

PENELOPE

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Penelope (in Homer's *Odyssey*)

Conscientious

Overview Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Penelope is one of the deepest figures, initially concerns the turbulent return home, to Greece, of the Greek soldiers who have succeeded in 'sacking the walls of Ilium,' the great Eastern fortification which controlled much of the traffic of the Eastern Mediterranean. Quietly tucked in one corner of the Greek world, on the island of Ithaca in the Tyrrhenian Sea, lay the baronial estate of Odysseus, who had left his home twenty years before, and who was gradually making his way home to his wife. In this setting Penelope must be imagined as largely deprived of news—about the war and her man—and about the prospects for solving her bind, whether or not to accept one of her many suitors.

Character Penelope is regularly portrayed as patient, and such she is, for she willingly remains at home twenty years awaiting her husband's return. (Legend has it that, having promised to choose one of the suitors upon completing the weaving of a burial shroud for Laertes, Odysseus' elderly father, she managed for three years to unwind her weaving every night). However, when it comes to the crunch, rediscovering the authenticity of her husband, and collaborating in the suitor-killing finale, she is cautious, careful, hard-boiled, and strategical. She grasps the whole picture quickly, having been convinced of the authenticity of Odysseus. So she is sharp, conscientious, and decisive when the chips are down.

Parallels The Hebrew Christian text of Job turns around the sufferings of a man who feels he being unjustly attacked by God and simple fate, and that he has been abandoned even by his friends, who in fact berate him with scorn, for having brought down pain on himself. All Job has to sustain him is patience and faith in God, but he has enough to persevere through all his travails. The Virgin Mary, as the Christian tradition understands her, is the Mother of God, a mystery which she cannot in fact share, but which she must bear internally, pregnant with a meaning which englobes her, like the meaning of her existential setting as it gathers around Penelope.

Illustrative moments

Ritual At the opening of Book 21 of the *Odyssey*, Penelope is brought into the sharp focus of deliberate behavior. She has long kept in her heart the knowledge of how to access the great bow of her husband, in the treasure chamber where he had left it, when he went to war. It was a holy site, and the time had come—her soi-distant husband had returned—when the bow was to perform its fatal role. 'She stretched forth her hand, and took the bow from off the pin, all in the bright case which sheathed it around.' She 'cried aloud and wept, and took out the bow of her lord.'

Obedient In the same Book of the *Odyssey*, Penelope acts through progressive stages of the difficult role she must play, in readying the bow for her husband (which she will soon know him to be) and then making certain that he is her husband. She asks Eurymachus, the prominent one among the suitors, to give due respect to the house's distinguished new guest (Odysseus). She asks a servant to 'give him the polished bow, that we may see that which is to be.' Upon being reminded by her son Telemachos, that only he now controls the behaviors of the house, she politely (and knowingly) returns to the women's quarters 'til grey-eyed Athena cast sweet sleep upon her eyelids.'

Cautious Careful, and reluctant to be persuaded, that the returning guest-tramp-hero, who is waiting to be accepted by her, is actually her 20 years absent husband, Penelope ponders whether she should 'stand apart, and question her dear lord,' or 'draw nigh, and kiss his head and hands.' She sits down over against Odysseus, in the light of the fire, and for a few agonizing moments both recognizes and doubts the person who has been the mainstay of her life, in absentia. So careful—it has been twenty years—is she, that her son Telemachus rebukes her again, and calls her 'an ill mother, of an ungentle heart.'

Trapped No longer able to make a decision, on whether the returnee guest is her husband, Penelope determines on a final test, to see whether the guy is genuine. She is determining whether he recalls the fact of the construction of their marital bed, which was hewed out of the living body of a tree, and was immovable. The yes answer Odysseus

will provide—he knows the bed secret well—is finally the only key that will release the conviction of Penelope, and include her full understanding and energies in the assault upon the scum who have been rioting in her house for years.

Discussion questions

There is an untraditional theory, that Penelope is actually enjoying being beset by a team of lusty bachelors, and that she prolongs the situation as long as possible. Do you see any merit to this idea?

Is it plausible that Penelope would have had so much difficulty identifying her husband? What was the ‘wound of Odysseus’ that needed identification before the process was complete?

How does Penelope deal with the new authority assumed by Telemachus, once his father was back on Ithaca? Is she at all amused by his quick transitions into the man of the house mode?