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Penelope, Unsung Hero

One of the key attributes of an epic hero is that he is almost always a man. The Odyssey challenges this traditional paradigm in that Penelope, wife of the protagonist Odysseus, is portrayed as an equal counterpart both in the pain she endures while he is away, as well as in the commonalities of their superior wit as a means of triumphing over their enemies. Indeed, Homer elevates Penelope to the heroic stature of her husband by giving them both the heroic traits of having a strong heart (emotional heroism) and mind (mental heroism). Nevertheless, her triumphs at home are often overshadowed by Odysseus’s mythological feats away (which is likely why Odysseus, rather than Penelope, is this epic’s namesake).

After twenty years of separation from Odysseus and without any knowledge of his whereabouts or if he is even alive, the forlorn Penelope never loses faith that her wayward husband will return home. Odysseus, however, is more remembered for his long wait to return home than Penelope is for waiting for Odysseus because he not only faces the emotional turmoil of separation, but also the bewildering obstacles in his way. This would be a fair treatment of their respective situations if it did not fail to take into account the fact that by the time Odysseus reaches Hades, he knows that Penelope is still alive whereas Penelope has no idea of the condition of Odysseus the entire time he is away.

Still, the fact that Odysseus and Penelope have a mutual faith that the other has not moved on shows an almost supernatural trust and love of heroic proportions. Indeed, just as Odysseus is a forlorn prisoner on Calypso’s island, Penelope is on an island of her own solitary confinement, day by day wondering when Odysseus will return. Penelope’s resolve in spite of this uncertain future therefore strengthens her heroic heart as the anguish she feels is marked upon on numerous occasions. For instance, when Eumaios says, “always with her the wretched nights and days also waste her away with weeping.”

The significance

of Penelope crying night and day but still remaining resolute in her faith that Odysseus will return further solidifies her emotional heroism. The reciprocal nature of Odysseus’ and Penelope’s emotional heroism is shown by the lengths they would go to be reunited: they would both give their lives to see each other again. While Odysseus forgoes the prospect of immortality proposed to him by Calypso noting the beauty that lies in death by saying, “My quiet Penelope—how well I know—would seem a shade before your majesty, death and old age being unknown to you, while she must die” (5.225-8). Penelope appeals to the goddess Artemis asking, “How I wish chaste Artemis would give me a death so soft, and now, so I would not go on in my heart grieving all my life, and longing for love of a husband excellent in every virtue” (18.202-204). The emotional aspect of the Homeric hero is presented as equal in Penelope and Odysseus as they would both courageously give their lives to be together again, which transcends normal love.

Penelope achieves a heroic status in the cleverness she shows in the face of the adversity that the gluttonous suitors present her. Though Odysseus’ triumphs over monsters such as the one-eyed beast Polyphemos or the sea monster Skylla are perhaps more exciting and memorable, his feats are no more valiant nor require more wit than do Penelope’s efforts in delaying her marriage with the suitors. With her son Telemachos not being quite old enough to ward off the suitors and her husband ostensibly trying to make his way home, Penelope uses her mind to out-maneuver her adversaries, just as Odysseus does his. Certainly, Penelope displays the mental aspect of the Homeric hero when she intentionally unravels a burial shroud for Odysseus’ father Laertes after claiming that once she finished making it she would pick a suitor. Homer emphasizes her cunning mind when Antinoös, one of the leading suitors who finds out about her trickery says, “Wits like Penelope’s never were before” (2.129). Penelope’s intelligence is highlighted by fact that, in a society in which honor (kleos) was paramount, Antinoös still commends her on her superior wit even after being duped. Again, Penelope exemplifies the mental aspect of the Homeric hero when she comes up with the contest for the suitors to shoot an arrow through twelve axe heads using Odysseus’ bow, a task which she knows only Odysseus could accomplish. Her mental fortitude is shown in her coura-
geous and firm tone when she addresses the suitors saying, “suitors indeed, you commandeered this to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband being long gone. You found no justification for yourselves--none except your lust to marry me” (21.72-76). Here it is clear that Penelope is confident in her scheme otherwise she would not dare speak so boldly and derisively. Thus, like Odysseus, Penelope time and again uses her quick wit to subdue her enemies therefore equalizing their heroic statuses.

Penelope does not fight monsters; she does not incur the wrath of the gods; she does not journey to the depths of Hades to be reunited with Odysseus. What Penelope does is wait. She waits for twenty years without a clue as to where her husband is, whether he will ever return, and whether she will be forced to take the hand of one of the despicable suitors. Because Odysseus undergoes countless obstacles, continuously exhibiting his heroism on his journey home, Penelope’s heroism at home can be overlooked. This, however, is a grave injustice to Penelope. It is with Penelope’s mental fortitude that the suitors are kept at bay and with her indomitable heart that she never gives up hope Odysseus will come home, by which she achieves a heroic status equal to that of Odysseus.

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**ANALECTS OF THE CORE**

Laozi: He who knows others is wise; he who knows himself is enlightened.

Bhagavad Gita: Dwelling compassionately / Deep in the self, / I dispel the darkness born of ignorance / with the radiant light of knowledge.

Paradise Lost: Long is the way and hard, that out of Hell leads up to light.