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Prof. Jacques Bailly

Myths/Legends Trojan War

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Penelopiad

Overview

* Windows into Penelope’s life during the events of the Odyssey
	+ Telling stories and interacting with past as she’s in the afterlife
* And a little bit before she got married
* Atwood defines her goals for the Penelopiad
	+ “I’ve chosen to give the telling of the story to Penelope and to the twelve hanged maids.”
	+ “What led to the hanging of the maids and what was Penelope really up to?”
* Scenes take multiple shapes
	+ Prose for Penelope
	+ Any other structure for maids
		- Songs, poems, scripts, trial, etc.
* Drawing from Iliad and Odyssey
	+ other sources talking about Penelope’s family history
	+ “Mythic material was originally oral, and also local – a myth would be told one way in one place and quite differently in another. I have drawn on material other than the Odyssey, especially in the details of Penelope’s parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumors circulating about her.”
* Homer’s characters are shown more like humans than divine heroes
	+ More genuine emotions and motivations
	+ Everyone’s a lot less noble and heroic
	+ Only women, the men are more personifications of violence, greed, and rape
* I’m generally going to focus on the interpretation of the characters and how they related to their own life vs. how it’s told in the epics
	+ The quotes are meant to give an idea of the character’s voice, personality, and interpretation
	+ Also, I just like those quotes

Character Interpretations

* Penelope – the faithful people-pleaser
	+ Like so many other women, her life didn’t belong to her
		- Forces enacting life upon her
	+ Cousin to Helen, constant comparisons
		- Penelope was the smart one, Helen was the pretty one
		- Everyone had to compliment them both equally
			* But they also knew Helen was more valuable in real life
		- Penelope’s qualities not valued “up close” or by Homeric standards for women
			* Except for loyalty
	+ Profoundly lonely during Odysseus’s wanderings
		- Isolation in Ithaca leading to hyper dependency
	+ Manufactured scene where she realizes Odysseus is Odysseus for his ego
	+ Men force sexuality upon her
		- They keep telling her they thought a widow would be super horny
		- Odysseus’s joke in the beginning “if anyone else knows about the olive tree bed I’ll know you’re cheating on me”
			* He said that to a teenager
		- Reducing women to sexual desire that needs to be controlled
			* Also significant in the case of the maids
	+ Penelopiad Quotes
		- “[…] what did I amount to? […] a stick used to beat other women with.” Pg 2
		- “I wanted happy endings in those days, and happy endings are best achieved by keeping the right doors locked and going to sleep during the rampages.” Pg 3
		- “No man will ever kill himself for love of me.” Pg 29
		- “Which of us can resist the temptation of being thought indispensable?” pg 80
		- “There is indeed something delightful about being able to combine obedience and disobedience in the same act.” Pg 117
* Helen – narcissistic seductress
	+ Affair with Paris treated as consensual
		- Left willingly, wanted to stay
	+ Takes pride in the violence on her behalf
		- Always know how many people died because of her
		- Asks Penelope if the deaths of the suitors made her feel pretty
	+ Every story ends with “and I was so beautiful that everyone apologized and/or was brutally murdered”
	+ Chapter 11 is titled Helen Ruins my Life so. That kind of covers it.
	+ Penelopiad Quotes
		- “The part of the story she enjoyed the most was the number of men who’d died in the Athenian war: she took their deaths as a tribute to herself.” Pg 75
		- “Cousin Helen, Helen the lovely, Helen the septic bitch, root cause of all my misfortunes.” Pg 131
		- “You wouldn’t have any idea of how exhausting it is, having such vast numbers of men quarreling over you.” Pg 154
* Eurycleia – overbearing mother-in-law, obsessed with her mediocre son-like figure
	+ In the most loving caring and adoring way possible she reminds me of my grandma
	+ Spoils Telemachus and Odysseus
		- They can do no wrong in her eyes
		- But Penelope spoils her maids
	+ Major cause for Penelope’s boredom
		- Won’t let her parent Telemachus or do any housework
		- Helps in keeping her isolated and ignorant
	+ The one to rat out the 12 maids who are hanged
		- The ones that Penelope “spoiled”
* Maids
	+ Speak mostly in the form of songs or plays
	+ Interesting note about marriage by Penelope
		- Marriage purely to transfer property, so it was only for people who had some to give
	+ Criticism of some academic’s insistence on the maids as a symbol
		- Called the Anthropology Lecture, I thought I escaped :( (Anthro major)
		- Olympic level gymnastics to keep Odysseus from being the bad guy by modern standards
	+ Essentially raised by Penelope, her only connection to the outside world
		- Main form of news and communication
	+ Relationship with Telemachus
		- Both being raised in the palace by Penelope, had a sibling relationship
		- But fundamental divide bc Telemachus would one day own them
	+ Reaction to rape
		- Almost ritualistic mourning and recovery period
		- Operating and surviving under current oppressive culture
	+ Quotes
		- “Infants when he was an infant, wailing just as he wailed, Helpless as he was helpless, but ten times more helpless as well,” Pg 66
		- “We were animal young to be disposed of at will, Sold, drowned in the well, traded, used, discarded when bloomless.” Pg 67
		- “But then the morning wakes us up: Once more we toil and slave, And hoist our skirts at their command for every prick and knave.” Pg 126
		- “You don’t have to think of us as real girls, real flesh and blood, real pain, real injustice. […] Consider us pure symbol. We’re no more real than money.” Pg 168