

AN ANCIENT GESTURE

————— *Edna St. Vincent Millay* —————

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
Penelope did this too.
And more than once: you can't keep weaving all day
And undoing it all through the night;
Your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets tight;
And along towards morning, when you think it will never be light,
And your husband has been gone, and you don't know where, for years,
Suddenly you burst into tears;
There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
He learned it from Penelope. . . .
Penelope, who really cried.

From *Collected Poems* by Edna St. Vincent Millay, published by HarperCollins.
Copyright © 1954, 1982 by Norma Millay Ellis. Used by permission of Elizabeth
Barnett, literary executor.