

Rusudan Tsanova (Tbilisi)

Of the Origins of the Gender Problem: Women in *Odyssey*

In this paper, we present three heroines, whose public status, real status, and emotions, when analysed, make it clear that Homer was the first, who describes psychological portraits of women. The biographies of all three women comprise hushed up embarrassing episodes, which the author narrates in a seemingly haphazard manner. At the same time, all the three are concrete models for Homer. Anticlea is a selfless mother, Eurycleia is a regardful nurse, and Penelope is a faithful wife.

Anticlea. Main characters of epic stories usually have special ties with their mothers. For example, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the mother – Goddess Ninsun – helps the main characters; in *Iliad*, Thetis helps Achilles; and in *Aeneids* Venus helps Aeneas. However, Odysseus does not have such a mother, as Anticlea is an ordinary mortal. According to *Odyssey*, she is dead and seems not to have been active even when she was alive. This is one of the features that make Odysseus different from other epic heroes. However, it should also be noted here that the mother's “genetic line” is dominant in Odysseus' biography. Anticlea is Autolycus'¹ daughter. According to myths, notorious robber and thief Autolycus is Hermes' son (*Od.*, XIX, 395). It was from Hermes that he inherited the skills of a swindler. According to one account, Anticlea was believed to be Laertes' bride when she was seduced by Sisyphus.² Odysseus was born after this affair (*Eur.*, *Iphig. A.*, 524, 1362). Thus, three cunning mythical men –

¹ Autolycus is a transparent name meaning “The Wolf Itself” or “An Incarnation of Wolf”, which, according to some researchers, must be pointing to totemic roots (Мифы народов мира, Т. 1, Москва 1980).

² Autolycus stole Sisyphus' herd. Sisyphus exposed him and seduced Anticlea.

Autolycus, Sisyphus, and Odysseus – become interconnected due to the insignificant figure of Anticlea (Soph., *Ai.*, 190; Soph., *Philoct.*, 417; Ovid. *Met.*, XIII, 31). The father – Laertes – plays a passive role in Odysseus' life, although he selflessly loves his son. Anticlea appears in the only passage in the text – the scene of her meeting with her son in the next world (XI, 140-224). In Hades, Odysseus asks the ghost of his mother about his home and learns that Penelope remains faithful to him (XI, 181-183).

Euryclea. Euryclea is the nurse of Odysseus and Telemachus. Both refer to her using the word τροφός “nurse” and “nanny” (II, 361; XVII, 31, etc.). In the very first chapter, she is described as κέδνα ἰδυῖα Εὐρύκλει (I, 428-429) – “Euryclea faithful of her duties”. In the text, Euryclea is mentioned with the same epithet that is used to characterise Penelope. The poem does not provide sufficient information about Penelope (unlike swineherd Eurylochus). The only thing we know is that Euryclea was quite young, when Laertes bought her for 20 oxen. Euryclea's father was Ops and grandfather was Peisenor. It is not clear why they sold the girl. We do not know either whether Ops and Peisenor were from Ithaca or some other region of Greece. The text says that Laertes showed as much respect to her as he did to his own wedded wife, but he did not take her to his bed out of respect for Anticlea (I, 432-433). The text does not say anything about Euryclea's marital status, but it says that she nursed him at her breast – οὐ δὲ μ' ἔτρεφεζ αὐτῇ τῷ σῶ ἐπι μαστῶ (XIX, 482-483). A woman is able to breastfeed only after she gives birth to her own child, but the text does not mention either Euryclea's child or her husband (partner). On the contrary, it says that even Laertes did not touch her out of respect for his wife. It would be quite fair to note that the image of Euryclea has not received appropriate assessment. No female slave has ever had the power she had. Telemachus and Odysseus also trust her, which she deserves.³

The etymologies of Anticlea and Euryclea are also interesting. The second part of the names is linked to κλέος (“fame”). Ἄντι is a prefix meaning “opposite” and εὐρὸς means “broad”. Both women's names are linked to the notion of “fame, dignity” (κλέος τὸ, pl. κλέα “fame, glorious deeds”). The name of Anticlea, Odysseus' mother, means “opposite to fame” and Euryclea means “a person having a broad (big) fame.” The fact that relations between Anticlea and Euryclea are not described in sufficiently clear manner in the text is difficult to explain. It is a fact that Anticlea died (of sorrow for her son) before Odysseus returned home and

³ Karydas C. H. P., *Eurykleia and Successors: Female Figures of Authority in Greek Poetics*, Lanham 1998.

Euryclea lived to meet Odysseus and even help him. She has big influence on Penelope and Telemachus, everyone treats her with respect, and she is a full-fledged member of the family.

Penelope. Penelope's faithfulness is constantly subject to control, doubts, and discussion. 1. Penelope's faithfulness is discussed by inhabitants of the nether world – Anticlea and Agamemnon (Agamemnon's ghost warns Odysseus not to trust his wife); 2. Inhabitants of the heavens (Athena) also express their opinion on Penelope's faithfulness; 3. Mortals, such as suitors, people, Menelaus, Telemachus, Eumaeus, and others also discuss Penelope's faithfulness; 4. It is interesting to analyse the emotional state of Penelope herself and her dreams.

It is obvious that Penelope's faithfulness is an issue discussed by everyone (in all three worlds). It should also be noted here that the problem of Penelope's faithfulness is still regarded to be a topical issue. Of course, we cannot touch on all details in this report,⁴ so we will concentrate only on several episodes. At a gathering of Ithacans, Antinous told Telemachus on behalf of all suitors: "It is your beloved mother's fault not ours (II, 86). These three years past, and close on four, she has been driving us, Achaeans, out of their minds, by encouraging each one of us, and sending us messages without meaning one word of what she says (II, 89-92). And then there was that other trick she played us. She began to work on an enormous piece of fine needlework. "Sweet hearts," said she, "Godlike Odysseus is indeed dead (II, 96), still do not press me to marry again immediately, wait till I have completed a pall for my father-in-law, to be in readiness, for *Achaean women will talk* if this heroic man is laid out without a pall" (II, 97-102). And we assented; whereon we could see her working on her great web all day long, but at night she would unpick the stitches again by torchlight. She fooled us in this way for three years."

This passage is noteworthy in many respects. First: according to the suitors, Athena protects Penelope and the young suitors find themselves in her trap (a net she knitted), because they failed to understand for three years that they were being deceived. Antinous compares Penelope to three mythical characters: Tyro, Alceme, Mycene. Homer mentions needlework several times and it always has important semantic overtones. Helen does needlework⁵ as well as Paeacian Queen Arete and goddesses Circe and Calypso.

Penelope and Helen also do needlework. Having transformed the mythoritual model in *Odyssey*, the poet presents features for the portraits

⁴ For details cf.: Tsanova R., *Images and Masks in Odyssey*, Tbilisi 2011, 166-206.

⁵ Cf. "wooden horse" in: Tsanova R., 2011.

of Penelope and Helen: Needlework is associated with the deception of males. A woman doing needlework (spider-woman) definitely gains an upper hand over men. The lie is justified in Penelope's case, as it points to the woman's astuteness. Antinous was right, when he said that Penelope deceived all the suitors, giving hope and having something else on her mind. This episode in the epic text does not question Penelope's desire: The suitors understand that the woman does not want to get married. In the same episode, Penelope says a noteworthy phrase – "for Achaean women will talk". The desire to protect her family and reputation plays a major role in Penelope's behaviour. It is this feature that distinguishes her from Helen and Clytemnestra. Penelope's behaviour can have several interpretations: 1. Penelope loves Odysseus so much that she does not even want to hear about any other man; 2. Penelope is ready to get married, if someone better than Odysseus emerges; 3. Penelope prefers to renounce her personal feelings in exchange for the reputation of a faithful wife and mother, thus surpassing her well-known cousins Helen and Clytemnestra. It is possible to say that the text makes all three assumptions possible. Penelope's artistic image comprises "numerous layers", which is one of the first examples of a complicated portrait of a woman in world literature. In the following centuries, it is neither surprising nor difficult to solve female "puzzles".

Before departing for Troy, Odysseus told his wife, raising her right hand (XVIII, 258): "Take care of my father and mother as at present, and even more so during my absence (XVIII, 267-268), but when you see our son growing a beard, then marry whom you will, and leave this your present home" (XVIII, 269-270). Raising a hand is the gesture of taking an oath. Odysseus made Penelope *give an oath* that she would behave in such a manner. Penelope remained faithful to her oath: She took care of Odysseus' parents and raised their son – Telemachus is already a man. She can now get married, as this is the initial condition. *This was also part of the oath*. Everything now depends on Odysseus. If he returns, Penelope will gladly welcome him.

What is said about Penelope: Menelaus speaks well of Penelope (IV, 110-111); swineherd Eumaeus names the people waiting for Odysseus body and soul – Eumaeus himself, Penelope, Laertes, and Telemachus (XIV, 171-173). Ithacans respect faithful Penelope. They condemned the queen's behaviour and called her *οχρηλιη* ("ruthless"), when they took merry sounds heard from her home for a wedding reception.

Athena told Odysseus, who was born in Ithaca: Make no hurry, first test your wife to see whether she is waiting for you with all her heart,

shedding tears (XIII, 336-338). Athena also warns Telemachus in his dream: You should not remain so far away from home any longer. You know what women are – they always want to do the best they can for the man who marries them, and never give another thought to the children of their first husband, nor to their father either when he is dead and done with (XV, 20-23). Agamemnon's distrust is quite natural. Odysseus' doubts are also quite understandable. Telemachus can also be suspicious. However, even Athena (who is well aware of humans' deeds and thoughts) does not say directly that suspicions are impossible and Penelope is faithful. Probably this is due to the fact that she knows the woman's plans or that people often behave in an inappropriate manner. This may also be due to the assumption that everyone should think about what may happen or what could have happened. There may be other reasons: Gods may be enjoying themselves or the poet may be raising tensions for readers.

Telemachus is the one, who has more doubts about Penelope than others. Relations between a lonely mother and her only son are a well-known issue in fiction and *Odyssey* seems to be the first work, where this issue was touched on, because the poem raises problems in relations between not only Telemachus and Penelope, but also Telemachus and Orestes, and Penelope and Clytemnestra.

On his return from Sparta, Telemachus, who was agitated by his dream, tells Eumaeus: “My mother cannot make up her mind (μητρὶ δ’ ἐμῆ διχα θυμὸς ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μεμμηρίζει – XVI, 73) whether to stay where she is and look after the house out of respect for public opinion and the memory of her husband, or whether the time is now come for her to take the best man of those who are wooing her, and the one who will make her the most advantageous offer” (XVI, 73-77). And Telemachus tells the visitor (Odysseus): “My mother will neither say point blank that she will not marry, nor yet bring matters to an end” (XVI, 126-127). This means that Telemachus is at a loss, saying one thing and then another.

It is a commonly held opinion that Odysseus and Penelope loved each other very much, but if we read the text, searching for words expressing love, the situation will seem different. Several words are used in Homer's poem to denote love and its manifestations. These are nouns ἔρωσ, φιλία, φιλότης and verbs ἀγαπάω, ἐράω, στέργω, φιλέω.⁶ These words have various overtones, which are not important here. What is noteworthy is that none of the words are used when describing relations between Odysseus

⁶ Шопина Н. Р., Изображение любовного чувства в гомеровском эпосе, Вестник древней истории, 1 (131), Москва 1975, 86-102.

and Penelope. Only once Homer uses φιλότης· Τὼ δ' ἐπεὶ οὖν φιλότιτος ἐταρπῆτην ἑρατεινῆς τεριέσθην μύθοισι, πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐνέποντε "When they had had their fill of love they fell talking with one another" (XXIII, 300-301). In most cases, Homer uses φιλότης to denote bodily intimacy. In addition to φιλότης, we encounter φίλος: Penelope πόσιος ποθέουσα φίλοιο (XVIII, 204). This word may mean "beloved", "soul-mate" or simply "relative", "closely related". In addition, Odysseus refers to "bed" as πολυήρατος "very desirable" (XXIII, 354). There are no other passages in *Odyssey* describing love or similar emotions. It is a fact that Odysseus does not speak anywhere with anyone about his love of Penelope. Moreover, he does not speak about love even to Penelope herself. It is logical to assume that even if Odysseus has affectionate feelings to his wife, they are not reflected in the poem. (It is noteworthy that other heroes do not speak about their love of women either.) No expression of feelings towards Penelope is visible when Odysseus finally meets her. However, Odysseus kisses his native land on Ithaca (XIII, 354). In other words, the hero's joy of seeing his native land is reflected in the manner usual for an epic poem – a physical action, but the hero does not behave in the same manner when meeting Penelope.

Praising Penelope, Odysseus is diplomatically moderate. He says that people do not say anything bad about her (do not condemn her), so her name has reached the heaven, emphasising again the *good name* Penelope has gained. Penelope's attitude towards Odysseus can be assessed by both her words and behaviour. Penelope complains in three episodes that gods destroyed her beauty, when Odysseus left for Troy and her heart is now sorrowful (XVIII, 180, 181, 251-253; XIX, 124-126). The woman does not want to choose any of the suitors, because she is sad and the only person, who she is looking forward to see (ποθέουσα) is Odysseus. At the same time, she *hesitates* (δίχα θυμὸς ὀρώρεται ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα – XIX, 524), not knowing what to do – protect her house and Odysseus' bed (take account of gossip) or get married (XIX, 525-529). Penelope is happy when she sees Odysseus in a dream and thinks that the dream is real (ἐμὸν κῆρ χαῖρ' – XX, 89-90). When she learns that Odysseus has returned, she springs up from her couch, throws her arms round Euryclea, and weeps (XXIII, 32-33). When Odysseus discloses the secret of the bed, her knees loosen and her heart melts (τῆς δ' αὐτοῦ λύτο γούνατα καὶ φίλον ἦτορ – XXIII, 205), which is regarded as the expression of strong feelings with Homer (cf. corresponding passages: IV, 703; XVIII, 212; XXIV, 345). When Penelope finally recognises her husband, "she gazes upon him with love" (τῇ ἀσπαστὸς ἔην πόσις εἰσορώσῃ – XXIII, 239) and from his neck she can in

no wise let her white arms go (δειρῆς δ' οὐ πάμπαν ἀφιέτο πήγχεε λευκῶ - XXIII, 240). Thus, to describe Penelope's spiritual state, Homer uses both external symptoms and her words. In spite of this, the sentiment Penelope has is not called ἔρωσ. She is waiting for Odysseus as the owner of the house and her protector, whose house she has to protect until he returns. It is no accident that Agamemnon praises Penelope's virtues (ἀρεπῆ) in the nether world, but this is an ethical notion, not emotional. *Penelope wants to be famous!* Penelope is effectively one of the first artistic images of a woman that rules a country. She rules Ithaca after Odysseus left for Troy. It is true that she has neither summoned an assembly of Ithacans nor made any important decisions, but she maintains the *status quo* on the island. Penelope's rule in Ithaca is nominal. She manages family affairs, taking care of her son and the name of her family and doing everything to maintain peace at home and outside it. She strictly controls her emotions.

Although Penelope's internal *ego* is sometimes presented in the shape of her "life" in dreams (which she describes to Odysseus, whom she sees as a wretched man), none of modern readers can say that she is emotionally convincing. Penelope is not angry because of being abandoned, having no more children, and being sexually frustrated. She is not jealous and she does not think whether her husband is faithful to her or not. She is satisfied that she has a lot to do at home and she is not angry that she has to cede her position immediately on Odysseus' return. She does not say anything even when Odysseus tells her after the very first night they spent together on his return that he has to leave her again. Readers may get the desire to correct flaws in Penelope's psychological profile and may ask a question: Does she subdue negative emotion or does she have a secret life? This is the most topical question that arises regarding Penelope. The problem became a source of inspiration for many authors in the following centuries. This became evident as early as in Ovid's *Heroides*, where Penelope is right and angry. The woman complains about being left alone in her bed, she is angry and doubtful. She suspects that Odysseus has a mistress, that she is losing her beauty, and so forth.⁷

The analysis of the text makes it clear that Homer created the image of Penelope as a faithful wife within the so-called "triple parallelism" model: Penelope, Clytemnestra, and Helen (women of one generation, who are, in addition, relatives) represent various mythic models, but all three have the

⁷ Hall E., *The Return of Ulysses (A Cultural History of Homer's Odysseus)*, I. B. Tauris, London, NY 2008, 120.

potential to resemble the other two. In other words, each of them can be regarded as the “failed incarnation of others”.

Let us try to clarify this aspect: As said above, Homer created the *epic model of a faithful wife* in the shape of Penelope, but Penelope's epic image has mythic roots and, as known, myths are symbols. Penelope as a symbol is a duck (garganey) and ducks can walk, fly, and swim. Their potential is multifaceted. On the mythic level, Penelope is no worse than her renowned cousins Helen and Clytemnestra. According to some mythic versions, she shared her bed with all 112 suitors in search of the best husband.

On the mythic level, only quality makes the difference between Penelope and Helen: Penelope is a duck and Helen is a swan (Leda reincarnated as a swan had Helen from Zeus in the guise of a swan. According to one version, Helen hatched from a swan egg.). It is noteworthy that it is due to the paradoxical nature of myths that a swan known as a symbol of most faithful partner is presented as a symbolic archetype of the most unfaithful wife.⁸ It is true that according to zoological classification, the symbols of Penelope-duck and Helen-swan are in one group, but they belong to various classes and a duck is a duck and a swan is a swan. Epic Penelope is “aware of” her symbolic position: She is neither Zeus' daughter nor the most beautiful among mortal women and, unlike Clytemnestra, she is not the queen of the richest hegemonic country either. Penelope as a symbol can sometimes be seen in the epic model created by Homer, which becomes evident in her well-known suspicions and the dreams she sees. The poet plays with readers. As Aristotle said, the function of literature is to ensure satisfaction from playing and guessing.

⁸ This can also be explained: 1. Helen's treason is not due to her personal will, as she acts in accordance with the will of the goddess of love; 2. Helen unwillingly becomes involved in making the curse of Pelopides some true. According to this curse, the descendants of Pelopides must never have faithful wives and marital happiness. Presumably, this is why lyric poets are trying to rehabilitate Helen.