

**By Henri Robben**

**The significance of female characters in the progress  
of Homer's novel The Odyssey**

Women are very important figures in Homer's The Odyssey. Athena and Penelope are the two primary examples. They help Odysseus in his travels in many ways through the story. They keep the reader interested so that they keep reading to find out what will happen next. Throughout the novel, they appear in many different forms.

In this epic, several female characters had a profound effect on the plot. They wielded their influence through typically feminine skills and attributes: seduction, supernatural powers, intelligence, and beauty. Some of the women of The Odyssey influenced the actions of men, playing key roles in the epics, such as Athena, Penelope, Calypso, the Sirens, Helen, or Circe; all have been true, and in actuality, may be an entertaining interpretation of an actual Trojan War. Since the Trojan War supposedly started because of a dispute between the gods and mortals, the Trojan War probably started because of a reason other than the reason Homer gives. If Homer were a woman, then he would have directed his audience into believing that women were at a higher level than men were by use of his epics. Ultimately, Homer would be utilizing his feminine characteristics when telling his stories with underlying messages of feminine superiority or equality.

As goddess of wisdom and battle, Athena naturally has a soft spot for the brave and wily Odysseus. She helps him out of many tough situations, including his shipwreck in Book 5 and the mismatched battle of Book 22. She does not merely impart sense and safety to her passive charge, however. She takes an interest in Odysseus for the talents he already has and actively demonstrates. Although she reassures Odysseus during the battle with the suitors, she does not become fully involved, preferring instead to watch Odysseus fight and prevail on his own.

She also often helps Telemachus as when she sends him off to Pylos and Sparta to earn a name for himself but she has the most affection for Odysseus. Athena is confident,

practical, clever, a master of disguises, and a great warrior, characteristics she finds reflected in Telemachus. Her role as goddess of the womanly arts gets very little attention in the *Odyssey*. Penelope works at the loom all the time but rarely sees Athena, and then usually only in dreams.

In book I, Athena urged Telemachus to give up boyhood, act like a man, present his case to search for his father to the assembly, and take stronger steps to search for his father. After Telemachus presented his case to the assembly and no action was taken on his request for a ship to enable him to search for his father, Telemachus prayed to Athena for help. In response to his prayer, Athena appeared as Mentor and borrowed a ship and crew for Telemachus. Athena also helped Telemachus by appearing to Odysseus' enemies miss with their attacks and Athena gave Odysseus precise aim.

Athena last and final help was when she interrupted the relatives of the suitors from attacking in revenge of the suitors deaths. Athena spoke stating, 'men of Ithaca, cease this dreadful war, and settle the matter at once without further bloodshed.' Then Zeus sent a lighting bolt that struck in front of Athena, so Athena said to Odysseus, 'Odysseus, noble son of Laertes, stop this battle, or Zeus will be angry with you.' Then Odysseus gladly agreed, and in the voice and form of Mentor she made a covenant of peace between the two parties.

Though she has not seen Odysseus in twenty years, and despite pressure the suitors place on her to remarry, Penelope never loses faith in her husband. Her cares make her somewhat flighty and excitable, however. For this reason, Odysseus, Telemachus, and Athena often prefer to leave her in the dark about matters rather than upset her. Athena must distract her, for instance, so that she does not discover Odysseus's identity when Eurycleia is washing him. Athena often comes to her in dreams to reassure or comfort her, for Penelope would otherwise spend her nights weeping in her bed.

Though her love for Odysseus is unyielding, she responds to the suitors with some indecision. She never refuses to remarry outright. Instead, she puts off her decision and

leads them on with promises that she will choose a new husband as soon as certain things happen. Her astute delaying tactics reveal her sly and artful side. The notion of not remarrying until she completes a burial shroud that she will never complete cleverly buys her time. Similarly, some might claim that her decision to marry whomever wins the archery contest of Book 21 results from her awareness that only her husband can win it. Some even claim that she recognizes her husband before she admits it to him in Book 23.

Women are very important figures in the *Odyssey*, and one of the most prominent roles they fulfill is that of seductress. Circe and Calypso are the most obvious examples of women whose love becomes an obstacle to Odysseus's return. Homer presents many other women whose irresistible allure threatens to lead men astray. The Sirens enchant Odysseus with their lovely song, and even Penelope, despite all of her contempt for the suitors, seems to be leading them on at times. She uses her feminine wiles to conceal her plan of action, every night, her day's work on the burial shroud, and even gets the suitors to give her gifts, claiming that she will marry the one who gives her the nicest things. While these women do gain a certain amount of power through their sexual charms, they are ultimately all subject to divine whim, forced to wait and pine for love when it is absent.

The wedding bed in Book 23 symbolizes the constancy of Penelope and Odysseus's marriage. Only a single maidservant has ever seen the bed, and it is where the happy couple spends its first night in each other's arms since Odysseus's departure for Troy twenty years earlier. The symbolism is heightened by the trick that Penelope uses to test Odysseus, which revolves around the immovability of their bed a metaphor for the unshakable foundation of their love.

Heroism was not an invention of the Greeks. Yet, through the first hundreds of years of their civilization, the Greek literature has already given birth to highly polished and complex long epics that revolved around heroes. These literature works gave many possibilities of definition of heroism. The Greeks illustrated heroism to obey the rules laid down by the gods and goddesses, and those who obey the rules would gain honor and

fame. The Greeks regarded intelligence as one of the highest gifts that all heroes must possess. The Greeks required that all heroes must have courage and die a horrible death. We know him less from what he thought, which was seldom revealed, than by what he says and did, and his actions follow naturally from his characteristics. If the cunning of Odysseus is mentioned more than his courage, it was his courage that gets him into the scrapes from which his cunning had to deliver him. Odysseus had all the qualities that the Greek tradition required of all heroes, which were obey the rules of gods, possess intelligence, and displayed courage. He was made a hero thanks to his own characteristics however, without the guidance of Athena, his longing to be at home with his wife again and the intervention of women on his journey, he would only be a hero by myth not by what he has achieved through the trouble of getting home due to the women he has encountered.