

Penelope: A Female Heroin Worthy of Admiration

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The Classical world has always been a source of many memorable historical and mythological figures who have played an important role in both ancient and modern societies. Many of these figures were not only respected in their own societies but are also greatly esteemed even in modern times. Although many such characters come to mind, the one who I admire the most is the mythological figure Penelope.

In Homer's epic, *The Odyssey*, Penelope is the exceedingly patient and clever wife of the famous hero, Odysseus, and the mother of Telemachus. For nearly twenty years, she has been waiting for her husband to return from the Trojan War, all the while economically maintaining their estate on the island of Ithaca, and raising her son on her own. During this time, she had many suitors who persistently pursue her and take advantage of her husband's absence. Although a wife in a male-dominated society, Penelope takes on the role of a female heroine and capably deals with those all-consuming suitors. A patient woman and a devoted wife, she displays exceptional intelligence and is able to control a situation without appearing to do so.

One important aspect of Penelope's character which I find admirable is her patience and devotion which is displayed throughout the poem. With her husband absent from her life for the past twenty years and his whereabouts unknown, Penelope remains, patiently awaiting Odysseus' return. After such an extended time period, Penelope would have been allowed to remarry; nevertheless, she is determined to wait for her husband even though there is little hope of his return (Harris and Platzner 352). Due to her patience and loyalty, Penelope remains devoted to her marriage and family, however she is not without temptation. During Odysseus' absence she is being constantly pressured by several suitors into marriage, nevertheless, Penelope strives to maintain her loyalty and devotion to her beliefs which are important to her. When referring to Athena his mother's situation with the suitors, Telemachus states that, "she [Penelope] will neither reject this odious marriage, nor can she make herself carry it through" (1.249-250). This statement shows that Penelope recognizes the dangers of refusing marriage to one of the suitors, yet she remains faithful to her love for Odysseus and her belief of his safe return. This aspect of Penelope may, at times, seem naïve to us, yet I still find her devotion and patience admirable because in the future I hope to become a teacher and to show such patience and devotion to my own students.

In addition to Penelope's utmost devotion and patience, I also admire her intelligence. Throughout *The Odyssey*, Penelope's intelligence matches that of her husband's, who is well known for his cleverness. It is this aspect that allows Penelope to remain devoted to her husband. One example of her intelligence is the test she develops to help her Odysseus on this return. This test effectively arms her husband giving him the opportunity to kill the suitors who have been eating them out of house and home. Penelope decides that she will marry the man who is able to string Odysseus' bow and

shoot an arrow through twelve ax heads (19.572-580). Not only does this allow her husband to be armed, but it also provides a reasonable test to be sure that Odysseus is truly her husband. A woman in her position could have been easily taken advantage of by an imposter. This demonstrates that her intelligence has made her cautious and wise, another characteristic that I admire in her.

It is Penelope's intelligence which allows her to exhibit a large extent of control over her situation. In ancient times, women were considered weaker to men, and therefore were generally subject to them. However, Penelope manipulates her suitors without violating the social role of women in ancient Greek society. Although her house is being invaded by many suitors who are killing their flocks for food and pressuring her into marriage, she is not a passive victim waiting to be rescued (Harris and Platzner 352). Penelope does not violently revolt against the suitors, but she uses her intelligence to hold them off for several years, in hopes that her husband may return. Staying within her female role, she delays the suitors by promising to choose a suitor when she finishes making a burial shroud for her father-in-law. Penelope works on this shroud each night but secretly unravels it before morning, effectively delaying the suitors for several years.

A second example in which Penelope takes control of her situation is at Odysseus' return. After her husband kills the suitors, she does not welcome him, but remains cautious, and develops a second test to ensure that he is indeed Odysseus. Once again, her intelligence helps her to take control of her situation. This test consists of her calling for the nurse to bring the bed out of her room and "after bringing the stout bedstead, put bedding upon it" (23.179). By doing this, Penelope is able to see if Odysseus still remembers the secret of their marriage bed, that it is a part of the house and it cannot be removed. Through this test, Penelope is able to determine if Odysseus is the same man that he was, and if he is worthy enough for her to take back as a husband. Penelope is worthy of admiration because being a woman, she is disadvantaged in her society, yet she does not give up hope and does all that she can to take advantage of the situation. She is an ambitious character who knows what she wants from life.

Although there are many figures of the classical world who are worthy of esteem, the one that I admire the most is Penelope. An exceptionally intelligent woman, the patient and devoted wife of the famous hero Odysseus, Penelope takes advantage of her situation while remaining within social norms. Never giving up her beliefs and hopes, she is truly a figure worthy of admiration.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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