

The Un-Usual Suspects: Near Eastern Penelopean Parallels

In the last decade or so, scholarly interest in Penelope has exploded, focusing specifically on her role within the *Odyssey*, her voice as a vehicle for female agency, her craftiness, and how her literal weaving can serve as a metaphor for the weaving of Homer's tale itself (Heitman, 2005; Clayton, 2003; Felson-Rubin, 1994). Little attention, however, has been paid to Penelope's literary precedents within Near Eastern literature, from which tradition Homer's work, at least in part, derives (M.L. West, 1999; Parry, 1989). Usually the women in Near Eastern literature are hyper-sexualized (such as Ishtar, Potiphar's Wife, or the prostitute who seduces Gilgamesh in his epic) and seem to have little in common with the chaste Penelope. We would argue, however, that there are some examples of women who are crafty for the purpose of maintaining their loyalty, their sexuality taking a back seat to their paradigmatic cleverness.

In this paper, we will look at the Hebrew Bible as the precedent and *locus* for examples of the "virtuous wife," and in particular the stories of Tamar, Ruth, Esther and Judith in order to demonstrate that these parallels are not at all random, but are part of a much older Near Eastern tradition of which Penelope is certainly a part.

One such example, from *Genesis* 38, is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, whose husband died after the birth of their first and only son. Wishing to assure her son's place as heir to Judah as his first-born grandson to his first-born son, she attempts to re-instate herself within Judah's family as her brother-in-law's wife. After his death, Judah told Tamar to return to her father's home and live out the rest of her days in widowhood until such time as Judah's youngest son came of age to take her as wife. It soon became clear that he had no intention of marrying his youngest son to her despite his promise, so she cleverly outwitted Judah by posing as a prostitute. Before she agreed to have sex with him, as a pledge for his later payment of her services, she asked for his signet and cord, as well as the staff he was carrying; she later used these tokens to identify herself and the twins she was carrying as Judah's thereby assuring her children their place in the family of Judah.

The details of her story at first indicate a woman who is indeed sexually promiscuous, but the paradigm of the clever woman who overcomes male deceit is clearly an analogue for Penelope's character in the *Odyssey*. Tamar also serves as a parallel for Penelope in that both women found it important to keep their sons close to their rightful inheritance and thereby keeping the family line unbroken. Although we cannot ignore the blatant sexuality that Tamar uses to her advantage which Penelope supposedly does not, we must nevertheless consider the use of feminine wiles to disarm men as a paradigm which both women follow, albeit through different methods.

Bibliography

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