

Subversive Penelope

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Language as semiotic code indicates and creates reality with deeply structured and culturally understood context of meaning. This meaning often manifests in concepts that diametrically oppose one another, creating binary pairings that shape our use of language (not to mention our way of thinking). In this way of thinking, we learn what goes with what and how things go together in a socially meaningful way. Because pairings like “salt and pepper” can also be conceptualized as “salt and not-salt”, it shows that “words have the property of turning an external reality into binary categories” (Dillon, 2010; Seidman, 1996). This creates the base concept for the sociological application of queer theory. This version of queer theory from sociology is more interested in addressing subjects that are *categorically* deviant, as opposed to sexually deviant. Through analysis of key events, I intend to show that in Homer's *Odyssey* Penelope is categorically deviant, both in character and role. By placing this concept within the heroic binaries of *The Odyssey*, I will show how Homer's "Circumspect Penelope" can be read as "Subversive Penelope".

Through the course of Homer's work, Odysseus has one clear objective: for his *nostos* to be as laden with *kleos* as possible. This creates a conundrum that faces the reader throughout the text: how much of Odysseus's grand oration is an elaborate

façade, how does our awareness of that possibility affect his credibility, and how much does it matter?

I posit that any truth in Odysseus's storytelling is irrelevant; the fact that the story is being told and that he has amassed treasure is all that matters to his *kleos*. That concept is key to this interpretation of *The Odyssey*. An ideal hero (as all heroes likely strive to be) would pound through Joseph Campbell's 12 step "Hero's Journey" concept with great ease and panache, collecting the spoils of war voraciously. Assuming this ideal hero's story could be disseminated widely, the greater ease their "journey" was completed with would correlate directly to the level of *kleos* derived from it. Taking that idea a step further leads us to the conclusion that the greater mastery one appears to have had over their journey, the greater their *kleos* becomes. Since this measurement of success in journey completion is therefore directly tied to a character's worth as a hero, it is also directly tied to the character's base self-identity as a hero. So what happens if you're a hero with no *kleos*? You're not a hero! Your identity as a hero can be voided at any time by the revocation or denial of your *kleos* if you fail your expectations.

I propose that this fear of losing *kleos* (and therefore one's heroic identity altogether) places heroes throughout literature and specifically the Homeric heroes in an "Act like a Hero" box, governed on all sides by the threat of a reduction in *kleos*. This concept comes from gender literature (Kivel, 1992), because in the same way hegemonic masculinity is promoted through reinforcement of traditional gender role expectations, heroism (in this sense, membership in the group "hero") is reinforced through *kleos*-enforced heroic role expectations. I further argue that the binary of "hero

and not-hero” is the defining theme of *The Odyssey*, which sets the stage for our discussion of Penelope, who disregards this binary in several ways.

After Odysseus had been gone for years and the suitors began to gather, Penelope set out on a journey of perseverance, patience, manipulation, and relative loneliness without ever leaving the mansion. Her journey sounds startlingly similar to the one her husband was enduring at the same time. This shared tenacity between “the great tactician” and “circumspect Penelope” is not to be overlooked, and the trials and tribulations that they *both* encountered shows that Penelope is just as capable of being read as a hero as Odysseus is. The caveat to this concept of Penelope as a hero, however, manifests through her possession of conflicting statuses bearing different values, some of which prevent her from collecting *kleos* altogether. Because she is intelligent (high value), a woman (low), queen (high), and a wife (subordinate), we cannot simply ascribe her the title of hero. Due to this “tug-of-war” between all of Penelope’s character traits, Homer slates her to exist in a heroic grey area where she refuses to relinquish her independence in thought and action. As a character, then, Penelope is already subverting the “hero and not-hero” binary. The reinforcement of this idea lies in Penelope’s continuous refusal to submit to fates not brought upon herself. Penelope’s adamant assertions of autonomy culminate in three major points, all of which include a refusal to submit.

The most obvious instance in which Penelope stands her ground (therefore performing heroism) is her overall refusal to remarry. This exhibition of her ability to make and sustain decisions about her own life shows her level of intelligence, and the clever means she uses to delay her eventual submission to remarriage (like the funeral

shroud) puts her right up there with Odysseus in the running for the title of “most resourceful hero”. Unfortunately, as the difference in their epithets shows (example: “much-enduring Odysseus” vs. “cautious Penelope”), her conscious decision to await her husband’s return is not characterized as overtly heroic in the way that Odysseus’s actions are (recall Penelope’s conflicting statuses) denying her any *kleos* towards her hero score.

The second factor that illustrates the extent of Penelope’s unacknowledged heroic nature is that she is a cunning and coherent enough character to have scores of modern-day scholars arguing over her recognition of Odysseus after his initial, quiet *nostos*. Consider the early recognition concept for a moment; if we assume that Penelope recognizes Odysseus from the moment he is in her presence and chooses to feign ignorance so that she can successfully unravel her plan for the ultimate revenge, Penelope becomes the hero of the conclusion of the entire work! At that point, everyone else (perhaps even Athena) just becomes a marionette in Penelope’s hands. If Odysseus or one of his comrades of equivalent cultural-political status possessed Penelope’s intellect, that intelligence would be a source of *great kleos*. In Penelope’s case, it just makes her “self-obsessed”, and “wise” at best. Regardless of when she recognizes Odysseus, a traditional reading relegates her heroic role in the recognition story to the proposal of the contest, which effectively puts the spotlight right back on Odysseus.

The final aspect of Penelope’s non-heroic, heroic acts is her unraveling of Laertes’s funeral shroud. By unraveling the funeral shroud, which is easily read as a symbol of mortality, Penelope is literally refusing to accept mortality as a concept. This

daily construction and *deconstruction* of death in her weaving represents an intimate familiarity, an almost mastery over the concept of mortality. Her understanding and perseverance in the presence of death as a concept surpasses that of most other Homeric characters. I argue that Penelope's manipulation of this symbol of death can be read as analogous to her husband's underworld trip. Both instances represent facing death head on, and using it to one's advantage, though in Odysseus' case it's to get directions and in hers it's to stall the suitors. Of course, Penelope's refusal to submit to a symbol of mortality could also simply be read as her holding out hope that Odysseus is still alive. This hope is shown in her attempt to leave an item, the existence of which is analogous to the acceptance of death, perpetually unfinished. Whichever way one attributes symbolic value to weaving this symbol of death, we still come away with the knowledge that Penelope's suffering has led her to become intimately familiar with the concept of mortality, another classic heroic attribute. Unfortunately, since Penelope's familiarity with death is framed within the context of a traditionally female pursuit, her hard-earned hero points are null.

Homer's world prizes heroism based on *kleos* above most things, to such an extent that one's entire identity hinges on the public's perception of one's deeds, charisma, and possessions. This creates an awkward situation for characters who possess heroic attributes while failing to check all the boxes to be considered a traditional "hero". Because in the Homeric universe there aren't provisions in place for an intelligent, married queen to be a hero, Penelope is denied heroic identity because of her conflicting statuses which prevent her from obtaining *kleos*. Due to the wealth of characteristically heroic behavior on her part however, she *cannot* be relegated to the

role of “not-hero” either. She must therefore exist in an androgynous grey area between the two where her subversion of the “hero and not-hero” binary reflects subversion of all rigid, hegemonic binaries.

Works Cited

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