

## A Story with No Ending: Penelope and Ambiguous Loss in the *Odyssey*

Families whose loved ones go missing in action (MIA) confront a different type of loss from families whose loved ones' bodies are returned home. Not only have these MIA families lost a spouse or child, but they are also deprived of an explanation of their loss. Accordingly, their unresolved feelings of grief are as much about narrative, a story without an ending, as about death (Boss 1999, 2006; Hylton 2014, 99). This paper employs recent sociological and psychological research on this "ambiguous loss" to frame the narrative strategies of the *Odyssey* and its portrayal of Penelope's grief.

Although many scholars have commented upon Penelope's immobility (some positively, e.g. Mueller; others negatively, e.g. Olson) and her resilience (Thalman, Murnaghan, Foley 2001, Pache), none has yet examined how these qualities are linked with the context of her loss as the wife of an MIA soldier. I argue that, like many spouses of MIA soldiers, Penelope experiences her loss of Odysseus as an ongoing trauma in which Odysseus is psychologically present, but physically absent. The persistent psychological presence of Odysseus at first immobilizes her in grief, but later creates an opportunity for change. Odysseus arrives home just as his wife displays her resilience by setting a contest for her suitors. Penelope's decision to remarry not only serves as a convenient set-up for Odysseus' revenge, but also resolves the subplot of her unresolved grief by demonstrating her ability to accept change, while maintaining her memories of Odysseus.

Penelope's first appearance in the epic introduces her preoccupation with the memory of Odysseus. She tells the bard Phemius that his song about the homecoming of the Greeks causes her unforgettable grief (πένθος ἄλαστον, 1.342) because she constantly remembers (μεμνημένη αἰεὶ, 1.343) her absent husband. Her interruption of the bard's song calls attention to the fact that

the story of her husband's homecoming has also been interrupted. This memory of Odysseus immobilizes Penelope as she weeps for him until she falls asleep (1.363-364; cf. 16.450-451, 19.603-604, 21.357-358). The narrative repetitions of her grief perform the trauma and stasis that result from ambiguous loss.

Penelope's immobility in the poem's opening books is countered by her resilience in its closing books. One of the heroic qualities she shares with her husband is resilience (Foley 1978, Arthur, Thalmann, Marquardt). Penelope's resilience is not, however, limited to her weaving trick, which has postponed her remarriage while she keeps open the possibility of Odysseus' return. Rather, as Boss (1999, 2006) has shown, resilience in the context of ambiguous loss means keeping an absent loved one psychologically present without becoming so preoccupied as not to move forward in life. Books 18-20 dramatize this process for Penelope. Her frozen grief begins to melt (19.204-209) as she recognizes that her story continues despite her unresolved loss. When she announces the bow contest, she claims that she will leave behind the house in which she was married, but will remember it always (τοῦ ποτε μεμνήσεσθαι ὄϊομαι, 19.581 = 21.79). This decision models not her ambivalence toward Odysseus, but rather her impressive resilience.

In some ways, the *Odyssey*, with its tidy ending of reunion, defies the reality that most people never find closure when they lose a loved one, especially a soldier who goes missing in action. Yet the subplot of Penelope's ambiguous loss gives voice to the perspective of those who learn to live with a story of loss that has no ending.

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