

The Looming Issue: Domestic Space and Time for Shalott and Penelope

With such works as “Ulysses” and “The Lotus-Eaters,” it is not hard to make the assumption that Lord Alfred Tennyson is well-versed in Homeric traditions. Much of the scholarship connecting Tennyson with the classical tradition has focused on the poems mentioned above (Cronin 2002). However, there is very little scholarship connecting “The Lady of Shalott” to classics. Udall makes a brief mention of the similarity between Shalott and Penelope but only in terms of the web imagery their weaving (1990). However, I intend to focus more on the space of the loom itself. In the poem, Tennyson explores the mystical figure of Shalott, who is trapped at her loom, forced to weave for an undefined amount of time. Shalott, I believe, is very reminiscent of another weaving figure in classical myth, Penelope, wife of Odysseus. In this paper, I will draw out the parallels between Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” and Homer’s Penelope, and use those parallels to examine the structure of female space located in the vicinity of the loom. This space, I argue, separates females from the present world and keeps them in a liminal stage of time until some outside force (usually men) changes this, either for better or for worse.

Shalott and Penelope are female figures who take up the task of weaving, not through necessity, but through circumstance. In Tennyson’s poem, it is clear that Shalott weaves not of her own choice but rather because a terrible curse will befall her, should she stop weaving (Christ 2006: 1114). Similarly, Penelope weaves as her only way in which she can hold off the suitors who have invaded the house and held her ransom for her hand (ὄσσοι γὰρ νήσοισιν ἐπικρατέουσιν ἄριστοι, .../οἳ μ' ἀεκαζομένην μνῶνται, τρύχουσι δὲ οἶκον. *Od.* 19.130-133). Both are stuck to their loom, Shalott because of her curse and Penelope for the protection of her *oikos*. They weave to buy time for themselves and in doing so, trap themselves within a liminal time.

Looming, as stated by Pantelia, is a largely solitary act, located within the private sphere of the house (1993). When they weave, women retreat to this private space and isolate themselves. In this private, gendered space, they are separated from the reality of the outside world.

While there are differences in the nature and characteristics of Shalott and Penelope, both women are spatially and temporally stuck. Stuck to her loom, Penelope does something that is not available to Shalott: she unweaves her work. While Shalott's present existence is dependent on her continuous weaving, Penelope's present existence, specifically her present existence as Odysseus' wife, is dependent on her unweaving. I believe that the weaving (and unweaving) done by both women is an attempt to preserve their present existence, but the space of the loom separates them from the reality outside of that space. The space beyond the loom is not only public, but male and it is only in the male space that the present reality happens. The only way for Shalott and Penelope to become part of the present reality is by the introduction of a male figure, Lancelot and Odysseus, respectively.

By comparing both female figures, I want to examine the idea of gendered space, and specifically how it works against women. Gendered space, when transgressed illegally, as Shalott does, will lead to ruin. When a woman respects the space, as Penelope does, she survives. But the gendered space also exists on a physical plane. A woman, when engendered in her own space, loses touch with present reality. Only with male interference (rather his permission) can a woman engage with the present reality.

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