

*Comment on the character and behaviour of Penelope.*

Author: Emily Kramers, St Mary's Convent, Cambridge.

Penelope is the loyal and faithful wife of Odysseus. Odysseus has been absent for nineteen years. The war at Troy ended after ten years and since that time Odysseus has been lost. Penelope therefore has had to wait in doubt and uncertainty for nine years, and it is that faith despite the odds that is her most striking virtue.

Penelope is important as a character because she is the wife of the hero. The Greek heroic code included the opinion that a wife was a reflection on the husband. A hero could not have an ugly wife, for physical and moral perfection were regarded as synonymous. Therefore Penelope's beauty is important as it reflects favourably both on her own worth and on her husband's status as a hero. In fact she is most important as a display of Odysseus' heroic status. The fact that Clytemnestra was disloyal to Agamemnon reflected badly on Agamemnon himself, which proves the importance of Penelope's good reputation. Therefore Penelope's stock epithets are very important as they show the essential qualities that she has, and also the opinion the reader or audience is being asked to remember.

Penelope's most common epithet is "wise". This is an important characteristic as it shows that she has an individualistic mind. This again is important with respect to Odysseus because his epithets are normally "nimble-witted" or "quick-witted". He is renowned for his cunning mind, and it is appropriate therefore that his wife should have also that distinguishing feature. She is also however referred to as beautiful and faithful. Beauty is important in materialistic aspect of the society, where possessions added to honour, upon which the whole status was based. But despite this her mind is important. It is seen when Antinous, a suitor, relates how Penelope would set about weaving a funeral cloth for her father every day. She promised to marry one of the suitors when she had finished the cloth. However every night she would unravel the day's work to postpone the day when she would finish. Therefore this shows her as intelligent and almost crafty. These qualities are apt for the wife of Odysseus.

Her distinguishing feature is her devotion to the memory of her husband Odysseus. This faithfulness and devotion may be viewed in two lights. It could be seen as opposition to further marriage due to the fact that she does not want to be married to any of the suitors, and is more inclined to remain Queen of Ithaca. However the more acceptable and, I think, the intended opinion is that she has true devotion and love for her husband. She declines all offers of marriage repeatedly. She often weeps for her husband. Several times Homer ends an episode by saying that Penelope goes to her room and cries for Odysseus until sleep overtakes her. When the bard begins singing of the battle of Troy Penelope entreats him to stop because it rends her heart with grief. This evident devotion is also shown by her eagerness to entertain strangers in case they may have heard news of Odysseus. Indeed the suitors mock her constant efforts to discover news of him. This devotion may be seen as a little artificial and contrived after nineteen years, but it is important as Penelope

