Who is to say that prayers have any effect? On the other hand, who is to say they don’t? I picture the gods, dildling around on Olympus, wallowing in the nectar and ambrosia and the aroma of burning bones and fat, mischievous as a pack of ten-year-olds with a sick cat to play with and a lot of time on their hands. ‘Which prayer shall we answer today?’ they ask one another. ‘Let’s cast dice! Hope for this one, despair for that one, and while we’re at it, let’s destroy the life of that woman over there by having sex with her in the form of a crayfish!’ I think they pull a lot of their pranks because they’re bored.

Twenty years of my prayers had gone unanswered. But, finally, not this one. No sooner had I performed the familiar ritual and shed the familiar tears than Odysseus himself shambled into the courtyard.
The shambling was part of a disguise, naturally. I would have expected no less of him. Evidently he'd appraised the situation in the palace — the Suitors, their wasting of his estates, their murderous intentions towards Telemachus, their appropriation of the sexual services of his maids, and their intended wife-grab — and wisely concluded that he shouldn't simply march in and announce that he was Odysseus, and order them to vacate the premises. If he'd tried that he'd have been a dead man within minutes.

So he was dressed as a dirty old beggar. He could count on the fact that most of the Suitors had no idea what he looked like, having been too young or not even born when he'd sailed away. His disguise was well enough done — I hoped the wrinkles and baldness were part of the act, and not real — but as soon as I saw that barrel chest and those short legs I had a deep suspicion, which became a certainty when I heard he'd broken the neck of a belligerent fellow panhandler. That was his style: stealthy when necessary, true, but he was never against the direct assault method when he was certain he could win.

I didn't let on I knew. It would have been dangerous for him. Also, if a man takes pride in his disguising skills, it would be a foolish wife who would claim to recognise him: it's always an imprudence to step between a man and the reflection of his own cleverness.

Telemachus was in on the deception: I could see that as well. He was by nature a spinner of falsehoods like his father, but he was not yet very good at it. When he introduced the supposed beggar to me, his shuffling and stammering and sideways looks gave him away.

That introduction didn't happen until later. Odysseus spent his first hours in the palace snooping around and being abused by the Suitors, who jeered and threw things at him. Unfortunately I could not tell my twelve maids who he really was, so they continued their rudeness to Telemachus, and joined the Suitors in their insults. Melantho of the Pretty Checks was particularly cutting, I was
told. I resolved to interpose myself when the time was right, and to tell Odysseus that the girls had been acting under my direction.

When evening came I arranged to see the supposed beggar in the now-empty hall. He claimed to have news of Odysseus — he spun a plausible yarn, and assured me that Odysseus would be home soon, and I shed tears and said I feared it was not so, as travellers had been telling me the same sort of thing for years. I described my sufferings at length, and my longing for my husband — better he should hear all this while in the guise of a vagabond, as he would be more inclined to believe it.

Then I flattered him by consulting him for advice. I was resolved — I said — to bring out the great bow of Odysseus, the one with which he'd shot an arrow through twelve circular axe-handles — an astounding accomplishment — and challenge the Suitors to duplicate the feat, offering myself as the prize. Surely that would bring an end, one way or another, to the intolerable situation in which I found myself. What did he think of that plan?

He said it was an excellent idea.

The songs claim that the arrival of Odysseus and my decision to set the test of the bow and axes coincided by accident — or by divine plan, which was our way of putting it then. Now you've heard the plain truth. I knew that only Odysseus would be able to perform this archery trick. I knew that the beggar was Odysseus. There was no coincidence. I set the whole thing up on purpose.

Growing confidential with the purported seedy tramp, I then related a dream of mine. It concerned my flock of lovely white geese, geese of which I was very fond. I dreamt that they were happily pecking around the yard when a huge eagle with a crooked beak swooped down and killed them all, whereupon I wept and wept.

Odysseus-the-beggar interpreted this dream for me: the eagle was my husband, the geese were the Suitors, and the one would shortly slay the others. He said nothing about the crooked beak of the eagle, or my love for the geese and my anguish at their deaths.
In the event, Odysseus was wrong about the dream. He was indeed the eagle, but the geese were not the Suitors. The geese were my twelve maids, as I was soon to learn to my unending sorrow.

There's a detail they make much of in the songs. I ordered the maids to wash the feet of Odysseus-the-mendicant, and he refused, saying he could only allow his feet to be washed by one who would not deride him for being gnarled and poor. I then proposed old Eurycleia for the task, a woman whose feet were as lacking in aesthetic value as his own. Grumbling, she set to work, not suspecting the booby trap I'd placed ready for her. Soon she found the long scar familiar to her from the many, many times she'd performed the same service for Odysseus. At this point she let out a yelp of joy and upset the basin of water all over the floor, and Odysseus almost throttled her to keep her from giving him away.

The songs say I didn't notice a thing because Athene had distracted me. If you believe that, you'll believe all sorts of nonsense. In reality I'd turned my back on the two of them to hide my silent laughter at the success of my little surprise.
THE PENELOPIAD

‘Quite a lot,’ I said. 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.

‘It depends on what you call a lot,’ said Helen. ‘But that’s nice. I’m sure you felt more important because of it. Maybe you even felt prettier.’ She smiled with her mouth only. ‘Well, I’m off now, little duck. I’m sure I’ll see you around. Enjoy the asphodel.’ And she wafted away, followed by her excited entourage.

Odysseus and Telemachus
Snuff the Maids

I slept through the mayhem. How could I have done such a thing? I suspect Eurycleia put something in the comforting drink she gave me, to keep me out of the action and stop me from interfering. Not that I would have been in the action anyway: Odysseus made sure all the women were locked securely into the women’s quarter.

Eurycleia described the whole thing to me, and to anyone else who would listen. First, she said, Odysseus — still in the guise of a beggar — watched while Telemachus set up the twelve axes, and then while the Suitors failed to string his famous bow. Then he got hold of the bow himself, and after stringing it and shooting an arrow through the twelve axes — thus winning me as his bride for a second time — he shot Antinous in the throat, threw
off his disguise, and made mincemeat of every last one of the Suitors, first with arrows, then with spears and swords. Telemachus and two faithful herdsman helped him; nevertheless it was a considerable feat. The Suitors had a few spears and swords, supplied to them by Melanthius, a treacherous goatherd, but none of this hardware was of any help to them in the end.

Eurycleia told me how she and the other women had cowered near the locked door, listening to the shouts and the sounds of breaking furniture, and the groans of the dying. She then described the horror that happened next.

Odysseus summoned her, and ordered her to point out the maids who had been, as he called it, 'disloyal'. He forced the girls to haul the dead bodies of the Suitors out into the courtyard – including the bodies of their erstwhile lovers – and to wash the brains and gore off the floor, and to clean whatever chairs and tables remained intact.

Then – Eurycleia continued – he told Telemachus to chop the maids into pieces with his sword. But my son, wanting to assert himself to his father, and to show that he knew better – he was at that age – hanged them all in a row from a ship’s hawser.

Right after that, said Eurycleia – who could not disguise her gloat ing pleasure – Odysseus and Telemachus hacked off the ears and nose and hands and feet and genitals of Melanthius the evil goatherd and threw them to the dogs, paying no attention to the poor man’s agonised screams. "They had to make an example of him," said Eurycleia, "to discourage any further defections."

"But which maids?" I cried, beginning to shed tears. "Dear gods – which maids did they hang?"

"Mistress, dear child," said Eurycleia, anticipating my displeasure, "he wanted to kill them all! I had to choose some – otherwise all would have perished!"

"Which ones?" I said, trying to control my emotions.

"Only twelve," she faltered. "The impertinent ones. The ones who’d been rude. The ones who used to thumb their noses at me. Melantho of the Pretty
Cheeks and her cronies – that lot. They were notorious whores.

‘The ones who’d been raped,’ I said. ‘The youngest. The most beautiful.’ My eyes and ears among the Suitors, I did not add. My helpers during the long nights of the shroud. My snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves.

It was my fault! I hadn’t told her of my scheme.

‘They let it go to their heads,’ said Eurycleia defensively. ‘It wouldn’t have done for King Odysseus to allow such impertinent girls to continue to serve in the palace. He could never have trusted them. Now come downstairs, dear child. Your husband is waiting to see you.’

What could I do? Lamentation wouldn’t bring my lovely girls back to life. I bit my tongue. It’s a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years.

Dead is dead, I told myself. I’ll say prayers and perform sacrifices for their souls. But I’ll have to do it in secret, or Odysseus will suspect me, as well.

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