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Spring 2017

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Recommended Citation

Burrow, Ar'Meishia, "ENG 200: A Heroine in Her Own Right: A Character Analysis of Penelope in The Penelopiad" (2017). *English 100-200-300 Conference*. Paper 5.
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English 200

2 December 2016

A Heroine in Her Own Right: A Character Analysis of Penelope in *The Penelopiad*

When reading or viewing a text one must always keep in mind the perspective. It is amazing how much the point of view of the text impacts the interpretation of the story. Through our study of connections between Ancient and Contemporary Literature I have seen this direct relationship demonstrated clearly in Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Penelopiad*, written by Margaret Atwood. In studying the latter novel I have developed a deeper appreciation and respect for the character Penelope, wife of Odysseus, for her resilience, endurance, and intelligence. With those three characteristics Penelope becomes the captain of her own ship and uses her strengths to outwit her oppressors. In reading her perspective of the well-known story of her husband's voyage across the sea I have found many parallels between her and myself.

From an early age Penelope learns how to recover from difficulty. This often came from her experiences with the men in her life. Her first encounter with this occurs when her father, King Icarius of Sparta, orders her to be thrown into the sea (Atwood 8). This moment in her childhood wounds her relationship with her father and affects her relationships with others in the future. "It is to this episode – or rather, to my knowledge of it – that I attribute my reserve, as well as my mistrust of other people's intentions," Penelope says (Atwood 9). Her father's betrayal and neglect causes her to be guarded and apprehensive when in contact with other people, especially men. I empathize with Penelope because my father neglected me. My parents conceived me when they were teenagers, and the tension and disagreements between them

quickly resulted in the deterioration of their relationship. With the abandonment of his relationship with my mother, my father also abandoned me; to this day we do not speak to each other. For years I mourned his absence and blamed myself for his absenteeism. I questioned what was wrong with me and why I was not worthy of his love or attention. I imagine that Penelope battled with some of the same questions and insecurities that I did when she learned of her father's actions. Throughout *The Penelopiad* I see how this experience with her father affects her relationship with Odysseus. Penelope always aims to please him, which wins her the reputation of the virtuous, faithful, and devoted wife. I do not believe her commitment was solely based upon her delight of submission to her husband but also upon her innate desire to be loved and accepted herself. The self-inflicted standard of perfectionism is something that I am familiar with as is Penelope. We both believe that if we are perfect enough people will be obligated to love us and treat us well. This is the result of the void created by an estranged relationship with a father.

Unfortunately, Penelope does not have a close relationship with her mother either. Her lack of affection and absent-mindedness forces Penelope to master the art of self-sufficiency (Atwood 11). "I knew that I would have to look out for myself in the world. I could hardly count on family support," says Penelope (Atwood 11). While I do have support from loved ones I have been taught and trained by the women in my family to never depend on a man. My mother's struggle as a single, teen mother heavily influenced her strict parenting style, which bore the fruits of a disciplined child who did not trust men. The majority of the women in my family are single or divorced mothers who work tirelessly to efficiently handle the tough job of parenting alone although it was originally meant for two people. Observing this has fueled my ambition and is the reason why my perfectionist spirit makes me a very competitive student in the classroom. I am always pushing myself to achieve as much as possible in hopes that I will

become self-reliant and never have to face the vulnerability and desperation of depending on someone of the opposite sex who has the potential of neglecting me. Because Penelope is a princess in the ancient times of male domination, she does not have the option of independence and is arranged to marry Odysseus, a man she will come second to for the rest of her life.

The marriage of Penelope is not based upon love but rather the results of a barter system between men. Penelope is included as part of the cargo with no consideration of how she feels about the trade. She says that, "The man who won the contest got the woman and the wedding, and was then expected to stay at the bride's father's palace to contribute his share of male offspring. He obtained wealth through the marriage..." (Atwood 26). The text clearly shows that Penelope is seen as nothing to the men but property that will bear the ultimate gift, a child. This is similar to someone purchasing a cow only to obtain the milk. Penelope also explains that the purpose of children are alliances to protect and defend their materialistic treasures and says that, "Through children, alliances are forged; through children, wrongs are avenged. To have a child was to set loose a force in the world" (Atwood 24). This shows me that the men of this time do not value women outside of childbirth. Their political and economic strategy of securing their wealth is to have children who are obligated to protect them. This is absurd. I do not believe that women should be viewed as toaster ovens that pop out products like a machine. They are strong bearers of human life who endure the excruciating process of labor and courageously take on the great responsibility of raising a child and shaping them into the men and women they eventually become. I believe this because I have seen the women in my family sacrifice and face obstacles daily as mothers and respect them because of it.

"And so I was handed over to Odysseus, like a package of meat", says Penelope when describing her marriage to Odysseus (Atwood 39). Involuntarily, Odysseus purchases her like a

perishable food item at the grocery store. In that moment she becomes the queen of Ithaca and holds the responsibility of keeping her husband happy and well taken care of. She says, “I was clever, everyone said so – in fact they said it so much that I found it discouraging – but cleverness is a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is some distance away from him” (Atwood 29). I understand from this line that her intelligence and skill were appreciated as long as they remained in the confines of her role as his woman. I know from experiences in past relationships that men only value a bright woman when she is not an intimidation or threat to his power. In the same way Penelope will always come second to wily Odysseus. This was even the case in intimacy. “Once he’d finished making love, Odysseus always liked to talk to me,” says Penelope, which shows that she was not a willing or enthused participant in the act (Atwood 74). Her body was of service to her husband and her desires were once again out of mind.

It is not until Odysseus’ departure for the Trojan War that Penelope is able to use her skills and intelligence to their full potential. She kept inventory of all of Ithaca’s possessions and bargained cleverly to build up the estates to increase their wealth (Atwood 88). However, her talents were still used to please her husband when he returned. “I had such a clear picture in mind – Odysseus returning, and me with womanly modesty – revealing to him how well I had done at what was usually considered a man’s business. On his behalf, of course. Always for him,” she says (Atwood 88). This shows that Penelope’s relationship with her father still affects her as an adult. She still seeks approval from the man she loves. This is an ongoing battle in my academic and personal life as well. There has always been an underlying need for validation, which stems from a yearning to be loved by the ones I care about the most, and there is often fear of whether or not that care and love will be reciprocated.

Despite their distant relationship Penelope's mother gives her advice that she will use in strategic combat with the suitors who rampage her palace while Odysseus is away. Her mother says, "Behave like water... Don't try to oppose them. When they try to grasp you, slip through their fingers. Flow around them" (Atwood 108). Penelope uses her intelligence to do just that in order to delay her decision to remarry in hopes that her husband would return to Ithaca. She says she must complete a woven shroud for her father-in-law before she can choose a new husband. She works on it all day and then at night she would undo her progress (Atwood 112). Penelope outsmarts the suitors and is able to delay the decision for years (Atwood 113). Penelope has gumption and courageously uses her wit to trick the suitors since she cannot overpower them with physical strength; this is admirable. Her scheming and plotting allowed her to brilliantly 'flow like water' by the men who invade her home. She is also wily like her husband and persuades her maids to play double agents to receive information about the suitors' plans (Atwood 117). When Odysseus returns home disguised as a beggar she aids him in his victory over the suitors by coming up with a bow-and-arrow contest that she knew only he could win (Atwood 139).

Before analyzing the character of Penelope I did not imagine that we would share many similarities. In Homer's *Odyssey* her background and perspective on her husband's time away is not shared. This caused me to think that Penelope was a minor character with static qualities. In Homer's novel I see her as just a lady in waiting who is devoted to her husband desperate for his return. In *The Penelopiad* she is the protagonist, the heroine, who does not spend twenty years in her chamber crying as Homer's story says but uses her time to get her home back in order for when Odysseus comes home. Despite my past experiences with men and love for self-sufficiency I do value relationship. I like the idea of shared responsibility and dependency in a relationship;

it should be people working as a team. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope shows that her resilience as a child, her endurance in times of misogyny, and her intelligence make her deserving of a equal role in her marriage and rule in Ithaca. Penelope is a heroine because she saved herself and her kingdom from the oppression of the suitors without the guidance of a man.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. New York: Canongate Books Ltd. 2005. Print.