

PENELOPE AS MEDITATION

BY

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Wallace Stevens' "The World as Meditation" presents the reader with a striking portrait of Penelope, a literary figure so ancient that one is tempted to believe nothing new could be written about her. The epitome of the long-suffering wife, Penelope is a cautious, guarded woman in the Odyssey, one who endures all manner of indignities. However, Stevens reveals a different facet of Penelope's character: her inner serenity and real affection. Stevens and Homer present different but complementary aspects of the marital relationship through the character of Penelope in this time-worn story.

The lens through which Stevens scrutinizes his subject is different than Homer's: the latter writes in boldly stylized meter, while the former is quietly reflective in his observation, working in free verse form. Indeed, Stevens accomplishes an intimacy Homer does not attempt. The Odyssey, for all its majesty, evokes a sense of remote awe in the reader, rather than one of warm identification. The cumulative effect of reading Homer's poem is akin to that of watching a theatrical spectacle.

"The World as Meditation," on the other hand, is a psychological snapshot, which transports the reader into the afternoon haze of Penelope's thoughts. The query at the poem's outset, "Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east, / The interminable adventurer?" (Stevens 1-2)

underscores Penelope's mental state of flux. She is always questioning and cloaked in uncertainty. Vacillating between apprehension and hope, Penelope has

Composed, so long, a self with which to welcome
 him,
 Companion to his self for her, which she imagined
 Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear
 friend. (Stevens 7-9)

By revealing her dreamland of marital harmony, Stevens unveils Penelope's yearning, establishing emotional empathy between reader and character. One notes also the sensual imagery: "his arms would be her necklace" (Stevens 14), thought and heart "beating together," the lover as a "form of fire" (5), which puts Penelope's meditation in tactile terms and makes her longing all the more immediate. Finally, the poem's allusion to a general righting of wrongs emphasizes Penelope's plight: although the world is entering a healing cycle ("The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise / In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own..." Stevens 10-11), Penelope's own life is one of disorder. The discrepancy between the inner and outer worlds, then, only heightens her inner tension. Penelope, who cannot distinguish between missing Ulysses and "the warmth of the sun on her pillow" (Stevens 16-17), ultimately emerges as a daydreaming romantic, whose unquenchable pining for Odysseus is the source of her considerable fortitude: "The barbarous strength within her would never fail" (Stevens 21).

Homer largely downplays the feminine vulnerability captured by Stevens. The difference between the tranquil but longing woman sketched in "The World as Meditation" and the Penelope of the *Odyssey* is exemplified when Eurycleia, the devoted nurse, excitedly clambers up to the queen's room with good news of Odysseus' return, only to find Penelope wary as ever:

Dear old nurse...the gods have made you mad. They
 have that power,

putting lunacy into the clearest head around
 Or setting a half-wit on the path to sense.... Why do
 you mock me?
 (Homer XXIII.11-16)

Later, even as tears stream down her cheeks, Penelope cautions,

Don't laugh, don't cry in triumph—not yet....
 The story can't be true....
 It must be a god who's killed our brazen friends....
 Odysseus? Far from Achaea now, he's lost all hope
 of coming home. (Homer XXIII.65-76)

The severity of Penelope's stoicism is palpable; Telemachus' exclamation that Penelope's "heart always was harder than a rock" (Homer XXIII.118) suggests the extent to which Penelope has guarded her emotions to cope with her twenty-year nightmare.

Indeed, the idle trance of "The World as Meditation" is foreign to Homer's Penelope. She is a woman from whom life has bled sentimentality, so that she, like her husband, must resort to craftiness: she can only verify Odysseus' identity by eliciting "secret signs, / known to us both but hidden from the world" (Homer XXIII.124-125). Odysseus is right to exclaim, "What other woman could have a spirit so unbending?" (Homer XXIII.188). Penelope's caution is so unflinching that she is willing to rouse Odysseus' fury before letting herself be convinced of his identity. The passage in which Penelope "puts her husband to the proof" (Homer XXIII.203), testing his knowledge of the great rooted bed, signals most clearly the difference between Homer's and Stevens' heroines: their fortitude. The Penelope of the *Odyssey* possesses her own kind of "barbarous strength," but it is rooted in ineluctable reality, not the wellspring of dream. Whereas Stevens' queen "would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair.... Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near" (22-24), Homer's Penelope is reluctant to indulge her dreams: when conversing with the disguised Odysseus, the queen laments, "Ah my

friend...dreams are hard to unravel, wayward, drifting things” (XIX.630-631). Peace of mind, thus, comes to Penelope not in a vision involving birds (Homer XIX.603-620), but by virtue of her own hard-bitten cunning.

Stevens’ and Homer’s pictures do, however, coincide at important points, which elevate Penelope’s and Odysseus’ relationship to one of truly legendary stature. Both use natural imagery to characterize that relationship. The “Meditation,” with its mention of “mended trees,” “the warmth of the sun on her pillow,” and “a planet’s encouragement,” casts Nature as indomitable,



Oinochoe probably showing Odysseus
Anthony Snodgrass (*Homer and the Artists*)

a force from which Penelope is inseparable. Indeed, she draws her hope of Odysseus’ return from that force. Just as Nature itself is permanent, so, too, is the bond between husband and wife. The *Odyssey* also uses the Earth’s all-pervasive power: the royal couple’s reunion is rooted in the great bed carved out of the olive tree springing from the earth. The foundation of their marriage, then, is immutable organic, an extension of Nature, which “not a man on earth, not even at peak strength, would find... easy to...shift” (Homer XXIII.210-211).

Above all, both Stevens and Homer attest to the privacy of the marriage relationship. In “The World as

Meditation,” Penelope’s grief is private, as is her hope. She envisions a “deep-founded sheltering,” to which only she and her beloved have access, a bulwark from the world (Stevens 9); at poem’s end, Penelope remains,

“[talking] a little to herself as she combed her hair” (Stevens 22). Similarly, Homer identifies Penelope with the epithets “cautious,” “wary,” and, most tellingly, “reserved” (I.379). The means by which she recognizes her husband is a, “secret sign” (Homer XXIII.124), and, when the couple is reunited, they celebrate, not with elaborate public



Warrior Vase
Photo by Bruce Hartzler

display, but with the simple act of “revel[ing] in each other’s stories” (Homer XXIII.343), revealing their lives to each other and no one else. In doing so, they create an almost-spiritual “deep-founded sheltering” and cement the time-tested bond.

Though marriage as an institution may seem less meaningful than it once did, the idea of undying love still has tremendous impact. Close reading of both “The World and Meditation” and the *Odyssey* reveals the two traits indispensable to faithful love: the fanciful passion of Stevens’ Penelope and the quiet sturdiness of Homer’s queen. While each author’s view of the character is distinctive, the two poets echo each other in emphasizing Penelope’s iron loyalty, a loyalty as pure and unchanging as Nature itself.

Works Cited

- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Penguin Group: New York, 1999.
- Stevens, Wallace. “The World as Meditation.” *Hudson Review* V.3 (Autumn 1952): 334.