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Female Ethics and Epic Rivalry: Helen in the *Iliad* and Penelope in the *Odyssey*

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Note: all text translations will be Wilson, unless otherwise stated.

Lesser argues not only the ethical opposition between Penelope and Helen, but that "Penelope and the Iliadic Helen are put into an *intertextual* dialogue as part of an epic rivalry between *Odyssey* and *Iliad* traditions, and as a female counterpart to the competing heroisms of Odysseus and Achilles." (190)

Why compare Odysseus and Achilles?

Demodocus (*Odyssey* 8.72-83) sings of a tradition of quarrel between the two men:

"When they were satisfied, the Muse prompted the bard to sing of famous actions, an episode whose fame has touched the sky: Achilles' and Odysseus' quarrel—how at a splendid sacrificial feast, they argued bitterly, and Agamemnon was glad because the best of the Achaeans were quarreling, since when he had consulted the oracle at Pytho, crossing over the entry stone, Apollo had foretold that this would be the start of suffering for Greeks and Trojans, through the plans of Zeus."

They represent two entirely different ways of life

Achilles is younger, stronger, swifter, has a passion for warfare, and his fame is tied to his death.

Odysseus is older but more cunning, a hero of tricks and disguises, and his fame is dependent on his survival and journey home.

Some scholars also point out that not only does the *Odyssey* contain its own heroic and ethical model, but it demonstrates Iliadic heroism in the form of Odysseus taking on an "Achillean" role as he slaughters the suitors.

Theories for intertextuality between the epics

The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* developed simultaneously, each avoiding the content of the other.

The *Odyssey* is "dependent" on the *Iliad* since it does not contain any of the same content. The poet/poets were specifically avoiding any information that was covered in the previous epic.

This has a caveat of accepting that the *Odyssey* postdates the *Iliad*.

Lesser believes this theory, although she also says it is likely the two had a period where they competed alongside each other, and were possibly revised later in reflection of one another.

Penelope and Helen as counterparts for Odysseus and Achilles

Penelope is like-minded to Odysseus; they are both "defined by their cleverness,

endurance, and capacity for self-control." (195)

She is also one of the main driving factors for Odysseus, who wants to return, not only to Ithaca, but to Penelope.

Helen is the female counterpart to Achilles, although less directly, since they never meet face to face.

Achilles's fame is dependent on Helen, since she is the cause of the war.

They are both the "best of their respective sexes in physical form and capability." (196)

They observe the suffering they have brought from a distance.

Interesting comparison! In book 3 of the *Iliad*, Helen is seen weaving a giant tapestry of conflict (this will come up again later); she is the literal "creator of the war." In book 9, Achilles sings of the "fames of men" while the war continues around him, as if he is telling the stories of the conflict around him, without participating in it.

"Penelope's character contributes to the *Odyssey's* celebration of mental power, as she matches the intellectual acuity of her male narrative counterpart, Odysseus. On the other hand, Helen's capacity to see—in addition to the disarming effect of her being seen—adds to the *Iliad's* glorification of physical capability, represented most obviously by her narrative counterpart, the beautiful and "swift-footed" warrior Achilles." (220)

Comparisons of Helen and Penelope

Penelope's fidelity and Helen's infidelity are what make them the heroines of these epics; they are both subjects and objects.

Helen and Penelope both weave a "giant web" (μέγαν ἱστὸν/mégan híston)

Penelope's textile is never described, seemingly deliberately, because its importance lies in its purpose, not its content.

"Her weaving thus expresses, on the manifest level, her devotion to her husband's family and presents her as a woman who is concerned with other women's judgements of her and who fears becoming an object of nemesis; that is, she has a clear sense of shame." (197)

Penelope also unweaves, which is a resistance to the temporal progression of the epic.

It is a passive act that represents her "immobile resistance to infidelity." (198)

Helen's aforementioned weaving is representative of her role in pushing the narrative forward, since she is actively creating the scenes of war that we read.

Helen is a catalyst, while Penelope preserves the status quo.

It is arguable whether or not Helen went with Paris willingly, although I did notice an interesting comparison between Lesser's own translation and Wilson's. During the Teichoskopia, Wilson's version is much more vague on whether or not Helen chose to go with Paris (*Iliad* 3.172-6):

""To me you are venerable, dear father-in-law, and a source of awe. Would that evil death had pleased me, when here I followed your son, having left my

marriage chamber and relatives and late-born daughter and lovely group of friends. But these things were not to be; also weeping for this I have melted." (Lesser)

"Father-in-law, I love you and respect you. I wish I had chosen painful death the day I came here with your son and left my bedroom, kinsmen, late-born precious daughter and cherished group of women friends. I did not. That is why I have melted into tears." (Wilson)

This distinction is important when reading Odyssean Helen's recounting of the same event. In both translations, Helen deflects blame onto Aphrodite. In Wilson's translation, it is feasible that Aphrodite was to blame the entire time, whereas Helen "following" Paris in Lesser's translation puts Helen in a much more active role (*Odyssey* 4.259-64):

"Then the other Trojan women keened piercingly, but my heart rejoiced, since already my heart had turned to sail back home, and I was lamenting in retrospect the delusion which Aphrodite bestowed, when she led me there from my dear fatherland, having abandoned my daughter and marriage chamber and husband, who was not lacking in anything, neither with respect to wits nor form." (Lesser)

"The Trojan women keened in grief, but I was glad—by then I wanted to go home. I wished that Aphrodite had not made me go crazy, when she took me from my country, and made me leave my daughter and the bed I shared with my fine, handsome, clever husband." (Wilson)

Penelope acknowledges Helen in book 23 of the *Odyssey*, subverting her role as an adulteress and making her out to be weak and easily swayed by others, while also emphasizing her own restraint in not giving in to the same temptations (23.213-24):

"Please forgive me, do not keep bearing a grudge because when I first saw you, I would not welcome you immediately. I felt a constant dread that some bad man would cool me with his lies. There are so many dishonest, clever men. The foreigner would never have got Helen into bed, if she had known the Greeks would march to war and bring her home again. It was a goddess who made her do it, putting in her heart the passion that first caused my grief as well."

I have some thoughts on this.

Later, Lesser notes the scene where Aphrodite has Helen go to bed with Paris in book 3 of the *Iliad*, saying "Helen clearly has a choice here, even if it is an unpleasant one, and she actively chooses to go to Paris. She appears to be a conscious agent struggling against and finally succumbing to the transgressive desire for Paris that Aphrodite both enforces and represents." (213)

I do not fully agree with this. Even if we are to believe that Aphrodite is *not* arousing desire for Paris in Helen, which I fully believe she is, I think it only *seems* Helen has a choice in this situation. She can either sleep with Paris, or Aphrodite will either kill her or irreparably ruin her honor and reputation, which really isn't much of a choice.

"Glorious Aphrodite, furious, said, "Stubborn girl! You must not make me angry, or in my rage I will abandon you, and start to loathe you with as deep a passion as I have loved you as my friend till now. I shall devise a strategy to make you loathed and abhorred by both the Greeks and Trojans, and you shall die a dreadful death." At this, Helen, the child of Zeus, was terrified." (3.413-18)

It is to be noted that Iliadic Helen and Odyssean Helen are practically two different characters.

"Whereas Helen lamenting her actions appears in the *Iliad* as a powerful, conscious agent whose loyalties remain uncertain, the *Odyssey* refashions that same Helen into a less powerful, less clear-sighted, and less subversive character, who has been blindly manipulated by a goddess despite her love for Menelaus." (202)

She has been "redomesticated"

Helen's uncertain character in the *Iliad* makes her "more acceptable and sympathetic to the epic's audience than she would have been as an unrepentant adulterer, and more interesting and empowered than if she were a rape victim." (218)

Other comparisons

Helen, and the *Iliad* in general, is associated with the theme of movement.

Every major female character in the *Iliad* has been or ultimately will be displaced from their homeland (e.g. Helen, Chryseis, Briseis, Andromache (after the death of Hector), and a multitude of unnamed female slaves).

Penelope, as well as all other female characters of the *Odyssey*, are "immobile," confined to their islands and giving Odysseus the opportunity to sail away from them if he chooses (e.g. Penelope, Scylla, Charybdis, the Sirens, Circe, Calypso, Nausicaa, AND Helen, who has returned to Sparta).

Penelope's desire for Odysseus is consistently referred to using the word "pothē," which describes a longing for someone who is absent, and is dependent on memory.

Sustained and autonomous

Helen's desire for Menelaus is termed "himeros," which is similar to "eros," or a sudden urge brought on by something outside of oneself.

In this case, Helen's longing is stirred by Iris (*Iliad* 3.139-40), and her memory of Menelaus does not last, only resurfacing when she sees him or Agamemnon.

Remember when Helen was characterized by her sight? This is why—she only longs for her past life when she is watching the Greeks from the wall. Helen is also able to instantly recognize Aphrodite in book 3, although she has disguised herself.

Penelope, in her relenting to marry whoever wins the bow contest, is performing a similar action to Helen, but with great pain to herself, and only spurred on by pressures from the suitors and her parents, and her desire to benefit

Telemachus and prevent any more of his inheritance from being wasted.

Language parallels

Helen expresses the unreality of her former life, using the words "εἴ ποτ' ἔην γε" ("eí pot' éin ge" - something along the lines of "if ever you were," *Iliad* 3.180) during the Teichoskopia to ask if Agamemnon was ever really her brother-in-law.

Her longing for her past life is only brought on by her seeing the Atreidai, making her wonder if the Agamemnon she is viewing was really ever related to her.

Penelope uses this same phrase in book 19 (line 315) of the *Odyssey* to ask if Odysseus ever really existed.

Penelope does not need to see Odysseus to long for him, and she is asking whether the Odysseus she has been imagining all this time ever existed at all.

They also both describe themselves as "melting" in their grief for their husbands.

Helen - *Iliad* 3.176

Penelope - *Odyssey* 19.136

Odysseus (in disguise, telling Penelope not to melt in her heart for him) - *Odyssey* 19.263

Both wish to die, specifically by storm winds

Helen - *Iliad* 6.345-8

Penelope - *Odyssey* 20.61-5

Helen's wish of death is of no cost to her, since it wouldn't change her infidelity.

Penelope's death would be one of self-sacrifice, preserving her marriage to Odysseus.

Lesser's concluding thoughts on intertextuality, comparisons, and morality

Lesser explores a couple other ways the epics can share an intertextuality by comparing some of Helen and Odysseus's lines (specifically Helen saying she was at Troy for 20 years while mourning Hector), but I think it's generally a stretch and not that believable.

Morality is less important in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*

Odysseus and Penelope earn their happy ending because of their fidelity and piety, whereas the "amoral" slave-women and suitors are killed.

Characters such as Andromache are not rewarded for fidelity; Andromache must still endure Hector's death and her own eventual enslavement.

Helen is unfaithful, and yet she is still desired by the male characters, and, arguably, gets her happy ending if we take into account her apparent desire to return to Menelaus.

The *Odyssey's* ending is much more akin to comedy, since the outcomes of each character differ on whether they are "good" or "bad."

On the other hand, the ending of the *Iliad* is more akin to tragedy, since

the central characters all have endings of death or grief. She also argues that Penelope's "scheming and patient fidelity" (217) is crucial for the successful conclusion of the *Odyssey*. In order to have a heroine of equal importance to Penelope, Helen's decisions need to matter, which is why it would make sense for Helen to "follow" Paris to Troy, even if she changes her mind about being with him later in the epic.

As for how the *Iliad* is presented, the epic will conclude the same way no matter if Helen followed Paris or if he abducted her.

I like this theory a lot, although I don't know if I necessarily agree with it. Comparing Helen and Penelope is fascinating, since they're the two main heroines and almost complete opposites of each other. That being said, I don't think they stand on equal ground as characters, at least in how they're presented in the Homeric works. Penelope is crucial to the conclusion of the *Odyssey* because she is so integral to the plot, being the end-goal for both the suitors and Odysseus. While Helen is the "end-goal" of the Trojan War, the *Iliad* is primarily a story of Achilles, and Achilles is not *really* there for Helen. Achilles cannot achieve his fame without her, but Helen's actions, specifically *during the period of the Iliad*, do not impact the plot as Penelope's do in the *Odyssey*.

Citations

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Emily Wilson. W.W. Norton, 2024.

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