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Womanhood as the Least Common Denominator:
Examining Penelope's Character through Comparisons to Other Mortal
Women in Homer's *Odyssey*

Jill Smolevitz

More often than not, the character of Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey* is envisioned as the faithful and steadfast wife, a woman who overcomes extreme hardships and prevails in the face of oppression as a consequence of her unfaltering devotion to her heroic husband. She becomes almost a symbol for appropriate female behavior, rather than an individual. This portrayal is not wholly inaccurate; in fact, Penelope does remain faithful to Odysseus in his twenty-year absence from Ithaca in the sense that she does not remarry or commit adultery. But, this portrayal is far too shallow.

Penelope's character is quite complex, and her many sides are drawn out by Homer through careful comparison to other mortal women. Her characterization is a synthesis of attributes that Homer uses to depict such mortals as Helen, Clytemnestra, and past Achaean queens. These women are the closest parallels to Penelope's character in the epic. All were once queens, women just like Penelope whose behavior is on display to the masses; but most importantly, they are all mortals operating under the same set of behavioral constraints, limits to which goddesses need not yield—mortal women's indiscretions are scrutinized far more than the misbehavior of any goddess. These women bear a Bronze Age scarlet letter, which is transmitted to Penelope's character through her association with them. So, through implicit and explicit comparisons, Homer presents Penelope not as an embodiment of faithfulness, but as a representation of all womankind's potential for infidelity, treachery and guile.

The character of Helen is an interesting addition to the *Odyssey*. She appears in Sparta, depicted as Menelaos' wife (4.120-305), and her memory is invoked by Penelope upon Odysseus' return (23.218-224). Her behavior is entirely inconsequential in terms of the central plot of the poem, so it seems odd that Homer includes her in this story. But Helen's behavior does change her image: as opposed to her actions in the *Iliad*, her actions here seem to refute her past indiscretions, depicting her as Menelaos' loyal wife, just as Penelope is wife to Odysseus.

During Telemachos' visit in Sparta, when Helen first enters, she seats herself next to Menelaos, and her handmaiden places before her materials for weaving, "a golden distaff," χρυσέην τ' ἡλακάτην (4.131), an undoubtedly domestic picture and a concrete parallel to Penelope, known for her weaving.¹ She remains by Menelaos' side for the remainder of the scene while he conveys to Telemachos what he knows about his father and his own travels after his departure from Troy. Helen does interject, but her speech is limited; what she chooses to say, however, is worth noting. She refers to the war as having begun on account of "dog-eyed me,"² ἐμείο κυνώπιδος (4.145), a descriptor that recurs throughout the *Iliad*.³ In her account of the sack of Troy, Helen pronounces her joy at seeing Odysseus come to take her away, for "already was my heart turned to return to my home," μοι κραδίη τέτραπτο νέεσθαι ἄψ οἰκόνδ' (4.260-1), and she says she "grieved for the folly, bestowed by Aphrodite," ἄτην δὲ μετέστενον ἦν Ἀφροδίτη δῶχ' of going to Troy at all (4.261-2). And as night falls and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Greek were done by the author of this paper.

² Some render this 'bitch-faced.' For a discussion on canine epithets in Homer, including those for Helen, see Margaret Graver, "Dog-Helen and Homeric Insult," *Classical Antiquity* 14.1 (1995): 41-61.

³ Elizabeth Gregory, "Unravelling Penelope: The Construction of the Faithful Wife in Homer's Heroines," *Helios* 23.1 (1996): 10.

the Spartan guests begin to retire for the evening, Homer stresses the sleeping arrangements within Menelaos' palace: the guests sleep "in the fore-court," ἐν προδόμῳ, while Menelaos sleeps with his wife, "glorious among women," δῖα γυναικῶν, removed from the other men and secure in the palace's inner chamber, καθεῦθε μυχῶ δόμου ὑψηλοῖο παρ δ' Ελένη τανύπεπλος ἐλέξατο (4.304-5).⁴

These depictions of Helen stand in opposition to her characterization in the *Iliad*, except of course for the instance in which she refers to herself as 'dog-eyed.' She appears to have mastered the art of the loyal wife, and parallels Penelope in her domesticity. Helen has taken up the skill of weaving at a loom (4.131-7), just as Penelope does.⁵ Also, Penelope's bedchamber resembles Helen's; both are guarded, in that Helen's is hidden deep within the palace (4.304-5), and no one's eyes but Odysseus' (and a few select handmaidens') have ever looked upon Penelope's lofty bed.⁶ Nevertheless, as we see with her self-assigned derogatory epithet, Helen's treacherous past still looms below the surface.

This past, however, serves a purpose for Penelope. Although Helen may be portrayed as fairly innocuous in the *Odyssey*, the connotations that her name carries cannot be ignored. When Odysseus and Penelope are finally reunited in their bedchamber in Book 23, Homer oddly has Penelope appeal to the memory of Helen's infidelity, an ironic anecdote upon one's husband's return after two decades of marauding. In truth, Odysseus does return to a house full of suitors and stories of his wife's leniency, even

⁴ "He slept in the innermost chamber of the house, and long-robed Helen lay next to him."

⁵ Telemachos orders his mother to her bedchamber to "take up her own tasks, the loom and the distaff," ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ ς' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε, ἰστόν τ' ἡλακάτην τε (1.356-7).

⁶ In Penelope's apologetic speech to Odysseus in Book 23, she refers to their bed as something "which not any other mortal has seen, but you and me alone and one single handmaid," ἦν οὐ βροτὸς ἄλλος ὀπώπει ἀλλ' οἶοι σύ τ' ἐγὼ τε καὶ ἀμφίπολος μία μούνη (23.226-7).

encouragement, regarding their stay, ἢ δ' οὐτ' ἀρνεῖται στυγερὸν γάμον οὔτε τελευτὴν ποιῆσαι δύναται (1.249-250, 16.126-127).⁷ Penelope may feel the need to offer up an explanation for their presence, as well as her own indecisiveness. To do so, she compares herself to Helen.

When Penelope questions Odysseus about their unique bed, he proves his identity to her, but concludes by saying that he does not know if some other man has cut it down and taken it elsewhere (23.202-4), calling into question Penelope's fidelity in his absence. She, bursting into tears, claims that it was "the gods" who "gave us sorrow," θεοὶ δ' ὄπαζον διζύν (23.210), and argues that she had to be wary lest some other man trick her into sleeping with him. Even Helen, she says, would not have lain in love with another man, had she known that the Achaeans would eventually bring her home (23.218-21). And again, she blames the gods for Helen's "shameful deed," ἔργον ἀεικέες (23.222), for it was not until then that she even considered such a "woeful folly," ἄτην...λυγρῆν (23.223-4), that brought such grief to all the Greeks, including Odysseus and his household.

From this perspective, it can be argued that Homer has Penelope invoke Helen as a defense for her own actions. Women, it seems, are tricked and compelled by the gods to commit such unfaithful acts as forsaking one's husband and country, and allowing hordes of men to consume her husband's household, encouraging them all the while. Penelope pardons Helen to pardon herself,⁸ evading Odysseus' censure by aligning herself with

⁷ "She does not refuse a marriage, nor does she make an end to their advances."

⁸ Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*, (Princeton, New Jersey: University of Princeton Press, 1994), 40.

Helen in an 'it could happen to any woman' sort of way, while underscoring their differences: in effect, Helen did leave, while Penelope did not.⁹ Thus Helen represents two sides of Penelope: on the exterior, she is a domestic goddess and devoted wife. However this is but a cover for her true past and the capability, manifest in any woman, to desert her home and husband if the conditions are right.

But Helen is not the only woman in the *Odyssey* to commit such an ἔργον ἀεικέες (3.265) brought on by the gods' compulsion. Homer's Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's infamous wife, was not an adulterous murderer from the get-go. In fact, δῖα Κλυταιμνήστρη (3.266)¹⁰ was not willing to concede to the murderous plot until "the doom of the gods overcame her," δῆ μιν μοῖρα θεῶν ἐπέδησε δαμῆναι (3.269). Indeed at first "she had virtuous thoughts," φρεσὶ γὰρ κέχρητ' ἀγαθῆσι (3.266). This is an interesting choice of words, because Penelope is described by Agamemnon in a similar way: ὡς ἀγαθαὶ φρένες ἦσαν ἀμόμοι Πηνελοπείη, "since there are virtuous thoughts in blameless Penelope" (24.194).

It appears that Penelope and Clytemnestra are quite similar. Both women are left at home while their husbands go off to Troy; neither originally intends on pursuing another man in her husband's absence; both are propositioned by persuasive men and resist temptation for some time. It is only when Clytemnestra is left alone in the palace (Aigisthos abandons her protective minstrel on an island, 3.269-270), and enough time has passed that she eventually yields to her suitor and takes up the plan to murder her husband. According to this story, told by Athena in Book 3, Clytemnestra's disgrace is

⁹ Patricia Marquardt, "Penelope Polutropos," *The American Journal of Philology* 106, no. 1 (1985): 45.

¹⁰ "Glorious Clytemnestra."

not by any fault of her own; external forces lead her to commit her infamous crime.

Penelope's circumstantial protector is Telemachos, for Odysseus had said that she should not forsake their household until Telemachos matured (19.159-161).

If these parallels between Clytemnestra and Penelope are genuine, Penelope too has the capacity to perpetrate similar misdeeds. S. Douglas Olson asserts that "the danger on Ithaca, after all, has to do not so much with the queen's virtue or good intentions as with her endurance."¹¹ This idea is echoed repeatedly throughout the poem in Agamemnon's speeches. As he blames Clytemnestra for his death, he extends her blame to all women, and condemns them all simultaneously, even those who act well: οἱ τε κατ' αἴσχος ἔχευε καὶ ἔσσομένησιν ὀπίσσω θηλυτέρησι γυναίξι, καὶ ἦ κ' ἔυεργὸς ἔησιν (11.433-4; cf. 24.202).¹² Also, although Agamemnon explicitly tells Odysseus that they will not share the same fate, he concludes his speech by saying, "there is no longer faith in women," ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι πιστὰ γυναίξιν (11.456). No woman escapes the stain of Agamemnon's blood, not even Penelope. And if this is so, there is a very real threat that Odysseus may fall victim to his wayward wife, even though Agamemnon insists otherwise. Odysseus' fate, however, is not the real issue here. Regardless of whether Odysseus lives or dies, Homer implies that Penelope still manifests the capacity to commit the same crimes as her notorious cousin. As of yet, however, Penelope's circumstances have not warranted such behavior.

The lengthy description of past Achaean queens in the Underworld in Book 11 maintains the motif of women's potential for infidelity that has been established by the

¹¹ S. Douglas Olson, "The Stories of Agamemnon in Homer's *Odyssey*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 109 (1979): 66.

¹² "But she whose heart holds horror has shamed herself and women who are yet to be, even on she who does what is good."

images of Clytemnestra and Helen. In Homer's description of these women, it becomes evident that even the most dignified of women, women who beget noble lineages and are commemorated in Greek lore, women the likes of Odysseus' own mother, can succumb to temptation and make grave errors in judgment. And if women of such repute can be led astray, so can Penelope.

Before Odysseus speaks with these queens, he encounters his mother, who instructs him to remind his wife that in death, your soul is all that remains; things of the body apply to a mortal existence only (11.219-24). Perhaps this is a warning to Penelope, and all women, that they ought to resist temptation and remain virtuous, because bodily pleasures do not exist in death. By specifically mentioning Penelope, Homer may be directing the audience to compare Odysseus' wife with these noble queens.

Among the subsequent queens Odysseus meets, there are several recurring characteristics. Many sleep with gods, the first of whom is Tyro. Poseidon beguiles her and through his trickery has sex with her, so that she bears Pelias and Neleus. This theme, of a god deceiving one of the queens to beget noble sons, is common in these lines (11.235-332). And although the queens fall victim to deception and do essentially commit adultery, they still go on to establish noble lineages with their kingly husbands. Homer goes on at length describing the strength, valor, might, and honor of the sons born by these queens.

At the end of the list, Homer mentions Eriphyle, who traded her husband's life for a sum of gold. He describes her as "hateful," *στυγερήν* (11.326), an epithet used repeatedly throughout the poem to describe Penelope's potential marriage to one of her suitors (1.249, 16.126, 18.271, 14.125). It is also used to describe Clytemnestra as a

hateful mother (3.310) and to describe the song that will be sung about her in the future, *στυγερή δέ τ' αἰοιδή* (24.200).¹³ The recurrence of this descriptor serves to integrate the attributes of mortal women throughout the story into one cohesive whole. Women, though their circumstances vary, are all alike at the most basic level.

Throughout the *Odyssey*, Homer presents various mortal women whose characteristics are meant to be seen as parallels and comparisons to Penelope, the female protagonist of the epic. His portrayals of Helen and Clytemnestra serve to challenge the assumption that Penelope is flawlessly faithful and devoted; it seems that her circumstances and the level of divine interference in her life are also key determinants to a woman's behavior. And the comparisons to the Achaean queens attest to the fact that even women noble by birth, noble by marriage, and regarded highly throughout posterity for the virtuous lines they begot have the potential to commit adultery and misbehave. It is easy to say that because Penelope remains committed to Odysseus in the end, her character is unflinchingly faithful. But through a closer inspection of the way Homer compares other mortal women to Penelope, it becomes apparent that much darker complexities lie just beneath the surface of Penelope's character, and that in the end, she is really no different from any other woman.

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¹³ "Hateful song."

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