

## **Penelope**

by Scott Rettberg (poems) & Roderick Coover (images)

*Penelope* is a combinatory sonnet generator film based on Homer's *The Odyssey* [1] that addresses themes of longing, mass extinction, and migration, which are not simply relegated to the past. Recombinations of lines of the poem, video clips, and musical compositions are produced in real-time by the computer, resulting a different version of the project on each run. *Penelope* was co-produced by Alejandro Albornoz (Sound), Roderick Coover (Video), and Scott Rettberg (Text and Code). Other contributors to the project include Kristiansand Symphony Orchestra oboist Marion Walker, voice actress Heather Morgan, and actors Helen Amourgi, Kostas Annikas Deftereos, and Sophia Kagadis in non-speaking roles. The video and the text were developed by Coover and Rettberg during 2017 residencies at the Ionian Center for Arts and Culture in Kefalonia, Greece. Kefalonia is reputedly the historic home of Homer. *Penelope* is the winner of the 2018 SEA(S) Arts Award.

### **The Combinatory Poetics of *Penelope***

*Penelope* engages with ancient narratives and poetic forms, and contemporary technology and poetic methodologies. The central

situation of the narrative is that of Odysseus's wife Penelope from Homer's epic, left behind on Ithica for many years when Odysseus went off to fight in the Trojan wars and struggled to return. While Odysseus is off on his heroic adventures, Penelope must struggle to fend off the advances of a band of parasitic suitors vying for her attentions, hand, and Odysseus's throne. She distracts these suitors through subterfuge, delaying the arrival of the day when she will be forced to choose another to replace Odysseus, even as she struggles to believe that he will in fact return to rule at her side. Penelope is able to delay the decision of choosing a new mate by making them wait before competing for her hand until she has finished weaving a tapestry. Each day she can be seen working to complete it, but each night she returns to the loom to unweave the threads from the day before. Although it is set within a particular Homeric frame, the human concerns and emotions involved in Penelope's story are essentially universal ones of longing for loved ones, doubts for the future, struggle, loss, and perseverance in the face of adversity. These are themes which apply equally well in contemplation of contemporary struggles with catastrophic climate change, extinction, and mass migration.

*Penelope* filters Penelope's story from the epic through the form of the Shakespearean sonnet. Pulling from a database of ten-syllable lines primarily written in iambic pentameter, the

computer-code-driven combinatory film can produce millions of variations of a sonnet that weaves and then unweaves itself. The program writes 13 lines of a sonnet and then reverses the rhyme scheme at the center couplet. The program thus produces Shakespearean sonnets that weave and then unweave themselves according to the same rhyme scheme, resulting in a 26-line poem.

*Penelope's* generativity is not based on the operations of a complex AI or neural network, but instead hearkens back to early forms of combinatory poetics. The algorithms here are not generating the lines from scratch or building them on the basis of machine learning, but instead are recombining texts and media elements in an aleatory but formally structured manner. An important inspiration for *Penelope* is Oulipian writer Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes (One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems)* [2], a book of ten pages of a 14-line sonnet, with each line cut as a strip, so that the reader could substitute a line in any given position of the poem and still read a sonnet that worked metrically and semantically, resulting in  $10^{14}$  poems. *Penelope* is similarly factorial, if using a slightly more complex algorithm that results in a more varied end-rhyme scheme in successive runs of the work. *Penelope* is programmed to produce three 26-line iterations of the combinatory sonnet without

repeating a line. The system produces each sonnet as an audiovisual composition before printing it to the screen.

### **Combinatory Sonnet, Film, and Score**

*Penelope* not only generates combinatory sonnets but also recombines videos by Roderick Coover and the sound compositions by Alejandro Albornoz in a parallel algorithmic structure. Borrowing from traditions in avant-garde cinema and digital musical composition as well as experimental writing practice, the collaborative project thus brings three strands of practice together in one protean digital work.

### **Imagery**

The imagery for *Penelope* was filmed in and around islands of the Ionian Sea. The cinematography and art direction follow two primary themes. Images from the natural landscape evoke ancient and enduring elements of the *Odyssey's* sensorium, tying the present to the past in a cyclic expression of time. This includes human relationships to the land, weaving, storytelling, olives, seafaring and goats described by Homer that continue today. Other images illustrate human use and abuse the natural landscape, recasting enduring poetics in relation to contemporary crises of environmental destruction, waste, and mass extinction. Loss and memory in collective consciousness is

also expressed through visual forms of underwater imagery of Roman shipwrecks, above ground images of earthquake destruction and ancient open tombs.

PENELOPE / I.

I would sit a vigil at Hades' door  
In weak moments my appetites would whet  
I would pry your wrecked ship from ocean floor  
My man will be another woman's pet  
  
Nothing worse than gruesome bile thick with hate  
When silence is my lover's only word  
Nothing not expired far beyond its date  
If we asked for blessings, gods have demurred  
  
For the blood of our sacrificial goat  
Wash my hands, this blood, this permanent stain  
All epics, histories which fate rewrote  
Swim your dark shadows in my fevered brain  
  
We cast hopes to the wind as grey clouds loom

Our hopes lie in state, the ghost of my groom  
  
Swim as love drowning, driving me insane  
All the parasites and usurpers smote  
Wash my yearning lips, wet my tongue profane  
For refugees crowded on stranded boat  
  
If you lie dead, I'd have your bones interred  
Nothing for the cock that crowed too late  
When skies yield no promising flocks of bird  
Nothing to do here, nothing but to wait  
  
My fingers cut on threads of empty net  
I would render tame a restless centaur  
In clear lucid night you rise naked, wet  
I would stare for hours at an empty shore

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PENELOPE / II.

I would kiss every shadow winds have blown  
In our fields neglected crops wither brown  
I would you here to see how he has grown  
My glass reflects worry near to breakdown

Nothing sent here by your god or her owl  
When all the aurochs have finally bled  
Nothing tastes fresh, even the air is foul  
If dawn lights a bier, the morning I dread

For species lost we will never retrieve  
Wash my beating heart, its blood on this sand  
All loopholes only for a while deceive  
Swim the seas and find solace on our strand

We are as threads too tangled to unwind

Our oracle is as mute as he is blind

Swim to shore, free me from my prison land  
All gods will fall as we do not believe  
Wash away the pain from my aching hand  
For each soldier's widow that war bereave

If land is corrupt, our map must be shred  
Nothing for sacrifice, birds disembowel  
When the last Javan tiger has not bred  
Nothing on lips that are fixed in a scowl

My house of wax is slowly melting down  
I would you had not left us all alone  
In horror each night I watch as you drown  
I would touch weathered flesh with skin of crone

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PENELOPE / III.

I would kiss every shadow winds have blown  
In horror each night I watch as you drown  
I would have your skin, sinews to me sewn  
My eyes in dirt, they would have me facedown

Nothing sent here by your god or her owl  
When the last black rhinoceros lies dead  
Nothing tastes fresh, even the air is foul  
If I sought solitude, I'd not have wed

For broken bones that suffer butcher's cleave  
Wash over me golden, yearning, and tanned  
All gods will fall as we do not believe  
Swim now towards the destiny we planned

We have lost the treasures you'll never find

Our promised contract has never been signed

Swim the seas and find solace on our strand  
All loopholes only for a while deceive  
Wash away this loss, our desires demand  
For each soldier's widow that war bereave

If progeny ceases, our hopes we shed  
Nothing left where the tiger used to prowl  
When all the aurochs have finally bled  
Nothing but usurpers here cheek by jowl

My thighs quiver in a threadbare nightgown  
I would you had not left us all alone  
In wispy clouds' whisper, I dream you down  
I would barter my crown to fill warm throne

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