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Gods, Society, and Gender: How Athena and Penelope Aid Odysseus' Homecoming

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In the world of the *Odyssey*, gods and mortals together occupy the physical world. The divinity of gods grants them a higher power in relation to mortals; a god's will carries serious implications for the lives of mortals. For example, Poseidon disrupts the course of Odysseus' homecoming for blinding his son Polyphemus.¹ However, though Poseidon seeks retribution, Odysseus also receives aid from the goddess Athena who sanctions his return to Ithaca and devises a plan for the reestablishment of his power.² Athena's plan illustrates Odysseus' dependence on other characters in the *Odyssey* for his homecoming. In what follows, I will demonstrate how Athena and Penelope work together for Odysseus' homecoming primarily by advancing the plot so that opportunities are presented to Odysseus to demonstrate strength, constraint, and intelligence. In this manner, Athena and Penelope exemplify the divine and social conditions on which Odysseus' homecoming depends.

The male-dominated narrative of the *Odyssey* has produced interpretations of gender that minimize women's impact on the narrative. For example, with the advent of psychoanalysis, it was proposed that Penelope recognized the beggar (alias Odysseus) on a subconscious level, which explains the controversial decisions to flatter the suitors in book 18 and set up the archery contest in book 21.³ More recent scholarship has responded with literary, gender, and sociological theories that emphasize Odysseus as the character responsible for the imminent homecoming.⁴ Yet, within these frameworks, Athena's divine presence is disregarded as Penelope is painted a victim to the social world she operates in. Despite the twenty years Penelope has endured, her loyalty is questioned rather than being asserted by the rejection she shows the suitors. After highlighting prevalent interpretations of Penelope, I will use literary evidence from four scenes in the *Odyssey* for my interpretation of her to demonstrate a character actively working with Athena's divine presence for Odysseus' homecoming: Penelope flaunting herself to the suitors, Penelope's conversation with the beggar, the setting of the bow contest, and the test of the bed.

PREVALENT INTERPRETATIONS OF PENELOPE

Whether Penelope recognized the beggar remains an important backdrop for interpretation on her character. Emlyn-Jones argues that she never recognized Odysseus but rather that the recognition is delayed for dramatic purposes.⁵ For Emlyn-Jones, Penelope's delayed recognition of Odysseus is characteristic of Homeric technique wherein "he pushes to extremes the contrast between appearance and reality and exploits the limits of plausibility."⁶ The harsh irony of Odysseus' presence in Ithaca creates frustration as the suitors' slaughter approaches and Penelope is unaware of Odysseus and Athena's plan. Moreover, Nünlist argues that Penelope's recognition of Odysseus is unique from all the other characters.⁷ Nünlist argues that up to book 23, Odysseus "– whom the epic so far [presents]... as the incarnation of the

¹ See *Odyssey* 9.

² *Od.* 1.44-63 & 13.

³ See Anne Amory, "The Reunion of Odysseus and Penelope," in *Essays on the Odyssey, Selected Modern Criticism*, ed. Charles H. Taylor Jr. (Indiana and London: Indiana University Press, 1963), 100-21.

⁴ See Nünlist, René, "If in Truth You are Odysseus – Distrust and Persuasion in the *Odyssey*," *Symbolae Osloenses* 89, no. 1 (2015): 2-24; Murnaghan, Sheila, "Penelope's *Agnoia*: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the *Odyssey*," in *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Lillian E. Doherty, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 231-246.

⁵ Emlyn-Jones, Chris. "The Reunion of Penelope and Odysseus." *Greece & Rome* 31, no.1 (April 1984): 4-7.

⁶ Emlyn-Jones, 6.

⁷ Nünlist, 14.

cautious and skeptical investigator – meets his match in the person of his Penelope.”⁸ Here, Nünlist alludes to Penelope’s test of the bed that allows her to confirm the identity of Odysseus rather than Odysseus revealing his identity to others.⁹ Penelope’s test is functional because of “its implications regarding loyalty, fidelity, trust.”¹⁰

Both Emlyn-Jones and Nünlist regard Penelope’s delayed recognition as a literary decision for dramatic purposes: after proving his wit throughout the epic, Odysseus’ homecoming is delayed as the climax approaches. These arguments, however, take for granted Penelope’s gender as she occupies the power vacuum of Odysseus’ absence. For example, the decision to hold the bow contest in book 21 is interpreted as dramatic irony rather than the culmination of a twenty-year homecoming operation.¹¹ The effect is Odysseus becomes solely responsible for his homecoming, except for the bed test, and all other characters, including Penelope, are pawns in Odysseus’ homecoming.

Murnaghan engages with the aspects of gender by exploring Penelope as a woman who actively confronts the social reality of Ithaca, the suitors, and her family; Murnaghan argues that despite Penelope rejecting the suitors for twenty years, she ultimately can’t delay their demands of marriage as is demonstrated by the archery contest.¹² Murnaghan clarifies that Penelope isn’t betraying her marriage to Odysseus but rather succumbing to the limitations of power in woman: Odysseus just happens to be present for it.¹³ This analysis of the intersection between gender and power contextualizes Penelope as resisting the suitors for an indefinite amount of time but ultimately unable to supersede them. After demonstrating his heroic character development, Odysseus swoops in to slaughter the suitors just as Penelope succumbs to their demands. The strength and intelligence of men is emphasized, and Odysseus becomes responsible for his homecoming and Ithaca.

Although social reality may be inescapable, Penelope demonstrates that the frameworks of gender can be confronted and challenged. Against all odds, Penelope commits herself to rejecting the suitors for an uncertain amount of time. Not only does Penelope flat-out reject the suitors but also stalls them through her own wit and intelligence, such as weaving the shroud which delays the suitors for a few years.¹⁴ If the bow contest is a decision to marry, it contradicts the past twenty years Penelope has confronted. Moreover, Murnaghan does not consider Athena’s presence on Ithaca and how she influences Penelope’s decision is not considered.¹⁵

In what remains, the paper will explore the relationship between Athena and Penelope to demonstrate the reasoning behind Penelope’s action and its relevance for Odysseus’ homecoming. The textual evidence serves two purposes: it directly responds to arguments regarding Penelope’s fidelity while providing an explanation for her controversial actions. The effect isn’t to regard Penelope as a pawn in a scheme created by Odysseus and Athena, but as a critical character who advances the plot and initiates the suitor’s bloodbath. Whereas the homecoming plan appears confusing and full of irony, the audience observes Penelope chuckling as she consents to it. Moreover, Penelope ultimately decides the final test for Odysseus. Prior to

⁸ Nünlist, 14.

⁹ *Od.* 23.177-180.

¹⁰ Nünlist., 14.

¹¹ *Od.* 21.

¹² Murnaghan, Sheila. “Penelope’s *Agnoia*: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the *Odyssey*.” In *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Homer’s Odyssey*, edited by Lillian E. Doherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 234-8.

¹³ Murnaghan, 233-37.

¹⁴ *Od.* 2.89-137.

¹⁵ See *Od.* 18 & 21.

his arrival to Ithaca, Odysseus, with the aid of Athena, has been scheming for his return and reinstatement of power. However, where Odysseus is left unable to scheme is in Penelope's recognition of him.

PENELOPE FLAUNTING HERSELF TO THE SUITORS

In the case of Penelope, divine intervention often renders her at the will of Athena. Whereas Athena enhances and amplifies Odysseus' characteristics, she demonstrates an ability to bend Penelope's will to carry out her own plans. For example, book 18.158-63 read as follows:

τῆ δ' ἄρ' ἐπὶ φρεσὶ θῆκε θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη, κούρη Ἴκαρίοιο, περίφρονη Πηνελοπείη,
μνηστήρεςσι φανῆναι, ὅπως... τιμήεσσα γένοιτο μᾶλλον πρὸς πόσιός τε καὶ υἱέος ἢ πάρος ἦεν.
ἀχρεῖον δ' ἐγέλασσαν ἔπος τ' ἔφατ' ἕκ τ' ὀνόμαζεν.¹⁶

At first sight, Penelope's action appears as counterintuitive especially when considering the logic of receiving esteem from Telemachus and Odysseus by flaunting herself to the suitors, a complicated action many scholars have explained as a potential recognition or betrayal of Odysseus.¹⁷ Although understanding the positive benefits of flaunting oneself before the suitors may be difficult, it mustn't be framed as an action of Penelope but one of Athena. The verb, τίθημι, describes Athena's action of placing in Penelope's φρήν, the Ancient Greek organ of thinking, to appear before the suitors. As any mortal unable to escape the will of Athena, Penelope proceeds to appear before the suitors to complete it. The action moves the plot forwards and provides the circumstance for Odysseus observing Penelope as she continues to stall the suitors. The action's end-goal isn't to taunt Odysseus by flirting with the suitors but to gain honor from both Odysseus and Telemachus. Moreover, Athena's divine intervention does not erase Penelope's autonomy as the end of the passage suggests. Penelope receives Athena's plan and chuckles to herself from how amusing the plan appears. The action appears futile for Penelope isn't aware of Odysseus' presence; regardless, she consents to Athena's will while letting out a smirk.

PENELOPE'S CONVERSATION WITH THE BEGGAR

In book 19, Penelope and the beggar, Odysseus in disguise, have a conversation regarding the beggar's origins; later, when the servant Eurycleia speaks to the beggar, she discovers who the beggar is and attempts to notify Penelope, but: ἡ δ' οὐτ' ἀθρήσαι δύνατ' ἀντίη οὐτε νοῆσαι: τῆ γὰρ Ἀθηναίη νόον ἔτραπεν.¹⁸

Athena inhibits Penelope's ability to perceive, νοῆσαι, and to observe, ἀθρήσαι, what lies before her, ἀντίη. Penelope isn't unwilling to hear the conversation between but is unable, οὐτ' δύνατ', to process what is happening. Athena accomplishes this by turning away, ἔτραπεν, Penelope's mind, τῆ... νόον, from what lies before her. In short, the text explicitly states that Penelope is unable to recognize Odysseus.

Athena's decision to block Penelope's mind reveals Odysseus' hesitancy to trust Penelope. This hesitancy arises from Agamemnon's death who, after a successful homecoming, was betrayed by his wife Clytemnestra and killed by her lover Aegisthus. Odysseus hears about

¹⁶ "And then grey-eyed goddess Athena placed upon the mind of wise Penelope, daughter of Ikarios, to appear before the suitors, so that... she may become honored before her husband and son. And she laughed for no reason and both spoke out and called out by the name [the nurse.]" (All translations are my own.)

¹⁷ Emlyn-Jones, 3.

¹⁸ *Odyssey* 19.479-80: "But she was not able to observe nor to perceive before her; for Athena turned her mind."

this betrayal during his trip to the underworld and learns that Clytemnestra's actions have made women's loyalty a cause for concern.¹⁹ Despite Athena and Agamemnon assuring Odysseus of Penelope's loyalty, Odysseus remains skeptical and decides that revealing his identity too early can jeopardize his homecoming.²⁰ Clytemnestra's example demonstrates that regardless of the strength and intelligence a hero may perform during his homecoming, a woman can destroy the homecoming if she so wishes. After twenty years, Odysseus' homecoming becomes a tangible reality but revealing his identity to Penelope with the suitors presents the risk of betrayal.

Furthermore, this scene demonstrates Athena to be an independent, functioning character of the epic. In the world of epic, the Gods are not metaphors for mortal's psyches or extended mechanisms of the mortal's φρήν. For example, such a notion would suggest that Penelope foresees an important revelation that she can't know yet and must shut her own mind off from the situation. We can better understand this event as Odysseus and Athena working in tandem to execute their clever plan.²¹ In instances where Odysseus' capacities fall short, Athena is able to step in as a cooperative partner of Odysseus.

THE SETTING OF THE BOW CONTEST

In book 21.1-6, Athena determines Penelope must set the bow contest: τῆ δ' ἄρ' ἐπὶ φρεσὶ θῆκε θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη, κούρη Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφρονι Πηνελοπείῃ, τόξον μνηστήρεσσι θέμεν πολίον τε σίδηρον ἐν μεγάροις Ὀδυσῆος, ἀέθλια καὶ φόνου ἀρχήν.²²

Once again, Athena performs the same action of placing, τίθημι (θῆκε), in the mind, φρήν, of Penelope an action not from her own accord. The word ἀέθλια is defined as "gaining the prize" or "the prize of the contest;" φόνου is defined as "murder, homicide, slaughter."²³ Translated, the purpose of the bow contest is to set prizes, ἀέθλια, and to start, ἀρχήν, a slaughter, φόνου. First, Penelope offers to marry the suitor who can successfully string the bow, but also allows the beggar, alias Odysseus, to participate.²⁴ After Penelope is dismissed, the suitors fail to string the bow, followed by Odysseus stringing the bow and starting to slaughter the suitors.²⁵ Sanctioned by Athena, Penelope's actions function as the conduit for the suitors' removal in a manner that provides Odysseus the opportunity to prove himself worthy of his marriage with Penelope while demonstrating superior strength to the suitors.

However, Athena had the task of initiating the slaughter without revealing Odysseus' presence to Penelope. The ambiguity of the phrase, competitions and beginning of a slaughter, ἀέθλια καὶ φόνου ἀρχήν, allows Penelope to set the bow contest without being suspicious of Athena's intentions. For Penelope, the prize of the contest is her hand in marriage. Yet, this outcome is unlikely as even the suitors recognize that none of them match Odysseus in strength.²⁶ The suitors' awareness of their strength foreshadows their failure to string the bow. Advised by Athena, the contest allows Penelope to stall the suitors while raising their hopes for

¹⁹ See *Od.* 11.409-436.

²⁰ See *Od.* 11.444-51, 13.337-40, & 13.379-8 for remarks on Penelope's fidelity; see 13.333-7 for Odysseus' decision to test Penelope.

²¹ See *Od.* 13 for details on the homecoming plan crafted by Athena and Odysseus.

²² *The Odyssey* 21.1-6: "And the grey-eyed goddess Athena placed it upon the mind of wise Penelope to place the bow and iron axe for the suitors in the hall of Odysseus, competitions and the beginning of a slaughter."

²³ *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, Liddell & Scott, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1889), s.v. "ἀέθλιον," "ἀέθλιος," & "φόνος."

²⁴ See *Od.* 21.63-78 & 330-42.

²⁵ See *Od.* 21.417-31 & 22.

²⁶ See *Od.* 21. 90-4.

marriage after twenty years of delay. Even if a clear winner did arise, a violent outbreak among the suitors that results in the death of many would not be unlike the destructive behavior the suitors have exhibited on Ithaca in the past twenty years. Respect for rules, honor, and hospitality are not the concern of the suitors, who ravage Odysseus' estate. Respect for Penelope's marriage conditions seems unlikely as the suitors perpetually dishonor the customs of the society in the *Odyssey*. Athena's plan brings the plot's climax into sight while keeping Penelope unaware of Odysseus' location.

THE TEST OF THE BED

Once Odysseus slaughters the suitors, he faces a final challenge: Penelope's recognition of him. The test of recognition is for Penelope's benefit so that she may be sure without a doubt that her husband has returned and power in Ithaca may be reestablished - a final manifestation of her twenty year resistance to the external factors that have made her home vulnerable. After Odysseus expresses disbelief in Penelope's incredulity, in 23.173-5 she responds to Odysseus directly:

τὸν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε περίφρων Πηνελόπεια: 'δαιμόνι', οὐτ' ἄρ τι μεγαλίζομαι οὐτ' ἀθερίζω
οὔτε λίην ἄγαμαι...²⁷

Penelope rejects the qualities of a deceitful wife – μεγαλίζομαι, ἀθερίζω, λίην ἄγαμαι – while demonstrating her cunning ability to test the man who has survived the past 20 years against all odds on lies and deceit. Penelope suggests their shared bed is moveable which causes Odysseus to cry out in dismay; only Odysseus would know that the bed can't be moved hence his strong display of emotion.²⁸ No longer can Odysseus lie patiently. Instead, he finds himself at the mercy of his wife who must trust him. In other words, Odysseus' fate lies in Penelope's hands, and, in turn, she will hand power back to him by consenting to her reunion with Odysseus.

CONCLUSION

Just as Odysseus spent twenty years away from Ithaca, so did Penelope spend twenty years on Ithaca upholding Odysseus' estate by choosing not to marry. The decision regards fidelity and rejects the example of women set by Clytemnestra. The weight of those twenty years is difficult to grasp because Penelope has no avenue to express in full what she endured. Odysseus' journey is easier to grasp as the epic centers on those details and he can elaborate on details prior to the epic's starting point. With the divine sidekick Athena, the epic emphasizes the homecoming of a hero who must overcome tests of intelligence and wit. However, one mustn't take for granted the effect of Penelope's decision on Odysseus: no amount of wit and intelligence could reinstate him in Ithaca if Penelope gave the estate to any of the suitors. In other words, Odysseus' achievements can only come to fruition because Penelope allows the return of Odysseus to take place.

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²⁷ *Odyssey* 23.173-5: "But wise Penelope said to him, "You incredible man! I am not acting proudly nor making light of something nor wondering greatly..."

²⁸ See *Odyssey* 23.175-8.

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