

Instrument of Empowerment

An Exploration of Penelope's Fidelity in Homer's *Odyssey*

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In exalting the archetype of an independent and self-sufficient woman, contemporary feminist ideology often adopts a rather contemptuous view of romantic relationships. Unfortunately, a woman's desire to engage in amorous affiliations is too often attributed to dependence on men or an impoverished sense of self. The depiction of Queen Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey* offers a poignant refutation of this erroneous generalization, suggesting instead that intimate connections may act as instruments of female empowerment. Indeed, Penelope elects to remain faithful to her journeying husband, audaciously evading the social prescription to marry anew in his absence. Thus, the queen's fidelity demonstrates her capacity to transcend cultural expectations and commit to her own convictions. Ironically, too, Penelope characterizes herself as a subversive figure through the very attribute most esteemed of women in ancient Greece: loyalty to a male. In fact, through her steadfast fidelity, this nuanced character reclaims her sense of agency in a society that affords women few opportunities for self-determination. In this sense, Penelope's virtue lies not only in her devotion, but also in her capacity to operate as an independent thinker within the confines of a social structure that seeks to stifle female potential.

To begin, Homer highlights Penelope's weaving ruse to suggest that the shrewd woman exercises her intellectual vitality despite the "unforgettable grief" Odysseus's protracted absence precipitates (Homer 13). In turn, Penelope circumvents the choice of a suitor and preserves her fidelity because despondence does not eclipse her proactivity. Indeed, when presented with an "impossible situation"—Greek culture dictates that Penelope must remarry due to Odysseus's presumed death, though doing so would prevent her from reuniting with her beloved, should he return to Ithaca—Penelope cleverly recognizes that she need not capitulate to traditional social practices. Instead, this "matchless queen of cunning" vows to remarry once

she completes a funeral shroud for Odysseus's father (21). In reality, however, she weaves by day and unravels by night. Certainly, Penelope's "scheme" is ingenious *because*—not in light of the fact that—it is subtle and civilly disobedient (21). In fact, the queen perceives that as a woman, delivering an overt repudiation of her suitors would be wholly ineffective. Thus, Penelope's self-awareness and social aptitude allow her to remain loyal to Odysseus and "deceive [the suitors] blind" for such a prolonged period (21).

Moreover, weaving itself is richly symbolic. A conventionally domestic and feminine action, weaving is reappropriated in the *Odyssey*. Ironically, the epic depicts this activity as a means by which Penelope may elude her feminine "duty" to remarry. Therefore, as with her fidelity itself, Penelope undermines ancient Greek gender roles through her participation in them. On another note, Penelope's "masterpiece of guile" firmly links her to Athena, for the goddess is associated with both wiliness and weaving (21). Similarly, Penelope's ruse connects her to Odysseus, who himself earns Athena's affection and guardianship by "*weaving* cunning schemes" (149; emphasis added). In this sense, Penelope and Odysseus are bound both in common wit and in mutual protection under the goddess. Homer thus elevates an almost divine justification for the couple's rich compatibility, in turn offering further context for Penelope's fierce commitment to her husband.

Still, readers might avoid a reductionist view of the faithful queen. Although striking in her romantic devotion and social subversion, Penelope is certainly not immune to vulnerability and insecurity. For instance, the queen deferentially "withdr[aws] to her own room" after Telemachus admonishes her for curtailing a bard's song about the Trojan War (14). Additionally, when commanded to marry "[a]gainst her will" after her weaving ruse is exposed (20), Penelope entertains darkly existential thoughts: "if only blessed Artemis sent me [...]"

death[...]—no more wasting away my life, my heart broken in longing for my husband” (307). This somber outpouring appears to contradict the portrait of Penelope as an emboldened and independent figure. Indeed, some may interpret Penelope’s desire for death as evidence that she does not differentiate her sense of self from that of her husband. Accordingly, Penelope’s characterization is nuanced—the extent of her subversiveness complex and contentious. Even so, bitter anguish and moments of wavering fortitude are certainly justified in light of Penelope’s precarious circumstances. Consequently, this depressive outburst more likely represents a bereavement-driven expression of yearning for Odysseus than it does a genuine dismissal of her own human dignity. In this sense, Penelope’s grief will inextricably inform her actions. Her moments of apparent resignation indicate that she is a complex and ambiguous figure, not a meek one.

Penelope soon proposes an archery competition, the winner of which she commits to wed. Although this action signifies forced acquiescence to a desperately unwelcomed marriage—she states, “this cursed day, will cut me off from Odysseus’ house”—Penelope yet salutes Odysseus through the bridal contest (333). Indeed, the victorious suitor must successfully string and shoot Odysseus’s bow. In this sense, Penelope seeks in her next spouse a man who emulates her current husband; a “soul in the crowd” (352) who “can match Odysseus” (352), should one exist. Therefore, while consenting to marry another man, she remains true to the very essence of her husband’s being. For example, skills required to excel in archery include an acute mind, intense concentration, and exacting attention to detail. Evidently, then, Penelope values Odysseus’s cerebral attributes *in addition to* his physical strength. Moreover, the queen’s fidelity is clearly rooted in a metaphysical connection to her husband that transcends pure carnality. In turn, readers may understand that Penelope possesses genuine respect for the noble king and

honors his unique personhood; that her love is founded upon authentic affection for Odysseus, rather than social currency or personal convenience.

As a result, Homer extols Penelope's suspicion when she is later informed of her husband's homecoming. In fact, her "hard heart" is honorable rather than obstinate (383), for it allows her to affirm the beggar's alleged identity instead of rejoicing at the return of some potential "fraud" (387). Therefore, readers might commend Penelope for prioritizing verification of Odysseus's arrival (and, by extension, his well-being) over long-awaited respite from her grief. Audiences should note that this quality of self-restraint is also exemplified by Odysseus, contributing to the common values and characteristics that profoundly connect the two. Notably, too, Penelope's self-restraint *transcends* her self-interest—a quality integral to maintaining her "soul of loyalty" (388). Still, she does not simply suspend herself in disbelief of her husband's return. She gauges the beggar's authenticity by alluding to one of her and Odysseus's "secret signs": their bed (384). Carved out of a "branching olive-tree" (386), this bedstead represents Penelope and Odysseus's collective "life story" (387); their marriage bond itself. Just as the bed is sturdy and immovable, so too is the dyad's love robust and enduring through time and tribulations. Furthermore, olive trees symbolize peace and friendship, while the bed itself represents rest and respite. Finally, the olive tree is associated with Athena, again reinforcing the couple's unity and shared bond. Hence, their bed illustrates the sense of comfort, solace, and solidarity that Penelope and Odysseus find in one another.

These "longed-for joys of love" are realized when Penelope ultimately recognizes the beggar as her husband (390). The most compelling element of their reunion scene, however, is perhaps that which is left unacknowledged: Odysseus's sexual relations with other female figures throughout his odyssey home. In analyzing this excluded matter, readers may draw a distinction

between the portraits of fidelity practiced by Penelope and her husband. For instance, Odysseus treasures and esteems the queen when he recognizes Penelope as his “hardy wife” (383) and “we[eps] as he h[olds] the wife he love[s]” (388) when the two finally reunite. His faithfulness, however, is not reflected through physicality. In fact, he allows both Calypso and Circe to “keep[...] a mortal man beside [them]” (whether willingly or otherwise) by engaging with the nymphs sexually (81). Still, these immortal beings do not capture his heart: while Calypso attempts “to spellbind his heart with suave, seductive words” (4), Odysseus pines for home and “longs to die” (42). On the contrary, Penelope’s emotional devotion to her husband is compounded by chastity. This is not to say that Odysseus’s regard for Penelope is necessarily less earnest than her esteem is for him. Instead, his actions may be attributed to a cultural gender imparity that permits men, but not women, to participate in extramarital sex. In this sense, the epic contends that love and loyalty transcend the corporeal realm; that passion and mutual respect operate independently of the very societal strictures that urge Penelope to forsake Odysseus through remarriage.

Ultimately, then, Penelope’s narrative reveals not only the queen’s empowerment through autonomously elected fidelity, but also her admirable desire for personal fulfillment through human connection, rather than material possessions. In a more global sense, too, Homer offers insight into ancient Greeks’ perception of femininity by situating Penelope amidst a broader network of female figures. In fact, the fidelitous queen is a moral outlier compared to her counterparts. The bard typifies Circe and Calypso as salacious seductresses, while Helen and Clytemnestra are unfaithful wives. However, Penelope’s rectitude and steadfastness of purpose challenge this deprecating portrait of women. Consequently, the queen’s characterization offers evidence that females are not universally adulterine or irate, in turn earning back honor and

integrity for her gender. Although Penelope is not a vocal advocate of female power and excellence, she is a quiet champion of women. Still, her narrative should not resonate with women alone. Penelope's social subversion implores readers of *all* genders to question conventional wisdom and evaluate the merits (and detriments) of current social customs. In turn, they may cultivate forward-thinking ideologies that supplement valuable ancestral customs with new and sound traditions.

References

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