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Penelope's Lover

by David Rogers

She told me Odysseus would kill us both
if he ever found out. That didn't discourage me.
To the contrary, it honed desire
with the edge of danger:
no fruit's as sweet as what's forbidden.
Twenty years she was faithful
to a memory, impervious to my appeals,
my assurances he wasn't coming
back. Then the man himself washed up
on the beach; a legend already, he was in the flesh
a disappointment: no man
could live up to his reputation,
not even him. Oh, we'd gotten reports,
rumors from travelers, vagabonds
and runaway sailors, deserters from the war itself,
but there had to be some truth to them:
*Odysseus is clever, saves day again
for Greeks; Odysseus escapes beautiful
singing women; Odysseus outsmarts
one-eyed, dull-witted giant.*
Well, he was just an ordinary-looking man
when he got here — ragged tunic, worn sandals,
gray in the beard and hair.
He always looked as if he were listening
for some distant song or squinting
across a horizon no one else could see.
Even when he looked at her, she told me,
she felt as if he saw Athena, Cassandra,
maybe some nameless, faceless
camp girl less desirable than Briseis.
With no chance to be clever, he was nothing.
I've waited twenty years for a stranger, she said.
What a fool I've been! I led her inside
then and sent the servants away, and gave her
wine and comfort. I watched her lips touch
the cup and wondered, *are there any songs
not sung by sirens?* It seemed best
to wait to remind her we all become strangers
sooner or later — it's only a question
of when our ship sets sail, how long
until it doesn't come home.

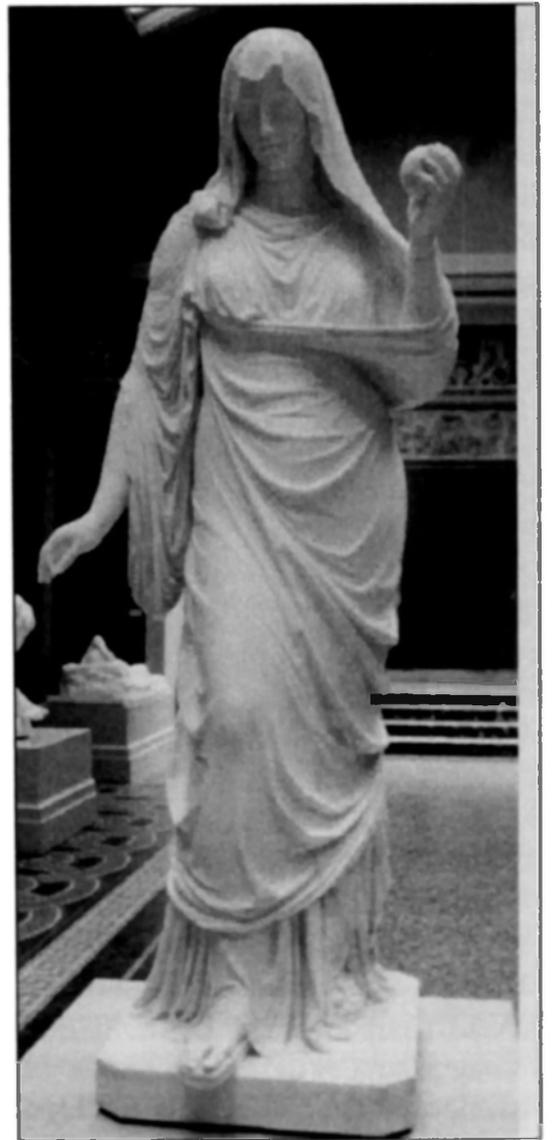


Photo by Maicar Førlag

