

## The Courtship of Penelope and Odysseus

Marriage, whether it is manifest as spousal harmony or disharmony, is a central motif in the Homeric epics, as critics have long noted. Odysseus and Penelope, Alcinous and Arete, and Hector and Andromache contrast with Helen and Menelaus, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and even Zeus and Hera. Penelope and Odysseus stand out among these couples not only as sharing a harmonious bond that arises from a similarity in intelligence and cunning but also as a symbol of “cosmic tranquility,” according to Emily B. West, who sees their reunion as also a “reformation of the stable core unity of their society.”

In this paper I will problematize the relationship between Odysseus and Penelope by suggesting that the obstacles to their reunion are not merely a matter of recognition on Penelope’s part and a rebuilding of trust on Odysseus’ part, since he has the example of Clytemnestra before him. Rather, I contend that Odysseus enters his own palace in disguise knowing that he must win Penelope as his bride once again as he joins the ranks of the suitors to vie for her hand in marriage. The two long exchanges between Odysseus and Penelope in Books 19 and 23 are thus part of an extended courtship ritual that is crucial before they can unite in their marriage bed, which ritually marks not simply their reunion but their re-marriage.

To develop my thesis, I will examine the love story of Penelope and Odysseus through the frame of contemporary popular romance. In her 2003 *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis explains that most romances contain “eight essential elements” that are necessary to create the formulaic tension between heroine and hero that will lead to the happy betrothal or marriage at the end of the novel (30). These characteristics include: the Society is defined, which is flawed in a way that will set up obstacles for the couple; the First Meeting takes place; the initial Attraction is charted; the Barrier to union is explored, which can be

internal or external, involving family, class, or physical separation; the Declaration of love or desire; the Point of Ritual Death, where the resolution of the story seems impossible because the barriers are too great; the Recognition scene where new information lifts the barrier-- the heroine or hero may be revealed for who they really are, or there may be an internal recognition of love or a realization of misunderstanding; and finally a Betrothal or Wedding that not only unites the lovers but is a mechanism whereby the community has reconstituted itself and celebrates its renewal.

By applying these eight elements of romance to the *Odyssey*, I hope to elucidate something important about the characters and structure of this epic, which Pamela Regis, Margaret Doody, and Northrup Frye all see as seminal to the historical development of the larger romance genre that is embedded with mythic patterns. Interestingly, the *Odyssey* has sometimes been criticized for the same things that have brought condemnation on popular romances: a sentimental happy ending, a fairy tale plot, a passive heroine, and the elevation of a mere domestic drama. Regis argues that though popular romance has been critiqued as a genre that reinforces female subordination, this genre in fact highlights female desire and agency. The heroine freely chooses the hero, and he freely chooses her. Informed choice is central for the heroine of romance, who starts encumbered and ends free, as does Penelope. Penelope is not merely trapped into her remarriage with Odysseus, but each freely chooses to enter once more into the marriage bond because they fall in love again through the process of their courtship ritual.

Partial Bibliography

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