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# Penelope's Titus 2 Virtue

Emily Ferkaluk

**T**he *Odyssey* famously recounts Odysseus' daring escapades on his winding way home from the Trojan War. Yet the story instructs us more about Odysseus' home than it does his homecoming. More particularly, the epic demonstrates the crucial role feminine intellectual virtue plays towards fostering a well-ordered home.

## **The Choice for Home: Penelope versus Odysseus**

Every home is defined by the people within it, and every person is defined in large part by their choices, especially the choice for virtue or vice. The choices of Odysseus and his wife, Penelope, sharply contrast each other. Both are clever and resourceful. From the first line of the poem the hero Odysseus is defined by the descriptions "many-sided" or "the man of many ways." We see Penelope's cleverness in how she delays a new marriage through her weaving. Promising the suitors she will choose a new husband when a death shroud for her father is completed, she weaves during the day and takes it apart each night. Like Odysseus, Penelope suffers sorrow through their years apart. Yet at Odysseus' homecoming, Penelope tells of what she endured in Odysseus' absence; Odysseus tells of what he made others to endure. Most importantly, Odysseus often does not acknowledge that his choices affect other people. The plot moves by Odysseus's constant inward waffling between desires for peace and conflict, between using clever resourcefulness to seek the honor that comes

through adventure and wanting the security of a home that protects him from dishonorable death at sea. More often than not, Odysseus chooses fighting rather than friendship, glory rather than peace, adventure rather than home. In contrast, Penelope recognizes that she has a choice in her circumstances, and she conscientiously uses her virtue to preserve rather than destroy her home.

### **The First Cause of Disorder in Penelope's Home**

When we first meet Penelope, she is faced with an unfortunate situation that appears to be her own doing. The Ithakaian suitors bring disorder to Odysseus' household in his absence by eating up his wine, sheep, and cows without proper recompense. According to the suitors, Penelope's actions win a great name for herself at the cost of her son's inheritance. Telemachos also blames his mother for allowing the suitors to eat up his birthright and wealth and pose a threat to his life. Both the goddess Athena and the suitors advise that Penelope return to her father's household to court and marry again, which would bring a swift end to the apparent injustice.

On second glance, however, the disorder and destruction enacted by the suitors is not caused by Penelope, but by Odysseus. Penelope is beset by the suitors against her will.

Odysseus's choice to prolong his absence brings disorder to his household. Although the poet begins by claiming that Odysseus longs for his wife and his homecoming, Odysseus himself is strangely silent in expressing that longing. We later learn that it is Poseidon who frustrates the latter half of Odysseus' travels as revenge for Odysseus' act of blinding his son, Cyclops. But why was Odysseus on Cyclops' island, and why was he trapped in Cyclops cave? Not out of necessity, but out of a thirst for adventure. Odysseus' love for adventure leads him astray, always further away from home. Moreover, his love for war-making eventually brings danger to his home, as we see at the very end of the epic. Odysseus ironically brings "peace" to his household by slaughtering the suitors, a war-like action that invites the threat of destruction upon his home from neighboring families.

Problematically, Odysseus' absence has also caused Telemachos to

grow up with a disorderly mind that fears to contribute his own solution to the household's problem. Although Telemachos asserts to Penelope that he has "the power in this household," and to the suitors that he "will be the absolute lord over my own household," he later complains that "we have no man here / such as Odysseus was, to drive this curse from the household." Telemachos cannot govern his troubled heart strongly because his mind is disordered; for these reasons, he doesn't act on his own responsibility to drive the suitors from the household. The true evil attacking the household is not the suitors or increasing loss of possessions, but the lack of a father.

### **How Penelope's Virtue Preserves Her Home**

Although Odysseus is ultimately at fault for the household troubles, Penelope still has a role in the situation. As we will see, Penelope uses the virtue of a sound mind to avoid both of the extreme choices presented to her by the suitors (either a new, hateful marriage or the destruction of Telemachos' household).

In particular, Penelope's reluctance to remarry is rooted in her recognition that a new marriage would not garner her a well-ordered home. Homer defines a well-ordered home in part by harmony between a husband and wife. The poet shows us this reality by picturing its inverse. Menelaos' household evidences clear discord between husband and wife; their lack of friendship seemingly also results in a disorder between the household and its community, as evidenced by the active guards. Similarly, Kalypso's household confirms that a husband and wife need to be emotionally connected. Although Penelope cannot rival the goddess in "beauty and stature," Odysseus later reveals that he can "converse" in human communities rather than among "nymphs" such as Kalypso. Penelope suspects there could be no proper harmony for her in a second marriage. Instead, she holds firmly to the value that a well-ordered home can provide.

Hence, the suitors eat up the household while Penelope remains faithful to the lord of that household until Telemachos is ready to assume leadership. Unlike Odysseus, Penelope unwaveringly chooses the possibility of a well-ordered home as the standard for all her actions.

## Penelope's Similarity to the Young Women of Titus

This use of Penelope's sound mind to preserve the possibility of a well-ordered home gives us a picture of the virtuous young women whom Paul describes in Titus 2. The cultures surrounding Penelope and the Titus 2 women are very similar. Like the Ithakaian suitors, the Cretans lived a culture of lying, laziness and evil that was upsetting whole households (Titus 1:10-13). Cretans were famous for their greed, gluttony, self-indulgence, and lies. Paul therefore writes to Titus to encourage the church at Crete to counter this testimony with a pattern of good works and sound doctrine.

Paul goes on to recommend specific behavior characteristics for each group of people in the church—older men and younger men, older women and younger women. More specifically, Paul charges older women to be teachers of good things, and then gives a list of descriptive adjectives that are to characterize virtuous young women: sober (self-controlled), friendly towards one's husband while also willfully subject to him; loving towards one's children; discreet; chaste; a keeper at home; good. Penelope pictures all of these virtues for us.

Throughout the *Odyssey* Penelope wraps herself in modesty. She is always accompanied by at least two handmaidens and takes a modest stance before her suitors by standing “beside the pillar that supported the roof with its joinery” and wearing a veil.

Penelope is also clearly *agathos* or good: she is distinguished, upright, and honorable and earns praise for these qualities from many people throughout the epic.

Above all, Penelope guards her home. The word for “housekeeping” in the scripture is *oikourgos*, which carries an implication of guarding the home. In contrast to Penelope, Agamemnon's wife Klytaimestra destroyed her home rather than safeguarding it. While Agamemnon was away at war, Klytaimestra took a lover who then treacherously killed her husband upon his homecoming. Importantly, Klytaimestra's adultery and murder began in her mind: “there is nothing more deadly or more vile than a woman / who stores in her mind with acts that are of such sort, as this one / did when this thought of this act of dishonor, and plotted/ the murder of her

lawful husband.” In contrast to Klytaimestra, Penelope uses her intellectual virtue of sober discretion to protect Odysseus’ rightful rule over his home.

Both Greek words for “sober” and “discreet” in Titus 2 stem from the same root that carries the idea that one is temperate, or that one moderates and controls one’s desires, holds to one’s duty, is of sound mind, and is self-controlled. These are intellectual virtues. They are virtues that begin with knowing what is good and then patterning one’s emotions and actions to act on the good. While Penelope deeply grieves the loss of Odysseus, she never allows her sorrow to affect her pursuit of a well-ordered home. Penelope’s self-control over her grief enables her to be good, maintain her chastity, and be loving towards her son Telemachos. All of these virtues combined contribute towards her successful protection over her home in her husband’s absence.

Homer’s depiction of Penelope thus gives us a portrait of how intellectual virtue affects other practical virtues, especially those that govern our home. A sound mind is the foundation upon which all other virtues of a young woman are built. Our actions adorn the doctrine we believe; actions show doctrine to be true and beautiful and good for us. Whereas Odysseus spends the epic chasing his desires to the detriment of his home, Penelope soundly chooses a well-ordered home as her ultimate good and subjects her desires in order to preserve it.