

A Reading of Penelope

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I. THE PRESENTATION OF PENELOPE

The *Odyssey* depicts Penelope in three main ways:²

- ▶ **In the narrator's words.** The narrator offers objectivity and perspective in describing Penelope. He shows her own actions and words – her continual tears and grief at Odysseus's absence; her opinion of the suitors; her inauguration of the marriage contest, and so forth. He also presents Penelope's interactions with other characters, such as her exchanges with Telemachos and with the suitors, and her conversations with the 'Old Beggar'.
- ▶ **In other characters' words.** The narrator also reproduces what other characters say about

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² Textual quotations from the *Odyssey* are taken from *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York, 1999). Quotations from the *Iliad* are from *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1961). Where given, Greek quotations and associated Latin transliterations and English quotations are taken from the Perseus edition of the texts (<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>>).

Penelope, both positive and negative. This includes Antinoös's account of her shroud-weaving trick, and Amphimedon's report of her involvement in the plan to kill the suitors. More common is praise for Penelope from a variety of sources.

- ▶ **Though comparison with other female characters.** The text offers, more or less directly, comparisons with other female characters throughout the *Odyssey*. This is the aspect to be explored here.

i. Specific Comparisons between Penelope and Some Other Female Characters

ATHENE

Athene (co-)rules the specifically masculine province of war, and is also connected with wisdom and skill in handicrafts, attributes which are not associated with a single gender. Wisdom is, of course, the ultimate trait of Odysseus in both Homeric poems; and the Odyssean Athene is herself a deviser of subtle plans, which is reflected in Odysseus's cunning and Penelope's trickery. Penelope's intelligence is emphasized in the *Odyssey*, and the shroud-weaving trick epitomizes her cunning and her talent for handicrafts. Although Penelope never sees or speaks to Athene, her strong connection with wisdom and handicrafts echoes the parallel that the poem sets up between Odysseus and the goddess.

KALYPSO

This minor deity is beautiful, boring, and shallow. Not even the promise of immortality can make Odysseus prefer her company to Penelope's, and Kalypso proves his point when she fails to understand why. The comparison between herself and Penelope that she articulates demonstrates her inability to understand human relationships and what it is that Odysseus yearns to regain:

‘I think that I can claim I am not her inferior
either in build or stature, since it is not likely that mortal
women can challenge the goddesses for build and beauty.’ (5.211–13)

CIRCE

Circe is another minor immortal. Her motives in turning Odysseus's men into swine are hard to fathom, resulting in a sense that she is untrustworthy and capricious. Odysseus needs immortal aid to best her. Circe's actions are, at best, an attempt to assuage boredom.

Homer invites a direct comparison between Circe and Penelope, whose shroud-weaving trick has already been decried by the suitors in Book 2. Odysseus's men find Circe ‘singing in a sweet

voice | as she went up and down a great design on a loom' (10.221–22). She is clearly only of passing interest to Odysseus, who tells Alkinoös that she too attempted to keep him with her: 'Circe the guileful detained me | beside her in her halls, desiring me for her husband, | but never could she persuade the heart within me' (9.31–33).

NAUSIKAA

The poem offers some potential parallels between Penelope and Nausikaa, who is shown to be brave, open-hearted, clever, and circumspect. When her companions run away screaming on the beach at the sight of Odysseus, Nausikaa faces him with dignity and courage; that these qualities are said to be lent by Athene marks the girl as intelligent. The exchanges between Odysseus and Nausikaa suggest a model for a relationship between Odysseus and Penelope which the audience has yet to see. Nausikaa seems to be the only female character who might come close to Penelope in Odysseus's view, but he is not tempted by her father's suggestion of her hand in marriage.

ARETE

Athene's words to Odysseus also offer parallels between Penelope and Arete. Arete is not only held in great respect by her husband and people, but is marked by her wisdom: 'there is no good intelligence that she herself lacks' (7.73).

HELEN AND KLYTAIMESTRA

Both these women are notoriously unfaithful, but, in both poems, the narrator tends to present them through the eyes of other characters, so that, for instance, his own impressions of Helen's role is obscured. Helen's abduction by Paris causes the Trojan War, but it is unclear how far she was a willingly actor in this abduction and there is little or no overt censure of her actions. In the *teichoskopia* in *Iliad* 3, Priam treats Helen sympathetically and counters her self-recriminations with blame for the gods. In the *Odyssey*, she has returned home with her first husband, Menelaos, and the two seem to live together contentedly. Klytaimestra, on the other hand, is roundly condemned in the *Odyssey*, where she is implicated in Agamemnon's murder (11.410–11) and identified by Agamemnon as the sole murderer of Kassandra (11.421–23).

Helen, Klytaimestra and Penelope are directly compared in the first underworld scene, where Odysseus sympathizes with the shade of Agamemnon:

'Shame it is, how most terribly Zeus of the wide brows
from the beginning has been hateful to the seed of Atreus

through the schemes of women. Many of us died for the sake of Helen,
and when you were far, Klytaimestra plotted treason against you.’

So I spoke, and he in turn said to me in answer:
‘So by this, do not be too easy even with your wife,
nor give her an entire account of all you are sure of.
Tell her part of it, but let the rest be hidden in silence.
And yet you, Odysseus, will never be murdered by your wife.
The daughter of Ikarios, circumspect Penelope,
is all too virtuous and her mind is stored with good thoughts.’ (11.436–46)³

In the second underworld episode, Agamemnon makes a final comparison between his own wife and Penelope in terms of fame:

‘O fortunate son of Laetes, Odysseus of many devices,
surely you won yourself a wife endowed with great virtue.
How good was proved the heart that is in blameless Penelope,
Ikarios’ daughter, and how well remembered Odysseus,
her wedded husband. Thereby the fame of her virtue shall never
die away, but the immortals will make for the people
of earth a thing of grace in the song for prudent Penelope.⁴
Not so did the daughter of Tyndareos fashion her evil
deeds, when she killed her wedded lord, and a song of loathing
will be hers among men, to make evil the reputation
of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous.’ (24.192–202)

There is a further element in these comparisons that Homer uses to add poignancy to Agamemnon’s situation and emphasis to the theme of Penelope as a virtuous woman. In the above passage, Agamemnon describes Penelope and Klytaimestra by their patronymics: Penelope, ‘Ikarios’ daughter’, and Klytaimestra, Helen’s sister, ‘the daughter of Tyndareos’. Ikarios and Tyndareos are brothers, making Penelope cousin to Helen and Klytaimestra.⁵

ii. The Status of Women in General

Homer also offers broader comparisons between Penelope’s situation and the status and treatment of other female characters. The autonomy of the goddesses and the relaxed freedom of Nausikaa, Arete and Helen are in sharp contrast to Penelope’s constraint in Odysseus’s house –

³ Note that Odysseus apparently does tell her ‘everything’ (23.309) – this, immediately before the rather puzzling summary of the hero’s adventures, offers another potentially logical closing point for the poem; the summary of his narrative mentions both Circe and Kalyпсо (23.321, 333–37).

⁴ A reference to *The Odyssey* itself?

⁵ Homer refers to Tyndareos as father of Kastor and Polydeukes (*Odyssey* 11.298–300) and, in the *Iliad*, Helen refers to her brothers both by name and by their relationship to her (3.237–38). Homer does not provide a patronymic for Helen, but elsewhere in Greek mythology Helen’s father is, in fact, named as Zeus: Tyndareos married Leda, who copulated with her husband on the same night as she was seduced by Zeus in the form of a swan. Of the resulting offspring, Polydeukes and Helen were supposedly fathered by Zeus and Kastor and Klytaimestra by Tyndareos (William Smith, *Everyman’s Smaller Classical Dictionary*, rev. ed. by E. H. Blakeney and J. Warrington (London: Dent, 1952), pp. 304–05). In the *Iliad*, Helen makes reference to sharing a mother with her brothers (3.238), which fits the Zeus myth, but in the *Odyssey*, Tyndareos is identified as father of both brothers and Leda as their mother (11.298–304).

her own home. Nausikaa is granted permission by her father to do the laundry accompanied only by female attendants. There is indeed no suggestion that male escorts might be required for protection or propriety. Arete is shown sitting at ease in the communal area of the οἶκος (*oikos*); and when the guest has been fed and watered, it is Arete, having recognized Odysseus's clothing as made by herself (another cloth-weaving link with Penelope), who asks him the *who are you and where are you from?* questions. Similarly, during Telemachos's visit, Helen joins Menelaos and his male guests and talks freely with them.

All this makes it more apparent that Penelope is constrained in the public areas of her home. As Telemachos tells Theoklymenos: 'with the suitors there in the house she does not | often appear, but stays in the upper room and works at her weaving' (15.516–17). In the suitors' presence, Penelope always wears a veil and is always escorted by female attendants, both as physical protection and to protect her reputation; she approaches the communal hall, but does not enter, remaining each time at the pillar or door-post. Thus, in Book 18, Penelope

made her descent from her shining chamber,
not all alone, since two handmaidens went to attend her.
When she, shining among women, came near the suitors,
she stood by the pillar that supported the roof with its joinery,
holding her shining veil in front of her face, to shield it,
and a devoted attendant was stationed either side of her. (18.206–11)

The more-or-less verbatim repetition of this description at each appearance of Penelope in the public areas of the house when the suitors are there reflects its oral source (cf. 1.330–35, for example), but also serves to emphasize Penelope's constraint, which she herself explains: 'I will not go alone among men. I think that immodest' (18.184). It is also, of course, potentially dangerous, leaving her open to the fumbings of drunken suitors and to damage to her reputation.

The number and importance of female characters in the *Odyssey*, particularly mortals, and the means Homer deploys to offer parallels between Penelope and other female characters elevate Penelope in such a way as to present her unambiguously as a fitting partner for the homecoming hero, and chief protagonist, Odysseus. The comparisons also keep her in the audience's thoughts during the long sections of the poem set outside Ithaka and Odysseus's household, and during Telemachos's and Odysseus's travels.

II. TEXTUAL INCONSISTENCIES RELATING TO PENELOPE

Overview

Scholars have long debated the *Odyssey*'s various inconsistencies of plot and style. Most contentious is Book 24; indeed, the ancient critics Aristophanes and Aristarchus considered Homer's text to have ended at 23.296, the point at which Odysseus recounts his adventures to Penelope.⁶

No conclusions are offered here – after all, scholars have been exploring the problems for millennia – but simply an introduction to some of the issues that directly concern Penelope, and suggestions for ways of balancing the discrepancies to attempt a sound reading.

i. Inconsistencies: Key Questions

- ▶ Why does Penelope decide to remarry just at the moment when reunion with Odysseus is about to occur?
- ▶ Why is Odysseus happy to see her soliciting gifts from the suitors? Homer says that Athene moves Penelope to solicit these gifts; he does not suggest that Athene has told Odysseus this.
- ▶ At what point does Penelope recognize Odysseus?
- ▶ Is there a way to reconcile Homer's insistence on Penelope's ignorance of Odysseus's plan and the ghost-Amphimedon's description of her involvement in the downfall of the suitors?

ii. Remarriage: why does Penelope decide to remarry when reunion with Odysseus is about to occur?

Despite omens, prophecies and portents suggesting that Odysseus will return, Penelope suddenly declares that she will now choose a new husband. Penelope's public explanation is that she is following instructions given by Odysseus before he left for the Trojan War that she might remarry when Telemachos reaches maturity: 'when you see our son grown up and bearded, then you may | marry whatever man you please, forsaking your household' (18.269–70). When Penelope recounts this to the suitors, it is clear that she has no more wish to marry now than earlier – 'And there will come that night when a hateful marriage is given | to wretched me, for Zeus has taken my happiness from me' (18.262–63) – and she speaks of the prospect in terms of 'a bitter distress to [her] heart and spirit' (18.274).

However, the explanation she gives the disguised Odysseus in Book 19 is more plausible:

⁶ Denys Page, *The Homeric Odyssey. The Mary Flexner Lectures delivered at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 101.

‘My son, while he was still a child and thoughtless, would not let me marry and leave the house of my husband; but now that he is grown a tall man and come to maturity’s measure, he even prays me to go home out of the palace, fretting over the property, which the Achaian men are devouring.’ (19.530–34)

Penelope’s words here do not necessarily mean that she considered marriage at an earlier time or even that she wanted to marry, but seem to evoke a familiar epic theme, that of fathers and sons: this is a typically Homeric depiction of a domestic situation, the anxieties of a fatherless boy who fears the loss of his mother too. The explanation Penelope gives for her sudden change of heart certainly fits with Telemachos’s repeated complaints about the wasting of his property and his mother’s refusal to consider marriage; for example, when Telemachos speaks to Athene (disguised as Mentès), he says: ‘She does not refuse the hateful marriage, nor is she | able to make an end of the matter’ (1.249–50; cf. 16.73–77, 125–28).

In the assembly in Book 2, Antinoös demands that Telemachos return Penelope to her father so her remarriage can be arranged; but Telemachos states that this is impossible: ‘I cannot thrust the mother who bore me, | who raised me, out of the house against her will’ (2.130–31), for fear, amongst other things, that ‘my mother will call down her furies upon me | as she goes out of the house, and I shall have the people’s | resentment’ (2.135–37); there are both personal and social implications for such a decision on Telemachos’s part, and his position is so precarious that he dare not risk engendering resentment in the people he hopes to rule. Telemachos’s wish to travel in search of news of Odysseus concludes with a plan for his mother’s remarriage should Odysseus be proved dead (2.220–23). With Telemachos reaching the age of maturity, and therefore marriageable age, Penelope recognizes her obligation to leave his estate as intact as possible in order for him to be able to make the best possible marriage of his own. Indeed, Telemachos, swearing by Zeus, insists to the suitors: ‘I do not delay my mother’s marriage; rather I urge her | to marry the one she wants’ (20.341–42).

Penelope’s explanation also fits with her sudden invitation to the suitors to give her gifts, in essence adding to the wealth of the household. Telemachos’s problem with sending Penelope back to Ikarios, her father, seems itself connected with wealth: ‘It will be hard | to pay back Ikarios, if willingly I dismiss my mother’ (2.132–33); this suggests that custom would dictate that, if Penelope were to be dismissed against her will, her dowry should be returned with her.⁷

The reader of the *Iliad* cannot fail to be struck by the sexual economics underlying the mar-

⁷ It may be possible to read the declarations made in public by mother and son – Penelope’s refusal to consider remarriage and Telemachos’s insistence that he cannot compel her – as evidence that the two are working in tandem, offering a performance to keep the suitors at bay.

riage test in the *Odyssey*, an echo of the idea of women as commodities. Telemachos's words to the suitors – 'here is a prize set out before you, | a woman' (20.106–07) – is a reminder of women as spoils of war in various parts of the *Iliad*, and as prizes in the funeral games of Patroklos. Yet the marriage test (and Odysseus's arrival home) also gives Telemachos the opportunity to present a different aspect of the problem: in fact, he does not want Penelope to be married off, but wants only to be rid of the suitors. He will himself enter the contest of the bow: 'if I can put the string on it and shoot through the iron, | my queenly mother would not go off with another, and leave me | sorrowing here in the house' (20.114–16).

Despite her continuing and obvious reluctance, Penelope's decision to marry essentially allows her a measure of control over the situation though the vehicle of the marriage test:

'This dawn will be a day of evil name, for it will take me
away from the house of Odysseus; for now I will set up a contest:
those axes which, in his palace, he used to set up in order
so that, twelve in all, they stood in a row, like timbers
to hold a ship. He would stand far off, and send a shaft through them.
Now I will set these up as a contest before my suitors,
and the one who takes the bow in his hands, strings it with the greatest
ease, and sends an arrow clean through all the twelve axes
shall be the one I will go away with, forsaking this house
where I was a bride, a lovely place and full of good living.
I think that even in my dreams I shall never forget it.' (19.571–81)

This speech mingles pathos, in her remembered pleasure at Odysseus's skill with the bow and her future nostalgia at memories of her happy home, with cool reasoning: if she must marry, then her new husband must be as good, in one way at least, as her old one.

Peter Jones reports a suggestion made by F. Combellack that Penelope knows that none of the suitors will be able to succeed in the marriage test, and that the test is actually another delaying tactic, like the weaving (and unpicking) of Laertes' shroud. Combellack admits that textual evidence is hard to find;⁸ yet it is not an implausible interpretation, and perhaps deserves greater attention, since it so well fits the overall pattern of the narrative.

iii. Recognition: does Amphimedon's narrative mean Penelope recognizes Odysseus earlier?

Two critical schools present arguments in favour of earlier recognition than Homer overtly depicts. The psychologists argue that Penelope 'instinctively' recognizes Odysseus in Book 19;⁹

⁸ *Homer's Odyssey. A Commentary based on the English Translation of Richmond Lattimore* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1977; repr. with minor amendments 2001), p. 174, section G.

⁹ See Jones, pp. 173–74, sections C, E, and F.

while the analysts see a confusion of several versions of the story, including one in which recognition happens at an earlier point and another in which, as the *Odyssey* presents it, recognition happens later.¹⁰ Is it possible to reconcile Amphimedon's story of a plan between Penelope and Odysseus with what Homer says about the timing of recognition?

In Book 24, Agamemnon greets Amphimedon in the house of Hades and asks him how he died. Amphimedon promises to recount the story 'truthfully' (24.123), and goes on to tell how the suitors paid court, how Penelope duped them with the shroud-weaving trick, and about the bow-contest which seems fully to mark the beginning of the end for the suitors. He echoes, formulaically, Telemachos's frequent complaint about Penelope's indecision, but concludes very differently: 'She would not refuse the hateful marriage, nor would she bring it | about, but she was planning our death and black destruction | with this other stratagem of her heart's devising' (24.126–28). Oddly, Amphimedon is not speaking here about the contest of the bow, but about the shroud-weaving trick; but how could this be linked with the 'death and black destruction' of the suitors? Amphimedon later states that Odysseus, 'in the craftiness of his mind, urged his lady | to set the bow and the gray iron in front of the suitors' (24.167–68).

Amphimedon's narrative is very different from Homer's presentation of events, in which Penelope is shown to set up the marriage test spontaneously; and it implies that husband and wife were reunited early than Book 23. Yet, if Amphimedon is telling the true version of events about the recognition of Penelope and Odysseus, at what point would the recognition occur? Book 19 is the favourite place of the analysts (Page, pp. 126–27). Why (they say) would Odysseus insist on having his feet washed by the one female servant who might recognize him? What is the purpose of the episode of Eurykleia and the scar if not recognition, and why, more particularly, have the noisy scene – remember, Odysseus's 'leg, which was in the basin, fell free, and the bronze echoed' (19.469) – played out just across the floor from where Penelope is sitting?

So can the reader reconcile these versions and, if so, how? In the foot-washing scene, Homer clearly recognizes a potential problem, since he says that 'Penelope was not able to look that way, or perceive him, | since Athene had turned aside her perception' (19.78–79). Whatever inconsistencies subsequently become apparent, Homer intends his audience to believe that Penelope does not recognize Odysseus at this time.

Penelope tells the disguised Odysseus of her intention to arrange a marriage contest, and her guest responds:

¹⁰ Jones, pp. 172–74, sections B and D; see also Page, pp. 123ff.

‘O respected wife of Odysseus, son of Laertes,
do not put off this contest in your house any longer.
Before these people can handle the well-wrought bow, and manage
to hook the string and bend it, and send a shaft through the iron,
Odysseus of the many designs will be back here with you.’ (19.583–87)

This is typical Odyssean double-speak, being simultaneously absolutely factual and remarkably ambiguous: from the speaker’s viewpoint, of course, Odysseus will be there because he already is, and the audience knows it; but from the listener’s point of view, if Penelope hopes and believes that the suitors will fail this marriage test, and further does not believe in Odysseus’s impending or eventual return, the words seem to confirm her beliefs: the ‘Old Beggar’ is agreeing that the suitors’ successful completion of the contest is as improbable as Odysseus’s return home, and vice versa. This reading is supported by Penelope’s failure to respond by articulating her disbelief in Odysseus’s return. The psychologists, however, take this to mean that Penelope has recognized her husband – but surely not, since what she does next is go to bed, where she ‘wept for Odysseus, her beloved husband, until | gray-eyed Athene cast sweet slumber over her eyelids’ (603–04). Homer seems to insist, therefore, that recognition has not yet occurred.

Both underworld scenes show plainly that the dead are not omniscient. This is the reason that the ghosts ask questions of Odysseus; for example, the shades of Agamemnon and Achilles ask Odysseus for news of their sons (11.457–61, 491–93), knowing only that they are not dead and with them in the underworld. So how would Amphimedon know whether or not Penelope and Odysseus had made plans together? Is Amphimedon’s presentation of the suitors’ death – a description whose veracity is underlined – merely the truth as he see it, his interpretation of events. This is evidence of his belief that there must have been a plan between Odysseus and Penelope, not evidence that there actually was such a plan. Reading the recognition of Penelope and Odysseus from the poet’s narrative, instead of relying on the flawed and biased evidence of one embittered ghost, allows the final reunion in Book 23 to retain not only suspense and charm, but also narrative logic. This problem of ‘inconsistency’ can be satisfactorily answered from the text.

III. PENELOPE AS HERO

The word ‘hero’ derives, via Latin, from the Greek ἥρωϛ (*heros*), a term which was originally understood as relating to ‘protector’¹¹ and eventually came to denote a warrior of extraordinary bravery and strength.

John A. Finlay states that Agamemnon’s praise of Penelope ‘comes near making our Odysseia a Penelopeia’, a story of Penelope.¹² In the context of Homeric epic, this seems to imply that he views her as more than simply a chief protagonist; yet M. I. Finley observes that “‘hero’ has no feminine gender in the age of heroes’.¹³ So, can a female character be an epic hero? If not, what is Penelope’s status, in the narrative, in the poem and in the epic tradition?

The model hero of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* demonstrates a variety of characteristics, some of which are reflected in Homer’s presentation of Penelope. These include the sponsorship of an immortal; the display of extraordinary or superior capabilities; the collection of material wealth; and the winning of κλέος (*kleos*), achieved through great honour and virtue.

i. Sponsorship by an Immortal

It is clear that Penelope is sponsored by Athene, who is, through her support of Telemachos as well as Odysseus, somewhat of a household or family god. There is no direct interaction between Athene and Penelope; but it is Athene who makes Penelope sleep when she has wept; who puts into her mind the plans for the shroud-weaving trick (Athene is surely the ‘divinity’ mentioned by Penelope at 19.138), and to spur the suitors into giving her costly gifts (18.158–62); and who makes her beautiful when Penelope refuses to wash the tears from her face (18.187–99).

Penelope is especially renowned for her intelligence. As well as supplying a useful parallel for Odysseus’s own cunning, her cleverness is overtly linked to her domestic skills through the trick of weaving and unpicking the shroud of Laertes. As stated above, both wisdom and skill in handicrafts, such as weaving, are traditionally associated with Athene. Penelope’s own brief history of the female immortals underlines this aspect of the goddess: ‘Athene instructed them in glorious handiwork’ (20.72).

¹¹ See, for instance, Douglas Harper (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2001–2013, <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php>>; ‘hero’ <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=hero&searchmode=none>> [accessed 10 December 2013]), and Thomas J. Sienkewicz (‘The Hero: Definitions’, Monmouth, IL: Monmouth College, 2003 <<http://department.monm.edu/classics/Courses/CLAS230/MythDocuments/HERODefinitions.htm>> [accessed 10 December 2013]).

¹² *Homer’s Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 3. Cf. Agamemnon’s reference to “‘the song for prudent Penelope’” (24.198).

¹³ *The World of Odysseus*, 2nd rev. edn (New York: NYRB Classics, 1978), p. 33.

ii. Superior Capabilities

Female warrior-heroines are not entirely absent from the epic canon. Virgil's Camilla is a famous example, and Homer himself refers to the Amazons (3.189; 6.186), although, of course, they are not Achaeans and the models of Greek femininity he portrays allow women no space for non-domestic roles. Penelope thus has no opportunity to display superior physical powers or any martial skills; but her courage in the face of adversity is undeniable. More pertinently, she, like Odysseus, is frequently depicted in terms of superior mental capabilities, both through her own actions and in the words of other characters; for instance, she is twice described by Antinoös as κέρδεά (*kerdea*), which Lattimore translates as 'cunning'. Jeffrey Barnouw observes that this form of the word (the plural, which has a meaning distinct from the singular noun) is 'used only for Odysseus, his family and friends, including Athene'; and Dene Grigar notes that the word 'occurs seven times in pivotal scenes of the story and [...] Homer links Odysseus to Penelope through the use of this word'.¹⁴

Homer often uses comparison to demonstrate heroic superiority. Thus, in *Iliad* 20, 'Aeneas now in his hand | caught up a stone, a huge thing which no two men could carry | such as men are now, but by himself he lightly hefted it' (20.285–87). Antinoös' praise of Penelope in Book 2 of the *Odyssey* is based on a similar comparative device:

'she is so dowered with the wisdom bestowed by Athene,
to be expert in beautiful work, to have good character
and cleverness, such as we are not told of, even of the ancient
queens, the fair-tressed Achaian women of times before us,
Tyro and Aklmene and Mykene, wearer of garlands;
for none of these knew thoughts so wise as those Penelope
knew...'

(2.116–22)

Here, Penelope's good qualities are phrased not merely as superior, but superlative: greater than any ever known in a Achaian queen.

iii. The Acquisition of Wealth

The *Iliad* begins with quarrels over women won in war and throughout presents the acquisition of possessions as a benefit of battle for the hero who survives; one key example is Achilles's lyre, 'which he won out of the spoils when he ruined Eëtion's city' (9.188). In the *Odyssey*, Telemachos is clearly impressed by Menelaos's possessions (4.71–75) and his host describes how he

¹⁴ Jeffrey Barnouw, *Odysseus, Hero of Practical Intelligence: Deliberation and Signs in Homer's 'Odyssey'* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 2004), p. 25; Dene Grigar, 'The Loom and the Weaver: Hypertext and Homer's *Odyssey*', *Computers & Texts*, 16/17 (Winter 1998) <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~ctitext2/publish/comtxt/ct16-17/grigar.html>> [accessed 9 December 2013] (para. 8 of 16).

accumulated property on his travels and thus brought wealth home to his household: ‘There may be | some man who could rival me for property, or there may be | none. Much did I suffer and wandered much before bringing | all this home in my ships’ (4.79–82). The descriptions of Odysseus’s travels, in his own words and in the poet’s, are punctuated by frequent references to his attempts to accumulate spoils or gifts in order not to return home empty-handed. The Homeric poems present adding to the wealth of the *oikos* as one of the characteristics, even perhaps one of the duties, of the hero.

Might Penelope’s solicitation of gifts from the suitors be read as fulfilling a similar function: an attempt to add to the wealth of the household? This would offer a plausible explanation for Odysseus’s unequivocal delight at her declaration that the suitors should ‘offer glorious presents’ (18.279): ‘She spoke, and much-enduring Odysseus was happy | because she beguiled gifts out of them, and enchanted their spirits | with blandishing words’ (18.282–82).

iv. Κλέος (*kleos*)

The *Iliad* frequently reiterates the association between the hero and *kleos*; for example, when Hektor speaks to Andromache of winning μέγα κλέος (*mega kleos*, ‘great fame’, 6.444); Hektor’s assessment of Nestor as a man ‘whose high fame [*kleos*] goes up to the sky’ (8.192); Homer’s description of how Iphidamas went to war, ‘looking for glory [*kleos*] | from the Achaians’ (11.227–28) or when Glaukos insults Hektor and his reputation, saying, ‘you come far short in your fighting. | That fame [*kleos*] of yours, high as it is, belongs to a runner’ (17.142-3).

The *Odyssey* reveals again and again that the importance of reputation is confined to men. One example (quoted above) is Agamemnon’s comparison of Penelope and Klytaimestra, which is framed specifically in terms of fame. In the angry exchange in the assembly in B2 of the *Odyssey*, Antinoös speaks of Penelope in terms of fame: ‘She is winning a great name | for herself’ (2.125–26). The Greek text uses the word *kleos*: ‘μέγα μὲν κλέος αὐτῇ ποιεῖτ’ (*mega men kleos autēi poieit*: on the one hand, she makes great fame for herself). Antinoös also compares Penelope to three famous Achaian queens, Tyro, Alkmene, and Mykene (2.120; the passage at greater length above); these, however, are renowned not for their intelligence or because of their own actions, but for being the ancestors of heroes (Jones, p. 22).

Penelope herself suggests the value of *kleos* to women by stating that Odysseus’s return would enhance her own fame: ‘If he were to come back to me and take care of my life, then | my reputation would be more great and splendid’ (18.254–55, repeated at 19.127–28). Dramatic irony is in operation here, since Penelope does not yet know of her husband’s return, but the

audience does and indeed can see Penelope's status, and thus her reputation, enhanced not only through Odysseus's own reputation, but also through his ultimate rejection of other women, mortal and immortal, in favour of returning to his wife.

When they first converse, the disguised Odysseus begins by praising Penelope's fame: "Lady, no mortal man on the endless earth could have cause | to find fault with you; your fame goes up into the wide heaven" (19.107–08). He goes on to compare her, using a simile, not to a virtuous woman or goddess, but to

'some king who, as a blameless man and god-fearing,
and ruling as lord over many powerful people,
upholds the way of good government, and the black earth yields him
barley and wheat, his trees are heavy with fruit, his sheepflocks
continue to bear young, the sea gives him fish, because of
his good leadership, and his people prosper under him.' (19.109–14)

Here, Odysseus outlines the role of the hero in peacetime. Note the attributes emphasized: *blameless, god-fearing, good government, good leadership*, all relating to the prosperity of the land and the people, and all elements which we have seen evaluated during the travels of Odysseus and Telemachos. The comparison has greater resonance since Odysseus has not yet revealed his identity to Penelope: beneath the polite compliments of a stranger lies the unqualified praise of a great hero who has come back to find his estates well kept, his heir well brought up, his wife's conduct beyond question and her reputation unsullied; and so he compares her to a strong and virtuous leader, a king, a hero.

There are several ways in which Homer presents Penelope's virtues in terms familiar from his presentation of (male) heroes: the link with an immortal; a kind of prowess through the skills of intellect (and handicrafts), superior to that not only of her peers, but also to the suitors, who discover they have been tricked by her only because the secret is betrayed; the collection of spoils as Penelope attempts to preserve and augment the wealth of the household; and her *kleos*, her uncompromised reputation.

There is another element which might be seen to provide a parallel between Penelope and the Homeric hero. Penelope's response to her final reunion with Odysseus is expressed by Homer through an extended simile which suggests a parallel between the suffering of husband and wife:

He wept as he held his lovely wife, whose thoughts were virtuous.
And as when the land appears welcome to men who are swimming,
after Poseidon has smashed their strong-built ship on the open
water, pounding it with the weight of wind and the heavy
seas, and only a few escape the gray water landward
by swimming, with a thick scurf of salt coated upon them,

and gladly they set foot on the shore, escaping the evil;
so welcome was her husband to her as she looked upon him,
and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms. (23.233–40)

It is both intriguing and apt that a simile describing Penelope's joyful acceptance of her husband should draw on images and language which strongly remind the audience of Odysseus's own maritime struggles. From his adventures, and those of other heroes — Agamemnon, Achilles, Hektor — it seems that suffering (or 'long-suffering' as Odysseus's epithet has it) is part of the heroic experience, part of the *kleos* itself. And Penelope certainly suffers.

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¹⁵ A excellent resource of online classical texts in original language, with English translations and hyperlink glossaries.