

Greek female loyalty

Business



In the epic poem, the *Odyssey*, written by Homer, the fates of the heroes Agamemnon and Odysseus both lie, at least partially, in the hands of their wives, Penelope and Clytemnestra, women capable of wielding power over or in the service of their husbands. The *Odyssey* clearly contrasts the qualities of Greek women by demonstrating the fates of these two heroes' wives.

Penelope represents the ideal Greek woman because of her ability to resist the suitors, her ability to wield power and strategize in the service of her husband, and her trusting relationship with her husband.

In direct contrast, Clytemnestra embodies the most horrific wife imaginable in her submission to the temptation of suitor, Aegisthus, who is a known rival to her husband, and her strategic power over her husband, with the help of her suitor. Penelope's role in the *Odyssey* as the representative of the ideal Greek wife originates from her ability to wield strategic power over her suitors, and her submission to the power of her husband in the form of her grief. In both of her schemes, every action Penelope takes is in Odysseus' best interest. Though she expresses her total disgust with the suitors freely and without a thought, she does not possess enough strategic or physical power as a woman against hundreds of the most powerful lords in the land to drive the suitors out of her palace. Instead, she devises a plan to pacify the impatient suitors with the excuse of weaving a funeral shroud for Odysseus' father, Laertes, in order to resist marriage as long as she can.

She seduces the power-hungry suitors with her speech: " Young men, / my suitors, now that King Odysseus is no more, / go slowly, keen as you are to marry me, until / I can finish off this web" (Bk. 19, ll. 156-159). The suitors' naive faith in her demonstrates her obvious authority over them, a

dominance that continues three years until a maid informs them of her scheme. In another instance of her loyalty to Odysseus, Penelope grieves for him countless times during his absence, disgusted with the idea of a marriage to a villainous and wasteful suitor.

When Odysseus finally returns, disguised as a beggar, she recognizes him, as Homer hints when she calls to Eurycleia: “ come and wash your master’s...equal in years” (Bk. 19, ll. 406).

Penelope’s pause is her only slip of the tongue when trying to protect her husband’s identity. Penelope defends her husband instead by formulating a plan to humiliate her suitors and encourage false hope for marriage with an impossible contest, again asserting her dominance over lesser men (but not her husband). The contest puts a weapon into Odysseus’ hands, thereby giving Odysseus the opportunity to reassert his dominance (Bk. 19, ll. 645-651).

Homer represents Penelope’s actions as the actions of an ideal Greek woman, motivated by one objective: loyalty to her husband. Penelope represents the Greek ideal in the type of suitor that she attracts and her ability to resist them, demonstrating her desirability as a wife. Though the suitors are the most powerful men in the area, their ultimate goal is Odysseus’ throne and not Penelope’s bed because they know that they won’t be able to seduce her, a testament to her character. When Penelope shares her grievances with the beggar (Odysseus in disguise) she expresses the difficulty in fending off Ithaca’s leaders: “ all the nobles who rule the islands

round about, /... / and all who lord it in sunny Ithaca itself—they court me against my will” (Bk. 19, ll. 145-148).

The suitors “ rush the marriage on” (Bk. 19, ll. 152) and pressure Penelope because they long to sit on the king’s throne, but make no effort to woo her, with their abhorrent behavior. If the suitors desired to share her bed more than take her husband’s power, they would never have laid “ waste to... [Penelope’s] house” (Bk. 19, ll.

148) or called her a “ matchless queen of cunning” (Bk. 2, ll. 95) at the public assembly; they would shower her with gifts and pray to the gods to “ lie beside her” (Bk. 18, ll. 242), as they do only when she descends the stairs with her beauty renewed. Penelope’s fame for her discretion and loyalty has already spread so far and she holds such a powerful position that she attracts power-hungry suitors who make no effort to sleep with her because they know that it is impossible, therefore demonstrating her impeccability of character and loyalty to Odysseus.

Odysseus and Penelope have the ideal Greek marriage, especially demonstrated by the level of trust that Odysseus has in Penelope. Twenty years before, Odysseus departed for Troy, entrusting the rule and the responsibility of the whole of Ithaca to Penelope, showing his belief in her. Odysseus’ faith in Penelope’s loyalty and ability to rule further validates her eternal fame as the ideal Greek woman. Agamemnon rejoices in the underworld when he discovers the suitors’ death and Penelope’s loyalty, “ the fame of her [Penelope’s] great virtue will never die. / The immortal gods

will lift a song for all mankind, / a glorious song in praise of self-possessed Penelope.” (Bk.

24, ll. 216-218). Odysseus and Penelope are fated to live happily until they die of old age, Homer’s demonstration that the ideal woman in the ideal marriage will have the ideal ending. Clytemnestra’s ability to wield strategic power over her husband and her submission to Aegisthus’ power cause her damnation and infamy as a wife with the most undesirable qualities possible. One of the main distinctions between her nature and Penelope’s nature is her lack of ability to resist a lover when she theoretically should have remained faithful to Agamemnon while he was away at war. Agamemnon clearly lacked the faith in Clytemnestra that Odysseus had in Penelope, as King Nestor reveals to Telemachus: “ there was a man, what’s more, a bard close by, / to whom Agamemnon, setting sail for Troy, / gave strict commands to guard his wife” (Bk.

3, ll. 304-306). Though Agamemnon left her in charge of his lands, it was not without strict supervision and a justified mistrust of his wife. Clytemnestra originally resists Aegisthus’ seduction, similarly to Penelope, as King Nestor continues to tell Telemachus the story of Agamemnon’s death: “ at first, true, she spurned the idea of such an outrage, / Clytemnestra the queen, her will was faithful still” (Bk. 3, ll. 302-303).

Still, her will only remains impenetrable while the bard persists at her side. As soon as Aegisthus ships the bard to a deserted island, he happily snatches his lover and her loyalty. Aegisthus, as a suitor, is very different from Penelope’s suitors, who are all noble lords and men lusting for power.

Aegisthus, son of Atreus' rival brother, Thyestes (Hamilton), hungered for Agamemnon's throne and power and an affair with Clytemnestra, making Clytemnestra's affair not only traitorous to her marriage and her duty to the Mycenaean throne, but also to Agamemnon's side of the longstanding familial rivalry by backing Thyestes' son. Her betrayal of Agamemnon at several levels leads her to a degree of damnation that " bathes in shame / not only herself but the whole breed of womankind, / even the honest ones to come, forever down the years!" (Bk.

11, ll. 490-492). Not only will her infamy grow, but also her own son, Orestes, will send hers and Aegisthus' damned souls flying down to Hades. Homer's portrays Clytemnestra as the opposite of Penelope in her actions and her nature, and her ultimate fate underlines her depiction as the most flawed wife. The Odyssey presents Penelope and Clytemnestra as wives with qualities considered to be the best and worst in ancient Greek society, and the epic poem emphasizes the sentiment with their respective deaths and reputations after their stories have been told. Penelope, with her loyalty, her cunning, her power against her husband's opposers and her submission to her husband result in her eternal renown as the most desirable woman with the most ideal qualities.

Clytemnestra's betrayals on multiple levels lead her to fame as the worst wife possible with the least idealistic qualities. Homer's narration of Penelope and Clytemnestra's stories show that the most important and ideal trait possible for a Greek woman is loyalty and devotion to one's husband.

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