Nicole Smith December 6, 2011

The Narrow Role of Women in *The Odyssey* by Homer

Although “The Odyssey” by the Greek poet Homer is very much an epic tale of a man’s heroic quest, women play an incredibly large role. Homer’s epic tale, “The Odyssey”revolves around Ulysses’ quest to return back to his wife, Penelope, so that he may be reunited with her and assume control over his palace, which has been overrun by suitors. Ulysses’ son, [Telemachus](http://www.articlemyriad.com/development-character-telemakhos/) attempts to regain authority in the presence of the many suitors but finds this difficult and embarks upon his own journey under the guidance of Athena and other deities. The main thrust of Homer’s “The Odyssey” centers upon the adventures of Homer as he endeavors to get back home, which he finally does. He overtakes the suitors through his cunning and the tale ends happily. Throughout “The Odyssey”by Homer however, there are quite limited presentations of women and many of them, if not servant girls or deities, are assigned to the narrow role of mothers, [seductresses](http://www.articlemyriad.com/food-imagery-temptation-odyssey/), or some combination of both.

Mothers are persistent figures throughout “The Odyssey” and are seen as the givers of pity and sorrow rather than true “supporters” of their sons and husbands in terms of military or personal quests. In most instances of depictions of mother figures in “The Odyssey”, these are women in need of support and guidance as they are weak and fragile. Without a steady male hand to guide them, these women appear to be lost and inconsolable. As one scholar notes, “Telemachus first asserted his manhood by ordering Penelope from the public rooms of the palace, indicating to the suitors of his intention to assert his claim to his father’s throne. The dependence of mothers on their son’s devotion to them is made clear elsewhere in Homer, as in the case of Anticlea and her statement that she died not of illness but of longing for her son Odysseus” (Pomeroy 28). The mothers in this text serve little function aside from mourning their men and urging them to remain safe, which is an important notion because much of the masculine sense of glory was associated with attaining glory. In many ways, the value placed on [fathers and sons in “The Odyssey”](http://www.articlemyriad.com/father-son-relationships-odyssey-homer/) was far greater than the bonds with mothers or daughters, for that matter. For Anticlea, Ulysses’ mother, she cannot even exist without her son as she died after waiting for years for him to come home. For Anticlea and other mothers, the entire purpose for existence is to look after, nurture, and protect their sons and husbands.

No female character in *The Odyssey*is quote as complex as the grief-stricken wife of Ulysses, Penelope. One the hand, she represents the motherly characteristics described above, but she also has some of the traits associated with the seductresses seen later in *The Odyssey*, such as Circe and Clymenstra. Following the prescribed role of a mother figure, Penelope mourns her lost love, seemingly oblivious (at least at first, it seems) to the attentions of the suitors. At one point, one of the bards of the palace begins singing about the deadly battles where she assumes her husband perished and falls to weeping and publicly mourning. It takes the leadership and masculine presence of her son to bring her to senses and he states, rather insultingly in one of the [important quotes from*The Odyssey* by Homer](http://www.paperstarter.com/odyssey.htm), “Ulysses is not the only man who never came back from Troy, but many another went down as well as he. Go, then, within the house and busy yourself with your daily duties, your loom, your distaff, and the ordering of your servants; for speech is man’s matter, and mine above all others- for it is I who am master here” (Book 1). At this moment, Telemachus asserts his role in the male order and also scolds his mother for what he seems to see as her conscious effort to lead on the suitors.

There is no doubt that Penelope is playing the role of the mother figure and the seductress simultaneously. This is observed by her many persistent suitors, particularly Antinous, who complains to [Telemachus](http://www.articlemyriad.com/development-character-telemakhos/) after being chided for consuming the goods of his father, “It is your mother’s fault not ours, for she is a very artful woman. This three years past, and close on four, she has been driving us out of our minds, by encouraging each one of us, and sending him messages without meaning one word of what she says” (Book II). While mourning for her husband (which the reader can only assume is sincere) Penelope is also leading on these suitors in order to gain material objects. She promises that she will marry one of them once she finishes her sewing her wedding veil, but each night she destroys the previous night’s work so that the task will never be accomplished. Even if she is using this ruse to attain riches, the fact remains that she is still acting as a seductress. She is very much like a Siren, typical of those present in Book XI, always singing out to encourage men but not intending to fulfill any promise of love or sex. Penelope presents both sides of the two distinct divisions of women characters in the text.

Although the Sirens and Circe represent the ultimate seductress, it is important to notice the way the story of Agamemnon and Clymenestra reappears in the text. This is a legend told about how the [strong female character Clymenestra](http://www.articlemyriad.com/women-power-agamemnon-lysistrata/) was, much like Penelope, dogged by suitors in her husband’s absence, the only difference being that Clymenestra gives over the temptation of one suitor in particular and she and this new lover plot to kill Agamemnon upon his glorious return. The description of Clymenestra almost seems to echo Penelope’s situation as Ulysses is told the story. “At first she would have nothing to do with his wicked scheme, for she was of a good natural disposition; moreover there was a bard with her, to whom Agamemnon had given strict orders on setting out for Troy, that he was to keep guard over his wife” (Book 3) but his lack of quick return to the palace to see his wife led to her infidelity. Just like Penelope, Clymenestra went through a deep mourning and this story creates the impression that even those women, who seem the most “mother-like” and devoted to husbands, sons, and family, are always prone to falling into the seductress model of femininity.

Homer’s *The Odyssey*offers readers a complex portrait of masculinity by presenting an epic hero who quests to return home, but the depiction of women is much less complete. Men are free to roam and stay long periods with strange women, but women are held to strict social codes of conduct that seem to drive these extremes of either intense and self-sacrificing motherhood or selfish betrayal. This theme of women as either mothers or seductresses is most fully represented by Penelope and although the story does not end tragically, as was the case with Agamemnon’s return home, there is still room for doubt about the true nature of Penelope based on her behavior in the absence of her husband.

Works Cited

Homer, Trans. Samuel Butler. “The Odyssey of Homer.” Sacred Texts. 2 Feb. 2006<http://www.sacredtexts.com/cla/homer/ody/index.htm>

Pomeroy, Sarah B. Goddesses, whores, wives, and slaves : women in classical antiquity. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.