The Weaving of Faithful Penelope, Considering the Various Contributions of Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio and Christine de Pizan

The figure of “Penelope, the faithful wife”, permeates the Western cultural consciousness. Her fame existing above and beyond the context of the Odyssey, Penelope can seemingly be easily contained and known by her ubiquitous epithet: faithful. Yet the Penelope within Homer’s narrative is a far more complex, multi-faceted and even ambiguous character than her reputation would suggest. How then did her character come to be so condensed? Focusing on the representations of Penelope by Roman and Early Modern writers, this essay seeks to reveal this period’s gradual but enduring simplification and reduction of Penelope’s narrative and characterisation.

In the past, the critical consideration of Penelope has been oft circumscribed by a too stringent focus on her exceptional fidelity. Walter Allen Jr. neatly demonstrates the struggle to reconcile her behaviour and choices within the Odyssey with the overriding expectations of her character: “Homer could not well have her perfectly serious in this matter [the bow contest] or she would not be the faithful Penelope.” Such attempts to store Penelope neatly in a box marked “the paradigm of the virtuous wife” have, more recently, been proven problematic. Instead, critics resisting this simplification have explored the indeterminacy surrounding Penelope and the various intriguing nuances of her presentation. Thus Homer’s Penelope has emerged as a character rich in detail and worthy of further attention.

I begin with an exploration of some of Penelope's most intriguing qualities in the *Odyssey*: her portrayal as a woman "secret in her design" (XXIV.141), a skilful and potentially equal partner to Odysseus as well as fundamental to the epic's eventual happy resolution. Then I move to consider the representations of Penelope by Ovid, Boccaccio and finally Christine de Pizan, these authors comprising the most influential interpreters of the Penelopean narrative in the Classical and Medieval period. The subsequent variations of Penelope are illuminating, demonstrating how their different contexts affect the representation and significance of the Penelope figure. It simultaneously also becomes apparent how these representations influence the readings of each other in subtle, sometimes counter-intuitive ways. In this way this chain of reception, that is the weaving of Penelope's character, can be interpreted as not dissimilar to her own famous weaving: perpetually unfinished and revised, continually woven, unwoven and re-woven.

i. *The Odyssean Penelope*

So to begin, sensibly, at the beginning: Penelope's first entrance in the *Odyssey*. She is described thus:

> She stood by the pillar that supported the roof with its joinery,
> Holding her shining veil in front of her face, to shield it, (I.334-5)

Penelope's precise alignment with the structural features of Odysseus' house suggests that, symbolically, Penelope is as integral a support to its continued existence as much as any physical pillar. As Odysseus' house can be interpreted as a symbol of his kingship and authority in Ithaca, Penelope's importance within the society of the narrative is

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immediately established. At the same time as establishing Penelope’s status though, the introduction also hints at a prevailing element of Penelope’s characterisation: concealment. Consider how Penelope’s veil is described. Whilst Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fitzgerald limn the veil as “shining”⁶ and Robert Fagles interprets it as “glistening”,⁷ the translations all hint at the tearful face hidden beneath the veil. In transferring the description of tears from Penelope’s face to her veil, the imagery conveys a sense of semi-transparency: Penelope’s emotions may be deduced despite her “shield”, yet they are also inherently obscured.

The shrouding of Penelope’s face with her veil is a useful metaphor for her portrayal throughout the narrative, where there is a maintained sense of withholding. Seth Schein usefully alludes to this when writing of how “Penelope’s plans and behaviour can be seen to have their own motivation quite apart from her loyalty to Odysseus and his oikos.”⁸

The issue of interpreting a character’s interior life, highlighted by Schein, is more difficult for Penelope than perhaps any other character in the Odyssey. Indeed, the text works hard to make this so. The disconnection between the workings of Penelope’s mind and the outward signs of her behaviour is repeatedly enforced; both Odysseus and Athena state that despite her actions “her own mind had other intentions”(XVII.283 and XIII.379). Odysseus and Athena appear to have some insight into Penelope’s interiority, as her husband and a goddess respectively, but the reader has no such privilege. Penelope is never allowed a monologue, which would enable more intimate insight into her character. To perceive the consequence of this portrayal from without, look to the varying significations that swirl around the explicit signs of Penelope’s behaviour. One of the most intense debates surrounds her motivation for calling the bow contest in

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Book XIX. Is it because she has decided to remarry? Or does she recognise Odysseus and see an opportunity to neatly dispose of the suitors? Or, perhaps, she doesn’t recognise him and the contest is merely another delaying tactic? All of these explanations have been ventured. However, whichever one is correct is, in my opinion, less important than their co-existence; the text supports each of them and no one significantly more than the other. Thereby, a wider truth is revealed: Penelope’s characterisation is veiled by ambiguity, never wholly knowable to the reader.

Of course, Penelope is characterised as virtuosic in the art of dissimulation. This is epitomised by her famous weaving and unweaving of Laertes’ shroud, which encapsulates her ability to “weave [her] own wiles” and be “secret in her design” (XIX.151 and 137). Indeed the narrative admires skilful lying and concealment: it comprises a fundamental part of Odysseus and Penelope’s shared and celebrated “cunning intelligence.” Yet though Odysseus and Penelope are characterised as like-minded, these minds are presented in wholly different ways. For if Odysseus’s “false narratives are battle stratagems” then the audience is alongside him, therefore able to appreciate the resourcefulness of his claim to Polyphemus that “Nobody is my name” (IX.366) secure that it is another performance by Odysseus,

[…]far the best of all mortal
men for counsel and stories[…] (XIII.297-8)

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12 I find Michelle Zerba’s position most persuasive; for me, the early recognition theory reduces the emotive power of the *Odyssey’s* conclusion too severely.
The distance created between the representation of Penelope’s “wiles” and the reader is an opaque counterpoint to the accessibility of Odysseus’ false narratives.

In part, this distance is necessitated by the very particular role Penelope has to play in the narrative: matching Odysseus but not overshadowing him. On the one hand, Odysseus and Penelope are ostensibly established as peers. This is marked particularly by their shared imagery. In Book IV, for instance, Odysseus and Penelope are both, in quick succession, compared to lions: Odysseus has “the heart of a lion” (IV.724) whilst Penelope paces “much as a lion caught in a crowd of men” (IV.791). The lion lends added significance as cultural symbol of majesty and power, hence the comparison equally ties the couple together and to their joint royal prerogative. Such imagery, Nancy Felson and Laura Slatkin posit, “invites the reader to imagine permeable (even interchangeable) gender roles and spheres of activity as an alternative to the traditional divided world”.15 This argument is supported by the famous reverse simile of Book XIX, where Odysseus compares Penelope’s fame to that

[...]as of some king who, as a blameless man and god fearing,

and ruling as a lord over many powerful people,

upholds the way of good government[...] (XIX.109-11)

Undeniably Penelope is located in a position of power, one corresponding to what Odysseus’ own position ought to be.

Furthermore, in many ways Odysseus' status is ineluctably tied to, even reliant on, Penelope. Read as a metaphor of the state, Penelope’s body and her sexual fidelity to Odysseus become politically loaded. Her chastity, the enduring integrity of her body,

functions as reminder of Odysseus' claim both to herself and to his kingdom. It is only appropriate then, that it is Penelope who approbates Odysseus' return to power. The bed test instigated by Penelope is fundamental to the resolution of the *Odyssey*, a narrative pervaded by questions of identity and deception. Telemachus' distils this preoccupation in Book I when remarking anxiously to Athena "no man really knows his own father" (I.216). Penelope, however, is determined to know her husband. Her refusal to accept Odysseus immediately is seemingly censured in the text. Odysseus reprimands her:

You are so strange. The gods, who have their homes on Olympos, have made your heart more stubborn than for the rest of womankind (XXIII.165-6).

Yet there is a certain irony in the speed with which Penelope’s previously celebrated virtue, her circumspection, is suddenly pejoratised to become mere hard-hearted stubbornness. Perhaps Penelope recognises this, for her reply is briskly concise: “You are strange” (XXIII.174). “Strange”, or as Lombardo translates “mysterious”, emphasises the couple’s twenty-year estrangement: their reunion ought to have its difficulties. Penelope’s tricking of Odysseus into describing their marital bed, thereby demonstrating his knowledge of their “secret signs” (XXI.108), ensures the focus of their reunion is not the proof of Penelope’s fidelity but of Odysseus’ identity. After all deception permeates the *Odyssey*, is even admired, but consequently trust is problematic. The subsequent “higher standard of proof”, as Heitman labels it, that Penelope’s scepticism ensures is attained publically stabilises Odysseus' identity, facilitating his transformation from an exile to King Odysseus once more. Arguably such

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16 The alternative to Penelope course is Clytemnestra, whose opposing choice haunts the *Odyssey*.  
17 This epithet is used by Lattimore (XI.445), with which even misogynistic Agamemnon praises Penelope.  
19 Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously*, 95.
definite closure is inevitable within the epic's world of fixed meanings and characters.\(^{20}\) Nevertheless, it still has to be enacted in the narrative and Penelope acts as this agent of resolution. To understand the significance of her role, imagine the transformation of the *Odyssey* if Penelope disagreed with the description of the bed.

However, the importance of Penelope and her role within the text is undercut by the epic's underlying misogyny, resonating from its centre with Agamemnon's counsel, "there is no trusting in women" (XI.456). There are gestures towards female power and moments in which gender roles are subverted, but these instances are couched within more traditional representations of masculinity and, specifically, femininity. For modern readers the cultural limits of female agency are marked by the constancy of Penelope’s weeping and the irregularity of her sleeping patterns. There is a frustrating regularity to the formulation, "Athena cast sweet slumber over [Penelope’s] eyelids" (XX.604), as the character is once more removed conveniently from the narrative. Victoria Wohl offers an apt reminder of the "themes of sexual submission beneath the joyous ode to *homosphrosûne* [like-mindedness]"\(^ {21}\) Indeed Penelope ultimately finishes the *Odyssey* enclosed by Odysseus within the domestic sphere of her chamber (XXIII.364). Their partnership, praised by Odysseus to the Phaiakians as winning "the best reputation" (VI.185), is conspicuously absent in the final book.

So although Penelope exercises remarkable agency, she remains caught within the strict bounds of a patriarchal society. How important are these constraints when evaluating Penelope’s representation? In one sense she is no less trafficked than any other women of the epic tradition.\(^{22}\) Arguably whatever choice she makes is negligible because she

\(^{22}\) Felson and Slatkin, "Gender and the Homeric Epic," 112.
cannot transgress the limits of patriarchal society, she will be subordinated to a husband be it Odysseus or another man. Yet she still undertakes decisive action. Carolyn Heilbrun comments perceptively that, "because Penelope's choice has been the one we might call conservative [...] we have failed to see how extraordinary Penelope is." Occupying a unique position, married but also a widow and with a son not yet mature, Penelope is afforded a measure of autonomy and with this, as she says, "I weave my own wiles" (XIX.137).

Thus, despite the attempts to subsume Penelope into the structures of patriarchy, epitomised by her degrading dismissal from the narrative, the text cannot erase her previous status or her central importance to its resolution and its thematic concerns. A tension still lingers between Penelope's real significance within a fundamentally circumscribed narrative: the Odyssey must focus on and glorify Odysseus; it is not, after all, the Odyssey and Penelopiad. To attempt a straightforward reading of faithful Penelope, then would be to wilfully disregard the character's carefully constructed complexity.

ii. **Ovid's Penelope as Author**

In Ovid's 'Heroides I', however, such an attempt to flatten Penelope's characterisation is discernible. Published between 5BC and 8AD, the first volume of the Heroides, in which Penelope appears, is a collection of epistolary poems composed by the heroines of Greek and Roman mythology to their absent lovers. Thus Ovid enacts a fundamental change on to Penelope's character, one necessitated by the genre of his work: Penelope becomes a writer. Though offered the opportunity to temporarily dispel the conditions of absence and distance on which letter writing is predicated, and what's more the materials to

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craft her own narrative, the Ovidian Penelope apparently declines to take full advantage. As Sarah Lindheim catalogues extensively in her study, “the heroine of ‘Heroides I’ chooses to emphasise her own lack, helplessness and marginality,” eschewing a powerful central narrative position. Indeed the opening salutation to Ulysses establishes the apparent futility of Penelope’s written discourse:

Penelope to the tardy Ulysses:
do not answer these lines, but come [...] 25

Presence and the immediacy of speech are immediately preferable over written communication, for which a particularly problematic absence is prerequisite.

Penelope’s surprising overshadowing within what is nominally her own narrative is further engineered by the establishment of distinct spheres of association for Penelope and Ulysses. The poetic environment ascribed to Ulysses is evocative of a wider landscape, informed by the Trojan War as symbolised through the map and specific landmarks such as “the Thracian camp”, the “Sigeum and Simois” before widening to encompass his present residence in “some foreign place”. In comparison, Penelope never leaves a domestic setting, be it “your kingly hall” or “my cold bed”. This specific locale, as Barbara Clayton recognises, is a powerful signifier of Penelope’s “sexual identity as wife of Ulysses”. But significantly the spaces connected to Penelope are displaced to the outer edges of the poem; the Ulyssean landscape, and consequently their narrative, dominate the centre of the letter. Moreover, Penelope’s small domestic spaces are shrunk even further by the overwhelming presence of the suitors who

24 Sarah Lindheim, Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid’s Heroides (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 43.
26 Ibid., lines 36, 38, 51 and 71.
27 Ibid., lines 130 and 9.
“besiege me in your house.” It becomes apparent then, that Penelope is not situated at the centre of the narrative where her gaze and situation would be prioritised. Rather, the opposite is the case as the final lines, which state,

Just remember, I was a young girl when you left; if you came at once I would be an old woman.

demonstrate. Penelope is visible only through the eyes of Ulysses, and then specifically at vulnerable ages, young then old. The period of Penelope’s maturity, her successful governance of Ithaca and rearing of Telemachus, is eradicated from the narrative that could have detailed it.

Read in this way, Lindheim’s criticism that Ovid’s Penelope is a “comfortable and self (pre-) serving illusion that the male poet holds out to his male readers” appears percipient. Yet it is easy to forget the innovation of Ovid’s *Heroides* in handing these fictional women a pen, and it is important to remember the capacity of the epistle form to enable self-representation and self-construction. Lindheim’s critique somewhat overlooks these factors and as a result is overly stringent. It is, therefore, imprecise to claim that in the ‘Heroides I’ “Penelope-in-her-bed is who [Penelope] is.” It is more a case of that is how Ovid chooses Penelope to present herself, an infinitely more intriguing prospect.

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29 Ovid, *Heroides*, line 106.
30 Ibid., lines 141-2.
31 Lindheim, *Mail and Female*, 51.
32 Ibid., 4.
Certainly Ovid’s Penelope is characterised as conscious of her letter’s audience: both the directly addressed Ulysses and the numerous visitors she entreats to deliver her missives to him, “I give [them] letters meant for you.”

Consider the most forceful statement in the poem:

[...]I am Penelope and I
am Ulysses’ wife[...]

Insisting on her title and identity as Ulysses’ wife also asserts Penelope's fidelity, on which her good reputation is based. Likewise Penelope in the *Odyssey* is aware of the importance of *kleos*, or renown, when she expounds

[...]when a man is blameless himself, and his thoughts are blameless,
the friends he has entertained carry his fame widely (XIX.332-3).

Penelope’s fame in ‘Heroides I’ is carried not by her friends but by her letters. Moreover, by tying her identity so tightly to Ulysses, Penelope is able to broadcast her reluctance to remarry. Her identity as valued by patriarchal society, determined by her relationships to an authoritative male, is subverted in order to become a defence against further exploitation.

This subtle assertion of agency is also reflected within the poem’s precise rhetorical strategies. Penelope constructs very specific communities within her letter. For instance there is the presentation of “We three – old Laertes, young Telemachus / and a wife with

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35 Ovid, *Heroides*, line 74.
36 Ibid., lines 100-1.
37 Ibid., line 101.
no strength”. The “we” refers to Ulysses’ family unit, his father, son and wife, which is contrasted by an earlier reference to a reunited family where:

Older men and young girls marvel in silence;
the wife cherishes [her husband's] every word.”

This alternative family is positioned within a peaceful communal setting, “while they eat”, suggesting the resumption of a smoothly functioning society. The “we” of Ulysses’ family, in comparison, does not assimilate into society; they must and yet “cannot fight”. The sense prevails then, that this “we” though signifying plurality simultaneously signifies Ulysses’ absence. The use of pronouns manipulates social and personal roles to illustrate the consequences of Ulysses’ absence. One pronoun remains strikingly lacking in Penelope’s letter: the “we” marking the complete royal family and governing unit of Ithaca.

This clever appeal by an apparently submissive “I” for the receiver’s compunction is reinforced by the text’s adroitly judged tone. Though emotional, the letter deftly avoids hysteria and veers instead into the bleakly comic. There is the wry aside, for example, when describing Ulysses’ dangerous exploit:

[…]You were careful,
I’m sure, always to think first of me!

This can almost be read as Penelope’s acknowledgment of her own insignificance to her husband. Similarly so can her speculation that Ulysses “describes me as simple” to a new
lover, playing ironically against the notion of her renowned intelligence. These reflections hint at a complex psychology at work behind the more obvious appeals for Ulysses’ return. Thereby Ovid avoids making ‘Heroides I’ a simplistic guilt trip, as the reproaches directed against Ulysses convey real nuances of Penelope’s emotional discord. In this way Penelope does take advantage of her medium. Helene Foley distils Classical misogynistic thought in the formulation “silence brings glory to women.” When Penelope questions, “where are you now? Where do you delay?” she remains silent but still interrogates Ulysses’ honour concurrently suggesting her suffering in his absence and, indirectly, appeals to the reader’s compassion.

Interpreting Ovid’s Penelope as shrewdly self-aware aligns her characterisation with that of the “circumspect Penelope” (I.328) in the Odyssey. Though they share similar traits and, of course, a name, the Penelopes of Homer and Ovid are quite different. For a start, their narratives follow different paths. Amongst Ovid’s variations from the Odyssey is his portrayal of Penelope’s weaving as “like a poor widow” and not as the unweaving of a cunning wife, also Athena, or Mentor, is absent from the narrative as Penelope takes responsibility for sending Telemachus to Pylos, the information gained from which she denies knowledge. Still these variations are only recognisable with prior knowledge of the Homeric epic. Is this required knowledge then before reading ‘Heroides I’? Duncan Kennedy would argue so, as he perceives “the resonance and complexity of Penelope’s character seems largely to arise from recognition of Ovid’s deviations from the canonical Homeric account.” I agree that the Ovidian Penelope attains greater depth when held together with her Homeric sister, but I find Kennedy’s labelling of the Odyssey as

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42 Ovid, *Heroides*, line 78.
43 Ibid., line 12.
44 Ibid., lines 143 and 76.
"canonical", and even as "what 'objectively' happened",\(^\text{46}\) problematic; surely 'Heroides I' ensures that there is no longer a so-called "objective" narrative. For if a reader encounters the *Odyssey* after and through the *Heroides*, which for them is the canonical, and which the digressive, account?

‘Heroides I’ is altogether deeply interested in the potential positioning of the reader. Consider how the reader gains access to the letter. There is no outer framework to contextualise its giving and the receipt – so perhaps the reader is an unwanted interceptor! However, there are other clues secreted inside the text. Duncan Kennedy reflecting on its time scale, deduced that the letter must have been written after Telemachus’ return but clearly before that of Ulysses’: a space of only a few days,\(^\text{47}\) in which time the only visitor to Ithaca's shore seeking refuge in Ulysses' house is a certain Cretan beggar. It is possible then to infer that Penelope’s missive is finally handed, directly, to its intended recipient, Ulysses. Ironically though the reader is positioned as Ulysses himself, this Ulysses’ experiences events outside the frame of Homer's narrative. Thus, by intervening into the narrative of the *Odyssey*, Ovid deftly and playfully demonstrates the potential to retroactively transform narrative.

\textit{iii. The Medieval Paradigm of Ulysses' Wife}

Whereas Ovid's 'Heroides I' knowingly plays with the events of the *Odyssey*, Penelope’s medieval interpreters had little direct knowledge of her Homeric origins. In Giovanni Boccaccio's *On Famous Women* or *De Claris Mulieribus*, written and revised between 1355 and 1359, the details of Penelope’s biography are sourced from the Latin texts of

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., 417.
Hyginus' *Fabulae* and, principally, Ovid's *Heroides*. Subsequently, when Christine de Pizan writes in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, published in the early fifteenth century, "several history books mention [Penelope] in detail" she is referring largely to Boccaccio who, as Julia Holderness argues, is a pervasive presence throughout Christine's text.

This widening of the distance between the Homeric Penelope and the later constructions of her character is demonstrated through the sundry changes to her narrative, and consequently characterisation, which are evident in the texts of Boccaccio and Christine. The most prominent of these changes is the increased passivity and attenuation of Penelope's representation. Such quiescence is epitomised in *Famous Women* by Penelope's inactivity in the narrative's resolution. Compare the bed test of Homer, or even the exigent questioning of Ovid's Penelope, to Boccaccio's description that "though barely able to recognise him, [Penelope] welcomed with great joy the husband she had longed for." Rather than enabling an active involvement within Ulysses' readeption, Boccaccio depicts Penelope's "womanly astuteness" solely as the means by which Penelope protects her chastity. Unlike previous Penelopes, the Penelope of Boccaccio's interiority is not shrouded by ambiguity as her mental calculations are painted absolutely by her vow: "to grow old in chaste and eternal widowhood". Yet ultimately, Penelope's vow and her "womanly" resources to protect it are proved untenable. The narrative's crisis point, the growing demands of the suitors, is

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53 Ibid., 81.
resolved by Ulysses’ return alone, “and so he freed Penelope from [the suitors’] siege.”

Thereby, Boccaccio reinforces an opposition, rather than a similarity between the characterisations of Ulysses and Penelope, the opposition of male/female aligning with active/passive and so that Penelope’s status within the pair is clearly lowered.

Christine de Pizan’s account of Penelope extends the diminution of her characterisation apparent in Boccaccio. Hence, the overt privileging of Ulysses in *Famous Women* is also evident in *The City of Ladies* as Christine frames Penelope’s tale through Ulysses’ perspective: it is his return and “delight [...] to hear nothing but good reports” of his wife which consolidates her reputation. For the text only echoes his judgement and provides no additional report of Penelope’s behaviour above the assertion: “this lady conducted herself most sensibly”, even her famous weaving is unmentioned. Thus, it is possible to argue that *The City of Ladies* does not present a narrative of Penelope. Though “assailed by a king who was attracted by her extraordinary virtue and purity”, Penelope strategies of resistance are not detailed, nor is the ultimate relief of her besiegement. Simply Christine asserts that Penelope categorically “refused to listen to a single word [her suitors] said”, and so her prized chastity is never endangered, her virtue never questioned and her characterisation frozen as, “a lovely woman who is also pure.” Both Boccaccio and Christine’s representations of Penelope are emptied of the nuances of their predecessors. Such reduction is visible, for her biography is summarised in four paragraphs by Boccaccio and twenty-three lines by Christine.

In this condensed form, Penelope’s chastity grows in standing. Thus Boccaccio begins the exempla concerning Penelope with the proclamation of her as “a woman of

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54 Ibid., 83.
55 de Pizan, *The City of Ladies*, 144
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
untarnished honour and inviolate chastity, and a holy and eternal example for women”,⁶⁰ the focus entirely on Penelope’s marital fidelity. This commendation of a restricted female sexuality serves a powerful purpose in Boccaccio’s text. For Famous Women is didactic in purpose, serving to women an edited history of their sex in order to promote the values of medieval Christian thought. Boccaccio introduces his methodology in the Preface, writing “I have lengthened and broadened [the biographies] into more extensive histories because I think it both useful and necessary”, thus hoping that “by adding pleasure to these stories their value would enter the mind by stealth”.⁶¹ Considering this, Penelope’s devotion to the chaste state of widowhood appears almost a hagiographic motif corresponding to the figure of the “pious matron or widow”.⁶² Boccaccio, in this way, attempts to Christianise the figure of Penelope.

However, the medieval Christian thought that Boccaccio espouses is also profoundly misogynistic. The resultant tension between the intrinsic necessity to praise women in Famous Women and the fundamental distrust of the female sex throughout the Middle Ages is aptly exposed in Boccaccio’s dedication of Famous Women to Andrea Acciavioli, Countess of Alta Villa. It reads:

 [...]when I saw that what Nature has taken away from the weaker sex God in his liberality had granted to you, [...]and that He willed you to be known by the name you bear (since andres in Greek means ‘men’) I felt that you should be set equal to the worthiest of men, even among the ancients.⁶³

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⁶¹ Ibid., xxxviii.
⁶³ Boccaccio, On Famous Women, xxxiv
The quote is lengthy but an exemplary example of a left-handed compliment.

Paradoxically, Boccaccio’s explanation of Andrea as a praiseworthy woman centres on her unwomanliness, exemplified for him even in the etymological root of her name. As Guido Guarino acknowledges, “to lavish praise on a woman, Boccaccio can think of no better adjective than manly.”64 This typifies the negative framing of femininity throughout Famous Women, from which Penelope’s virtue is not exempt.

Hence, by the close of the passage the opening, apparently inviolable, statement of praise has been destabilised. Doubt is cast upon Penelope’s reputation through the citation of Lycophron’s alternative narrative, which tells of how “old Nauplius [...] persuaded Penelope to commit adultery with one of the suitors.”65 Boccaccio seemingly dismisses this criticism, “who am I to believe”,66 and uses it to extend the notion of Penelope’s exceptionality: “her virtue is the more renowned and praiseworthy in that it is found only rarely.”67 Note, however, the deviousness of Boccaccio’s rhetorical strategies; by concluding on a refutation, Boccaccio changes the emphasis of the narrative: the initial celebration of Penelope’s purity is overshadowed by the lingering potential for its corruption. For Boccaccio, the notion of female virtue and excellence is beset by anxiety and mistrust. This is encapsulated in his presentation of Penelope’s intelligence. An important characteristic in both Homer and Ovid’s representations, in Famous Women Penelope’s wiles are reduced to a mere “trick”68 in Guarino’s translation. Virginia Brown further distinguishes the discrediting of Penelope’s “feminine cunning” through its comparison to Ulysses’ “clever[ness]”.69 Implying that Penelope’s strategies involve less intellectual engagement than Ulysses’, the like-minds of Homer are

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64 Guido Guarino, introduction to On Famous Women, xxvii.
65 Ibid., 83.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid, 82.
effectively erased. Sarah Pomeroy posits that the Classical reaction of an insecure male when confronted with the possibility of a fully-realised female is an either/or representation: a woman may either be virtuous or intelligent but rarely combines desirable qualities. The de-emphasising of Penelope’s intelligence appears symptomatic of such a response. Boccaccio adds an extra caveat that Penelope’s virtue, ineluctably female, is thus intrinsically flawed.

Yet, the Penelope offered in The City of Ladies directly counterpoints the attitude of Boccaccio and those “philosophers, poets and orators too numerous to mention, who all seem to speak with one voice,” condemning the female sex. The eponymous city of Christine’s text symbolises this writing back to misogynistic tradition; evocatively labelled by Holderness “a memory palace”, the city is an imaginary structure occupied by the living memories of virtuous women. Further contrasting Boccaccio’s personally authoritative narrative tone, Christine frames her narrative with a dream vision in which the female embodiments of Reason, Rectitude and Justice visit a fictional Christine “to help [her] get rid of those misconceptions which have clouded [her] mind.”

As a student, the fictional Christine’s position mirrors that of her audience who are also undergoing instruction. The City of Ladies, therefore, subverts dominant discourse by claiming the source of its defence of womankind directly from “celestial creatures”. It’s ironic then, that of all the texts the most recognisably proto-feminist affords Penelope the shortest treatment. However, as in any city, how clearly can one individual be perceived? Rosalind Brown-Grant writes, Christine’s project necessitates that she “analyses history from the long-term view”, and, indeed, The City of Ladies is more

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71 De Pizan, The Book of the City of Ladies, 6.
72 Holderness, "Feminism and the Fall," 99.
73 De Pizan, The City of Ladies, 10.
invested in the collective “glorious good name of women.” To promote this larger cause, the Penelope figure becomes an expedient symbol of moral purity, representative of many women “who are just as spotless as they are beautiful” So whilst Boccaccio surreptitiously emphasises the inherent inferiority of the female sex, Christine stresses its general capacity for goodness. Nonetheless, both these medieval figures of Penelope are paradigmatic, strongly accenting the value of her virtuous example.

Following the medieval embalming of Penelope as an exemplum of feminine virtue, the character stagnated for centuries in a literary hinterland. Indeed, until her use as a scaffold for Joyce’s creation of Molly Bloom in Ulysses, Penelope was subjected to little development and remained, for the most part, the unidimensional faithful Penelope such as that transmitted by Boccaccio and Christine. This, to return to my introduction, is the received tradition bolstering Walter Allen Jr.’s conviction that Penelope’s actions in the Odyssey must conform to her public image or “she would not be the faithful Penelope.” Charles Martindale reminds us, “we are not the direct inheritors of antiquity”; the figure of Penelope has been historically refracted through varying representations, not necessarily directly rooted in Homer but which nonetheless affect the reading of her character in the Odyssey. This dialogic between the effects of later texts influencing the interpretation of earlier ones is deftly summarised by Jorge Luis Borges: “the fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.” Borges was writing about finding elements of the Kafkesque in writers preceding Kafka, but his conclusion is useful here nonetheless. Borges’ comments help to comprehend how each of these later figures of

75 de Pizan, The City of Ladies, 239.
76 Ibid., 144
77 Walter Allen Jr., “The Theme of the Suitors”, 118
Penelope is simultaneously constructed and constructive of the character read in the *Odyssey*. Thereby, the drawing of Penelope in broader and broader strokes by Ovid to Christine de Pizan is intimately connected to the erstwhile obfuscation of the nuances of her Homeric representation. Yet, the renewed critical interest in Penelope’s function in the *Odyssey* combined with the study of her textual representations throughout history reveals how compelling, complex and significant a role the character really plays.

Moreover, each transformation of the Penelopean figure presents an intriguing insight into the context of its author. So, as Penelope herself would understand, her faithfulness is not a simple matter after all.
Bibliography


