarded all parts of their universe as sacred and therefore they would be severely punished if they abused any part of the hierarchical scheme. Stories about the various gods and demigods numbered in the thousands and apparently were not only a part of religious practice but also a source of constant interest. The gods were mostly benevolent beings but could also exhibit sensual or sadistic human traits. The Greeks saw these divine beings not only as objects of worship but also, perhaps, much as we view entertainment celebrities today – mostly good, sometimes bad-mannered, self-centered or cruel, but always worthy of attention.

The Immortals of the Greek Pantheon can be divided into roughly eight classes, although many of the divinities fall into more than one of these categories:

1. The First Born or Primeval gods who represented the basic components of the universe, such as Gaia (the earth), Uranus (heavens), Nyx (night), Chronos (time), etc.
2. The Nymphs, minor goddesses who presided over natural phenomena such as breezes (the Aurai), fresh water (the Naiads), trees and forests (the Dryades).
3. The Daimons, body- and mind-affecting spirits, such as Hypnos (sleep), Eros (love), Phobos (fear), Geras (old age).
4. The Theoi, gods who controlled the forces of nature and gave civilized arts to mankind, such as Helios (sun), Persephone (goddess of the underworld, spring and rebirth), Pan (shepherds and their flocks), Hestia (goddess of the hearth and baking).
5. The 12 Olympian Gods who commanded the universe and governed the rest of the gods. These were namely: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hades, Artemis, Apollo, Ares, Athena, Aphrodite, Hephaistos, Hermes and Hestia. Sometimes Demeter and Dionysus were included. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve\\_Olympians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Olympians) for a photo gallery of statues.
6. The spirits of the Constellations, such as Sagittarius, the twin Gemini, etc.
7. The Monsters, Beasts and Giants, such as Centaurs, Dragons, Sphinx, etc.
8. The Semi-Divine Heroes, worshipped after death as minor gods, such as Theseus and Perseus.

The various gods were popularly depicted on drinking or eating vessels such as the scene shown below from a kylix (wide-mouthed wine cup).



Portion of a scene depicting a banquet on Olympus showing Hestia (right) and Zeus (left, holding a lightning bolt) being served by Ganymede, Zeus' young lover.

## Life for Women in Ancient Greece (see Activity #9)

The women of ancient Athens were closely controlled by the men in their lives, first by their fathers and then by their husbands. Girls spent most of their time in their households with other women, leaving only to perform religious duties or perhaps to attend school if there was no family tutor. They learned reading, mythology and religion, dance and music and important domestic skills – spinning, dyeing, weaving, sewing and cooking. A girl would be married in her teens to a man chosen by her father, an arrangement possibly made at a very early age if the families were wealthy. The dowry (girl's portion of the father's estate) would accompany her and give her some security in the marriage. (It, and she, would be returned to the father if the marriage broke down.) When the girl was passed from her father to her husband a celebration was held with the bride dressing in white befitting the religious nature of the occasion. She would wear a crown and carry a pomegranate or fruit with many seeds as a symbol of fertility. A sacrifice would be made at the family altar and her childhood toys would be offered to the goddess Artemis. The celebration would also involve a feast and a first night with her groom after which proof that she had just lost her virginity was shared with the guests.

A woman's chief duties were to take charge of the household and supervise the slaves and also to bear children in order to carry on the family bloodline. Women were frequently pregnant, child mortality was high and the life expectancy of women was 35-40 years. Babies not passing the inspection of the father (who routinely preferred male heirs) were frequently left outdoors to perish.

Greek houses were built of stone or brick with no windows and one or two doorways, and were made up of several rooms built around an open air courtyard or atrium with a garden and often a fountain. Much of ancient Greek family life centered around the atrium where meals were enjoyed, women would relax, chat and sew and stories would be related by the mother or father.

The status of Spartan women (like Penelope) was considerably higher than that of Athenians. They had more education in the arts and athletics and could own property and dispose of it as they wished. They were much freer to move around outside the house because their husbands did not live at home, being housed in military barracks.



For more information on life for women in ancient Greece visit the website:  
<http://www.womenintheancientworld.com/>

## **The Development of Ancient Greek Theatre** (see Activity #10)

There was a very long tradition - presumably stretching back centuries before writing became common in the area that would become Greece - of lyric poetry being passed down orally by singers. Inspired by the Muses, odes in praise of the gods would be created and sung by professional singers in front of admiring audiences at temples, festivals and in other gathering places. Narrative poems singing the deeds of the gods and later the deeds of legendary heroes were likewise popular means of worship and education. These epic poems, like the ones attributed to Homer, were sung by "rhapsodes". Images of these performers show them clothed in a cloak and carrying a walking staff, suggesting that they moved around the countryside. Their songs no doubt helped foster heritage pride as well as a deep awareness of the pantheon of gods and heroes. Rhapsodes were not only males; we know that the poetess Sappho had a strong following among the women. Rhapsodes performed competitively, contending for prizes at religious festivals.

At some point hymns of praise for a particular god, Dionysus, came to be sung by a group of performers called a chorus who also danced to musical accompaniment. These hymns, called dithyrambs, may have also evolved from rural songs, folk tales and dances. They would be performed near a temple and altar dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine and patron of agriculture – and eventually of theatre. Festivals to his honour, often in the spring or at harvest time, were scenes of revelry and celebration. This revelry, of course, led to the growth of his popularity. Like the rhapsode performances, the dithyrambs were presented in competitions, and so the number of narratives about his birth, life and deeds grew. At some point dithyrambs involving other gods and, later, heroes were included in these festivals, although, for the purists, the dithyramb was supposed to only concern Dionysus. The material could either be serious or comic and ribald (satyr plays). A significant development was made when a chorus leader named Thespis separated himself from the rest of the chorus and created a statement and response format for the hymn. Soon a second and later a third performer stepped from the chorus and dialogue was created. This heralded the beginnings of Greek tragedy, a form that would flourish from approximately 550 BCE to 220 BCE in Athens. The popularity of plays, both tragedies and comedies, resulted in the construction of large outdoor theatres throughout the Greek peninsula and beyond. Festivals of plays attracted thousands of audience members with great interest in who would win the coveted prize for best offering each year. The top playwrights whose works have come down to us are Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes.

Conventions of Greek drama were:

- The performers were all male, a chorus of 12 or 15 with no more than three actors playing all roles, both male and female.
- Performers wore masks to define characters, as well as impressive robes and platform boots.
- The structure of the play involved sections of dialogue spoken by actors alternating with sections of singing and dancing by the chorus.
- The theatre consisted of a circular "orchestra" (for chorus), raised platform (for actors), "skene" (scene house for costume changes) and sloped, semi-circular seating area.
- Stage machinery included a wagon for transporting a dead body (death always took place off stage), a crane for lifting characters such as a god to the roof of the skene, a trap door and periaktoi (rotating prisms with scenery on three sides allowing for scene changes).

**An Excerpt from *The Penelopiad*\*** (page 1 of 2) (see Activity #7)

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(Background: Penelope and her glamorous cousin Helen of Troy (think Pamela Anderson) have been dead and existing as spirits in Hades for the last 3000 years or so. As in life, Helen enjoys taunting her plain and less popular cousin. The asphodel mentioned is a flower, the favourite food of the dead.)

PENELOPE: (to audience) I was wandering through the asphodel, musing on times past, when I saw Helen sauntering my way. She was followed by her customary horde of male spirits, all of them twittering with anticipation. She gave them not even a glance, though she was evidently conscious of their presence. She's always had a pair of invisible antennae that twitch at the merest whiff of a man.

HELEN: Hello there, little cousin duck! I'm on my way to take my bath. Care to join me?

PENELOPE: We're spirits now, Helen. Spirits don't have bodies. They don't get dirty. They have no need of baths.

HELEN: Oh, but my reason for taking a bath was always spiritual. I found it so soothing, in the midst of the turmoil. You wouldn't have any idea of how exhausting it is, having such vast numbers of men quarrelling over you, year after year. Divine beauty is such a burden. At least you've been spared that.

PENELOPE: Are you going to take off your spirit robes?

HELEN: We're all aware of your legendary modesty, Penelope. I'm sure if you ever were to bathe you'd keep your own robes on, as I suppose you did in life. Unfortunately, modesty was not among the gifts given to me by laughter-loving Aphrodite. I do prefer to bathe without my robes, even in the spirit.

PENELOPE: That would explain the unusually large crowd of spectators you've attracted.

HELEN: But is it unusually large? There are always such throngs of these men. I never count them. I do feel that because so many of them died for me – well, because of me – surely I owe them something in return.

**An Excerpt from *The Penelopiad*\*** (page 2 of 2)

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- PENELOPE: If only a peek at what they missed on earth.
- HELEN: Desire does not die with the body. Only the ability to satisfy it. But a glimpse or two does perk them up, the poor lambs.
- PENELOPE: It gives them a reason to live.
- HELEN: You're being witty. Better late than never, I suppose.
- PENELOPE: My wittiness, or your bare-naked tits-and-ass bath treat for the dead?
- HELEN: You're such a cynic. Just because we're not, you know, any more, there's no need to be so negative. And so – so vulgar! Some of us have a giving nature. Some of us like to contribute what we can to the less fortunate.
- PENELOPE: So you're washing their blood off your hands. Figuratively speaking, of course. Making up for all those mangled corpses. I hadn't realized you were capable of guilt.
- HELEN: Tell me, little duck – how many men did Odysseus butcher because of you?
- PENELOPE: Quite a lot.  
(to the audience) She knew the exact number: she'd long since satisfied herself that the total was puny compared with the pyramids of corpses laid at her door.
- HELEN: It depends on what you call a lot. But that's nice. I'm sure you felt more important because of it. Maybe you even felt prettier. Well, I'm off now, little duck. I'm sure I'll see you around. Enjoy the asphodel.
- PENELOPE: (to audience) And she wafted away, followed by her excited entourage.

## Suggested Events, Movies, Videos and Websites

### Websites of Interest



<http://www.online-literature.com/homer/odyssey> The entire text of Homer's epic poem as well as useful summaries of each of the 24 books.

<http://www.mythweb.com/odyssey/index.html> A youth-friendly summary of the *Odyssey* with notes, definitions and drawings.

<http://www.theoi.com/Pantheon.htm> A huge website with description and pictures of the vast array of ancient Greek gods and immortals.

<http://members.aol.com/Donnclass/Greeklife.html> a fun website outlining what it would be like to be an Athenian or Spartan living in 480 BCE; description of education, cultural and sporting activities.

<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~loxias/classics-quiz.htm> The classics game page which includes a role-playing game for *The Odyssey*.

<http://library.thinkquest.org/19300/data/Odyssey/virtodyssey1.htm> A thorough summary of the *Odyssey* with illustrations.

[http://womenshistory.about.com/od/ancientgreece/Ancient\\_Greece\\_Women.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/od/ancientgreece/Ancient_Greece_Women.htm) a list of many notable Greek women, their status and the myths of goddesses.

<http://www.greekmythology.com/> An excellent site giving bios of all the Greek gods, titans, heroes, myths and even ancient Greek recipes!

### Events, Movies and Videos of Interest

*The Odyssey* (1997) – 120min. 2-part TV miniseries with a huge cast of stars. It tells the story of Odysseus' attempts to get home after the battle of Troy. Because he forgot to pray to the gods for safe passage, they make his life miserable by forcing him to make numerous detours that add years to his trip throwing him into conflict with Circe, the Cyclops, Poseidon and others. Meanwhile his wife Penelope is trying to hold off suitors who want to claim his property thinking that Odysseus has died. Available at select video stores.

*The Animated Odyssey* (2000) TV miniseries. The *Odyssey* is wonderfully animated with incredible detail. All episodes stay very true to the book. The musical accompaniment is also beautiful and original. This animated series is both educational and entertaining, fun for all ages. Highly entertaining. Several parts available at some local libraries.

*O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) Very entertaining Coen Brothers film loosely based on Homer's *Odyssey* detailing the travels of an escaped convict and his friends trying to get home to Ithaca, NY where his faithful wife Penny lives, and meeting the sirens, a one-eyed bible salesman and other weird characters along the way. Recommended for home viewing. Available at most video stores.

*Troy* (2004) The Hollywood version of Homer's *Illiad*, the epic poem that precedes the *Odyssey* and tells the story of Achilles' fight to rescue Helen from the city of Troy. Odysseus makes an appearance in this movie starring Brad Pitt. Recommended for home viewing. Available at most video stores.

## Activities (page 1 of 3)

### **Before Seeing the Play**

#### **1. A Reading Assignment**

Distribute copies of pages 1-3 of this Study Guide, “About the Play”. The students should read the synopsis and comments on the play so as to better understand the world of Penelope, wife of the famous Odysseus. The cabaret style with some singing and dancing may be a challenge, as will the fact that members of the chorus often play several roles. The section “Some Things to Watch For in the Production” might help the students be more perceptive while watching the play and lead to post-performance discussions.

#### **2. A Reading and Discussion Activity**

Distribute copies of pages 6–8, “People, Places and Things in *The Penelopiad*”. Have the students read over the terms that they will encounter in the play. There could be a discussion about the various concepts of the Afterlife according to different religions. Students could share their knowledge of mythical or legendary figures from other cultures.

#### **3. An Improvisation Activity**

Experiencing a wide variety of improv topics will help student relate to the material of *The Penelopiad*. Try any of the following:

- Several “male” suitors compete to get a girl to go out with one of them. (Girls could play male suitors also.) How many different tactics can be used?
- Several females compete to get the attention of a popular boy. What are the different tactics used by girls?
- Standing in a circle, create a unison movement sequence following one leader. Without an obvious signal can the leadership change to another person? Scattering throughout the room, try keeping a unison movement sequence even when your back is to the leader by watching others who are following the leader.
- In teams of six or seven, one person tells a very fantastical and unlikely story of a journey while the others simultaneously act it out. Take turns as the storyteller.
- Create an undersea environment with fantastic beings such as mermaids which can move gracefully about and interact. Perhaps a selection of background music will help set the mood. After a while the medium gradually changes to thin air with the creatures floating and flying.
- Students initially spend a day observing carefully how members of the opposite gender move and do different tasks. The next day in class have them perform as the opposite gender showing what they learned. They must not try for laughs by falling into parody or clichéd moves.

#### **4. A Research Activity on Mythology**

Refer to page 14, “The World of Greek Gods and Other Immortals”. Research how other cultures explained the creation and nature of our world – Nordic, Hindu, Roman, American Aborigines. Discuss how the religion/mythology of a culture helps its members deal with phenomena, respect the environment or lead moral lives.

## Activities (page 2 of 3)

### **Before Seeing the Play**

#### **5. Creative Writing Activity on Mythology**

Refer to page 14, “The World of Greek Gods and Other Immortals”. Visit the website <http://www.theoi.com/Pantheon.html> to learn more about the Greek gods. Write a short article in cheap tabloid style regarding the scandalous or benevolent activity of a chosen god or goddess. Read the summary of the *Odyssey* found on pages 9–12. Write a series of headlines and news bites on Odysseus’s activities on his trip home.

#### **6. Enrichment Activity**

If time allows, screen a film dealing with the *Odyssey* or the Trojan War as mentioned on page 19 of this Study Guide. Visit the websites mentioned on page 19 for more in-depth coverage of the issues.

#### **7. A Scene Study Activity**

Use the excerpt from *The Penelopiad* (pages 17-18) to explore the relationship between the two cousins, and how text can establish status, relationship and desires/wants of each person. The location may or may not be defined in this scene exploration but the blocking should reflect the struggle between the two. Even though the two characters technically don’t have bodies, how can body language be used to get across the attitudes of the characters?

### **Activities After Seeing the Play**

#### **9. Creative Writing Projects**

After referring to page 15, “Life for Women in Ancient Greece”, and possibly visiting the website <http://members.aol.com/Donnclass/Greeklife.html> have the students write a blog for:

- a) Penelope during the time that she is being courted by the suitors.
- b) one of the maids in Penelope’s household.
- c) one of the suitors.

Choose another narrative novel that is familiar and then write a short passage from the point of view of a character other than the narrator. The version of events might turn out to be quite different, but the original narrator’s version must have some basis in fact.

#### **10. Topics for Class Discussion on the Production** (students may want to review the material on pages 1-3 of this Study Guide, “About the Play”.)

- Style of language used in the script; visit <http://www.online-literature.com/homer/odyssey> and read a short passage from a translation of the original epic poem comparing the language. See also page 13 of this Study Guide, “What is an Epic?”
- Style of acting chosen for this play; the use of movement to define male and female characters.

(continued on next page)

## Activities (page 3 of 3)

### 10. Topics for Class Discussion on the Production (continued)

- Themes explored – what was it about?
- What characteristics of ancient Greek drama and its staging are evident in this production? (see page 16, “The Development of Ancient Greek Theatre”)
- What elements of cabaret are evident?
- Effect of having actors playing more than one character.
- Production aspects:-
  - Costumes – how well did they define time period, character, mood? how were they altered to define different characters? did colour play a role?
  - Set – how well did it define location, theme? what mood did it convey? what abstract ideas did it evoke? what effect does its non-specific style have on the viewer? how was water used as a theme in the production and why was that appropriate to the subject matter?
  - Lighting – what did the realistic/non-realistic nature of lighting express? what special effects were used?
  - Sound – how was sound/music/singing used to represent Hades?
- Relevance of this story set mostly 3000 years ago in Greece to today’s Canadian audiences.

**11. Write a Play Review.** While the production is still fresh in their minds, have students review *The Penelopiad*. Refer them to play reviews in Toronto newspapers and online to give them an idea of the standard approach to theatrical criticism. You’ll find an outline for writing a review on page 12 of the Study Guide for “*The ‘Vaudevilles’ of Chekhov*” found in the NAC website <http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/activities/>. Theatre Ontario has an excellent guide at [http://theatreontario.org/content/play\\_reviews.htm](http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm). Students should refer to their programme (if supplied) or page 4 of this Study Guide, “Who Helped Put the Production Together?”, for correct production information. A review should cover, in general and more specifically when merited: design elements (lighting, sound, set and costumes), performances, direction, text (basic narrative, dialogue and the central themes).

### 12. A Comparison between the *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*

Have the students read the plot summary of the *Odyssey* found on pages 9-12 of this Study Guide. Have them also read a short passage from a translation of the original epic poem at <http://www.online-literature.com/homer/odyssey>. Perhaps a section from Book 23 where Penelope finally recognizes her husband and they are reunited would be a good choice. Compare this section with the scene in the play in terms of language, events, and atmosphere.