

The Penelopiad – by Margaret Atwood

Maids

Sleep is the only rest we get;
It's then we are at peace:
We do not have to mop the floor
And wipe away the grease.

We are not chased around the hall
And tumbled in the dirt
By every greedy thug and lout
Who wants a slice of skirt.

And when we sleep we like to dream;
We dream we are at sea,
We sail the waves in golden boats,
So happy, clean and free.

In dreams we all are beautiful
In glossy crimson dresses;
We sleep with every man we love,
We shower them with kisses.

They fill our days with feasting,
We fill their nights with song,
We take them in our golden boats
And drift the whole year long.

And all is mirth and kindness,
There are no tears of pain;
For our decrees are merciful
Throughout our golden reign.

But then the morning wakes us up:
Once more we toil and slave,
And hoist our skirts at their command
For every prick and knave.

The Odyssey – Homer (Translation by Robert Fagels)

Book 4: Tale of Proteus, Old Man of the Sea

Eidothea, now, had slipped beneath the sea's engulfing folds
But back from the waves she came with four sealskins,
All freshly stripped, to deceive her father blind.
She scooped out lurking-places deep in the sand
And sat their waiting as we approached her post,
Then couching us side-by-side she flung a sealskin
Over each man's back. Now there was an ambush
That would have overpowered us all—overpowering,
True, the awful reek of all those sea-fed brutes!
Who'd dream of bedding down with a monster of the deep?
But the goddess sped to our rescue, found the cure
With ambrosia, daubing it under each man's nose—
That lovely scent, it drowned the creatures' stench.
So all morning we lay there waiting, spirits steeled,
While seals came crowding, jostling out of the sea
And flopped down in rows, basking along the surf.
At high noon the Old Man emerged from the waves
And found his fat-fed seals and made his rounds,
Counting them off, counting *us* the first four,
But he had no inkling of all the fraud afoot.
Then down he lay and slept, but we with a battle-cry,
We rushed him, flung our arms around him—he'd lost nothing,
The old rascal, none of his cunning quick techniques!
First he shifted into a great bearded lion
And then a serpent—

A panther—

A ramping wild boar—

A torrent of water—

A tree with soaring branchtops—

But we held on for dear life, braving it out
Until, at last, that quick-change artist,
The old wizard, began to weary of all this
And burst out into rapid-fire questions:

“Which god, Menelaus, conspired with you to trap me in ambush? Seize me against my will? What on earth do you want?”

“You know, old man,” I countered now. “Why put me off with questions?
Here I am, cooped up on an island far too long, with no way out of it,
none that I can find, while my spirit ebbs away. But you tell *me*—
you immortals know it all—which one of you blocks my way here,
keeps me from my voyage? How can I cross the swarming sea and reach home at last?”
“How wrong you were!” the seer shot back at once.
“You should have offered Zeus and the other gods
a handsome sacrifice, then embarked, if you ever hoped
for a rapid journey home across the wine-dark sea.
It’s not your destiny yet to see your loved ones,
Reach your own grand house, your native land at last,
Not till you sail back through Egyptian waters—
The great Nile swelled by the rains of Zeus—
And make a splendid rite to the deathless gods
Who rule the vaulting skies. Then, only then
Will the gods grant you the voyage you desire.”