THE OTHER PENELOPE: ANALYZING AMBIGUITY IN OVID'S *HEROIDES*

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Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey*, who spends twenty agonizing years waiting for her husband Odysseus, represents to many the ultimate example of chastity, patience, and loyalty. Her appearances in the *Odyssey* all serve to reinforce these Homeric traits and set Penelope up to be the perfect wife: she dutifully takes care of Odysseus' home to the best of her ability, warding off a dizzying number of suitors and going against tradition by refusing to re-marry. She raises her son, Telemachus, alone, all while understanding the threats to both his inheritance and his life. Extremely limited by her situation and environment, and going directly against what is expected of her as a presumed widowed woman in ancient Greece, Penelope draws on her own wisdom and cunning to preserve her family's future, placing all her hope in the possibility that Odysseus is still alive somewhere, fighting to return to her. Her wit and wiliness, specifically, are viewed as assets wielded in a similar fashion to Odysseus himself, placing her as his intellectual match. While Penelope certainly is an important part of the world Homer creates, the *Odyssey* is not her story. Throughout the epic, she represents an end goal for Odysseus to work towards: the grand reward for all the suffering he was forced to undergo.[1] Homer goes into great detail describing each of Odysseus' adventures, filling in the twenty year timeline of his disappearance. However, there is little insight into Penelope's own experience. Apart from a few key events, such as her deceiving the suitors with her skilled weaving, Penelope's voice is largely absent from a story in which she plays such a crucial role. The gaps in her narrative, however, create the perfect setting for building upon and analyzing her character.

In the first of his series of poems, the *Heroides,* Ovid attempts to re-write Penelope's story from her own perspective. The first-person account of her experiences

[1] Anastasia Belinskaya, "Penelope's Odyssey," *Classical Journal* 115, no. 2 (2019): 183.

seem at first to be somewhat straightforward: in using her own voice, she gains a degree of agency and creates her own narrative both dependent on and independent of the *Odyssey*. However, in examining the ways in which Ovid wields her character within an elegiac setting, the result is a much more ambiguous Penelope who sometimes resembles her Homeric counterpart, while other times directly challenges it. Exactly how Ovid creates this ambiguity is the main focus of this paper.

The Roman poet Ovid, born in 43 BCE, explores Penelope's voice in his collection of poems titled the *Heroides*. Although hard to pin down an exact date, the *Heroides* are usually grouped within the same timeframe of Ovid's earlier works.[2] In these poems, Ovid explores a range of characters and emotions, using an interesting format: letters. Compiled of fifteen letters written in elegiac couplets, the *Heroides* details the perspectives of famous women from Greek myth who have been abandoned or otherwise separated from their male 'heroes'. By using the epistolary[3] format, each woman is given the opportunity to create a first-person narrative. Through Ovid's *Heroides*, women from Greek myth whose perspectives are often overlooked gain new voices, allowing them to explain their own version of the events they experienced. The letters each address their male recipient directly in an almost accusatory setting, as we will see. The works are unusual for their use of the female voice in a literary genre most commonly occupied by men: elegy.[4] As Thea S. Thorsen states in her essay "Ovid The Love Elegist," "Transformed and transported into Ovid's *Heroides*, the outlook, behavior,

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[2] Megan O. Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides and the Augustan Principate*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 7.
[3] Peter Knox, "Introduction," in *Heroides: Selected Epistles*, ed. Peter Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.
[4] Mathilde Skoie, "The Woman," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, ed. Thea S. Thorsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 83.

and experiences of the heroines resembles those of the *poeta-amator,* or the *poeta-amatrix*."[5] Thus, although speaking in a feminine voice, the women of the *Heroides* take on male roles and characteristics. The genre of elegy both frees and constrains them.

Ovid is widely regarded as one of the masters of Roman elegiac poetry. Elegy is, in essence, a genre dealing with erotic love. As stated by Thorsen, these works are often "sexy, elegant, (and) light-hearted; but also unhappy, plaintive, and even tragic."[6] The overall theme of elegy, furthermore, is rooted in desire, specifically the desire of the male lover. This desire is erotically charged and often rooted in sexual pleasure, as the lover "longs for his beloved's affection as much as her body."[7] The tragic aspect of elegiac poetry often lies with the object of the male lover's affections being just out of permanent reach or ownership. As such, "The ambition of elegiac love is decidedly neither marriage nor offspring."[8] The tug-of-war aspect to elegiac poetry sets up two distinct themes: fantasy and reality, as "there is a mostly insurmountable gap between what the elegiac lover desires and what he experiences."[9] Nevertheless, the male lover is overcome with passion, often resulting in "reckless" and "scandalous" behavior.[10] Overall, the rise of elegy, given the time period of its popularity, is surprising. The loose morality

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[5] Thea S. Thorsen, "Ovid The Love Elegist," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy,* ed. Thea S. Thorsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 119.
[6] Thorsen, "Ovid The Love Elegist," 115.
[7] Thea S. Thorsen, "Introduction: Latin Love Elegy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy,* ed. Thea S. Thorsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.
[8] Thorsen, "Introduction: Latin Love Elegy," 3.
[9] Thorsen, "Introduction: Latin Love Elegy," 5.
[10] Lisa Piazzi, "Latin Love Elegy and Other Genres," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy, ed. Thea S. Thorsen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 236.

encouraged by the elegiac genre directly conflicted with the shifting politics of the new Roman Empire.[11]

As Megan O. Drinkwater states in her book, *Ovid's Heroides and the Augustan Principate,* during the time period in which Ovid was living and writing in, "Rome was in transition from one civil war to another."[12] The rise of Augustus marked a shift in Rome's political structure from republic to empire, ending decades of political unrest but simultaneously drastically changing the role of the Roman citizen in civic life.[13] With the new centralization of power, many of the privileges that the Roman elite enjoyed during the time of Rome's republic were stripped or vastly reduced.[14] In addition to the changing roles of the Roman citizen, Augustus' reformed Rome also expected certain behaviors. Focuses on morality, good virtues, and the family only made the scandals of elegiac poetry seem all the more obscene, as they went against the expectations of a "good" Roman citizen.[15] In the context of the *Heroides*, Drinkater suggests that Ovid perhaps uses his heroines to reflect his own feelings towards his shifting political climate, as they all focus on "political or personal loss, public degradation, failures of self-identification, an inability to speak freely, and a pointed questioning of narrative authority."[16] The *Heroides* then becomes a commentary and critique of the new treatment of Roman citizens. Ovid's use of the female voice to express such sentiments is ideal, as Drinkwater states they are able to effectively "comment on the translation of Roman citizens from significant members of their fatherland into subjects whose voice holds little weight in

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[11] Thorsen, "Introduction: Latin Love Elegy," 11.
[12] Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides,* 3.
[13] Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides,* 5-6.
[14] Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides*6.
[15] Piazzi, "Latin Love Elegy," 236.
[16] Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides,* 6.

social and political discourse."[17] In the case of Penelope, both she and Ovid desire the same thing. Penelope wishes for the return of Odysseus, Ovid for the return of a pre-Augustan past and the rights/privileges that came with it. *Both* want a return of status.[18] In interpreting the *Heroides* as both elegiac love letters and political commentaries, Ovid already sets up ambiguity with their very premise, which will be explored fully in this paper.

The first epistle, written from Penelope to Odysseus, takes place during a specific point in the *Odyssey's* narrative.[19] Through her description of specific events, the letter is composed towards the end of Odysseus' journey, meaning nearly twenty years have passed since the pair have seen each other. In his essay "The Epistolary Mode and the First of Ovid's *Heroides,*" Duncan F. Kennedy argues that Penelope's letter is, in fact, written the very day before Odysseus slaughters the suitors, pointing to the fact that Telemachus has already returned from his visit with Nestor.[20] By contextualizing Penelope's letter within the *Odyssey*, Ovid creates a tension between her and the audience from the beginning, as they already know the outcome of the story.

The overall tone of Penelope's letter is one of frustration and despair: Penelope writes to Odysseus, begging him to return home and questioning what could possibly be keeping him away. As the reader discovers, this letter is merely one out of a whole collection of letters sent by Penelope to Odysseus, all of them unanswered.[21] Ovid introduces Penelope's plights in sections. She first laments that Odysseus is still missing,

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[17] Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides,* 5.
[18] Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides,* 42.
[19] Alessandro Barchiesi, "Future Reflexive: Two Modes of Allusion and Ovid's Heroides," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 95, (1993): 336
[20] Duncan F. Kennedy, "The Epistolary Mode and the First of Ovid's *Heroides,*" in *Oxford Readings in Ovid*, ed. Peter Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 76.
[21] Ovid, *Heroides* 1.61-62.

wishing he had never left in the first place and emphasizing the fear she has over not knowing his whereabouts. She then compares this to the fears she had while he was still warring with the Trojans, stating that while the war is over for the rest of Greece, for her alone it remains with Odysseus' absence. She then informs him of the struggles she and his family face, urging him to think not only of her, but their son, Telemachus, and his father, Laertes. Describing her own aged appearance in the last lines of the poem, Ovid emphasizes the sheer amount of time Odysseus has been missing through Penelope's 'transformation' from a girl to an old woman. Through her letter, Ovid provides audiences with a new perspective on the *Odyssey*, one driven by Penelope herself.

The language of the *Heroides,* as well as how Ovid chooses to interpret her, are important in understanding how Penelope transforms from her source material. Her character shifts to be presented from a Greek to Roman context, and furthermore epic to elegiac poetry.[22] These choices result in a much more complicated Penelope. While Homer is somewhat straightforward in telling audiences *who* Penelope is, the wise, crafty and loyal wife of Odysseus, Ovid is much more ambiguous. Ovid adopts and adapts Penelope's Homeric traits onto his own version of the character, at times both diminishing and emphasizing them. His depiction of her actions and emotions throughout the *Heroides* prompt several avenues of interpretation.

Much of Penelope's ambiguity comes from the specific language Ovid uses to describe both her and the events she experiences throughout the first epistle. Ovid, perhaps deliberately, allows for several possible interpretations of key events in both the *Odyssey* and his own *Heroides*. By subtly referencing details from his source material,

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[22] Megan O. Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides and the Augustan Principate*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 5.

Ovid expertly calls into question the accuracy or validity of certain scenes and conversations from the *Odyssey*. Furthermore, Ovid chooses to focus on Penelope's emotions, thus diving into her personal experiences. Throughout the first epistle, three major themes arise that I will discuss: Ovid's use of anger, eroticism, and deception.

While Penelope is called many things in Homer's *Odyssey*, 'angry' is not one of them. She certainly grieves the absence of her husband, and is even prone to weeping over him,[23] however her overall demeanor is that of a calm and collected woman. Ovid, however, is not content with such a picture. It is extremely understandable that Penelope would be angry, furious even, over her dire circumstances. The uncertainty she faces in every aspect of her life, her husband's whereabouts, her son's safety, and her own fate, are enough to drive anyone mad. The tone Ovid chooses Penelope to take, however, starting in the first line of the poem, suggests that perhaps Penelope directs some of that anger towards Odysseus himself.

In the opening of *Heroides I*, Penelope addresses Odysseus: *Haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixe / nil mihi rescribas attinet: ipse veni!* ("Your Penelope sends this to you, slow Odysseus, write back nothing to me in reply: come yourself!" Ovid, *Heroides* 1.1-2) The use of *lento* to describe Odysseus is interesting, as he is often noted for his quick thinking in dire situations. Thus, Penelope describing him as "slow" or "lazy" seems to directly counter previous assumptions about him and his character. While Penelope isn't *wrong* about Odysseus being slow, he has in fact taken several decades to return to her and is still missing, the word slow implies a degree of personal agency on his part. He is not "missing," but rather "slow," thus he *must* have some power over his own whereabouts in Penelope's mind. This is further emphasized by her plea to

[23] Homer, *Odyssey* 1.336-334.

Odysseus: *ipse veni*. Assuming Odysseus is alive, she would rather he simply *stop* being slow and show up in person rather than writing back to her. Ovid sets up Penelope as inherently wary of Odysseus' own agency in his disappearance

This theme is further played out in lines 51-58. Starting in line 51, Penelope laments how isolated she is in her own struggles: *diruta sunt aliis, uni mihi Pergama restant* ("If Troy has been demolished for others, for me alone Troy remains," Ovid, *Heroides* 1.51) Here Penelope outright complains, this time directing her anger towards the war that took her husband from her. Ovid furthermore emphasizes how alone Penelope is. Not only is there no one to help get her out of her current situation, there is also no one to even share her mental load with. However, she soon directs this anger back towards Odysseus.

> iam seges est, ubi Troia fuit, resecandaque falce
> luxuriat Phrygio sanguine pinguis humus;
> semisepulta virum curvis feriuntur aratris
> ossa, ruinosas occulit herba domos.
> victor abes, nec scire mihi, quae causa morandi,
> aut in quo lateas ferreus orbe, licet! (Ovid, *Heroides* 1.52-58)
>
> Now a crop is where Troy used to be, and soil rich
> with Phrygian blood must be reaped by the scythe.
> Half-buried bones of men are struck by curved plows,
> grass covers the fallen houses.
> Though victorious, you are absent, it is not known to me
> what is the cause for your delaying,
> or in what part of the world you lie hidden with a heart of steel.

Here, Penelope experiences a variety of emotions. Imagining a ruined Troy recovering from a decade of war, she begins with her fears, describing the battlefield being riddled with bones, perhaps Odysseus amongst them. Acknowledging him as a "victor," however, draws attention to the fact that he *couldn't* be amongst the dead, and there must be

another reason he hasn't yet returned home. Her fear morphs to anger with the use of *ferreus*, again implying that Odysseus has some degree of agency, and actively chooses to stay hidden. Ovid again sets up a dynamic between Penelope and Odysseus where neither seems to be fully trusting of one another: Penelope by questioning his desire to return at all, and Odysseus by, as Penelope puts it, staying hidden.

Ovid outright describes Penelope's anger in line 68: *irascor votis, heu, levis ipsa meis!* ("I myself fly into a rage, alas, due to my trivial prayers!" Ovid, *Heroides* 1.68). The use of *irascor* is a new, intense emotion from Penelope. As stated earlier, in the *Odyssey*, Penelope has many traits, but she is never shown to be angry. The use of *irascor* seems to be an attempt by Ovid to understand the emotional toll Odysseus' long absence has taken on her. Ovid is right, Penelope *should* be angry. She was forced to raise her son alone, endure the emotional strain of not knowing if her husband was safe during a war, and then endure further hopelessness when he did not return. The safety of her kingdom, her child, and even herself are all at risk. It's no wonder that all this uncertainty has made her "fly into a rage." Ovid's Penelope is more emotional, but is also seemingly more *aware* of her emotions.

Ovid also explores Penelope as a jealous woman, as seen in lines 75-78

> haec ego dum stulte metuo, quae vestra libido est,
> esse peregrino captus amore potes.
> forsitan et narres, quam sit tibi rustica coniunx,
> quae tantum lanas non sinat esse rudes. (1.75-78)
>
> While I foolishly fear these things, which is your desire,
> you may be seized by a foreign love.
> Perhaps you also say that your wife is rustic,
> the sort of wife who objects to coarseness only in wool.

These lines, while also an example of Penelope's anger, can be interpreted as Ovid transforming Penelope into a Roman elegiac lover. In imagining losing her husband to this "foreign love," she becomes the typical "rejected lover" of elegiac poetry.[24] Ovid makes a direct reference to events from the *Odyssey*, but this time from Penelope's perspective, although Odysseus never mentions such events to her in the original text. Here, Ovid paints a picture of Penelope as a jealous woman, not a concerned wife. She downplays her status as a *rustica coniunx* instead of emphasizing its virtuous connotations, as clearly these traits are not enough to 'woo' Odysseus home.

The culmination of Penelope's anger comes with her description of how the suitors treat both her and her house. *inque tua regnant nullis prohibentibus aula; viscera nostra, tuae dilacerantur opes.* ("and they reign in your palace with no hindering; our heart, your wealth, is being torn to pieces." Ovid, *Heroides* 1.89-90). The use of *viscera nostra*, "our/my heart" compared with *tua opes* is an interesting comparison by Ovid. Also ambiguous, Ovid could be equating Penelope with Odysseus' riches, or placing her as the crown of them. Both are being destroyed by the suitors, and both are assumedly important to Odysseus, thus all the more reason for him to return. Penelope seems to use this act of persuasion throughout the *Heroides*, again implying that Odysseus has some sort of agency in his own absence. In her mind, at least, it seems Odysseus bears some responsibility for the events that have happened while he has been gone, which she draws attention to earlier in her letter by stating his absence is what feeds the suitors. Again, Penelope directs her anger towards Odysseus. Drinkwater provides further analysis on the duality of the scene, drawing specific attention to Ovid's use of the word *viscera*:

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[24] Thea S. Thorsen, "Ovid The Love Elegist," 119.

> "The option–again usually in the plural–of *viscera* as corresponding to the seat of the emotion or mind presents us with a Penelope who can hardly think through her struggle any longer. Understanding *viscera* as 'entrails for sacrifice' on the other hand, offers a Penelope ready to consider her body a sacrifice to her role as protector of her husband's estate and her role as his wife."[25]

This heightened state of emotion, as proposed by Drinkwater, I would argue, further connects to Penelope's anger at Odysseus. Whether it is her mind or her body being attacked, both can be remedied by his return, which, as we have seen, she believes he is purposely delaying. Her letter is, essentially, calling for him to take action

In addition to anger, Ovid uses eroticism to separate his Penelope from Homer's, transforming her from a Greek woman to a Roman elegiac lover. In line 7, Penelope expresses her desire that Paris had never made it to Troy at all, thus eliminating the need for Trojan war in the first place, and that if such events happened, *non ego deserto iacuissem frigida lecto* ("I would not have lied cold in a deserted bed," Ovid, *Heroides* 1.7) The *deserto lecto* that Penelope refers to early in the poem has multiple connotations. The "empty bed" Penelope lays in draws attention to both the stinging absence of her husband and the amount of time she has gone without him. In addition, by referring to herself as *frigida*, Ovid creates a strong mental image of a lonely Penelope pining after her missing husband. However, the line also fits into the role of transforming Penelope into an elegiac writer. The act of pining over Odysseus cements such a picture. The bed is an important aspect of Penelope and Odyseus' relationship not only in terms of loyalty (referring to the test Penelope will ultimately give Odysseus by deceiving him into thinking the bed has been moved), but also sexuality. In an elegiac light, Penelope's "deserted" and "cold" bed suggest a lack of sex. This gives a new, ambiguous lens to

[25] Drinkwater, *Ovid's Heroides*, 53.

Penelope's character, putting together her duality as both a chaste loyal wife and a woman with sexual needs.

The overall theme of erotic love and desire presents a connecting thread throughout *Heroides I*. In line 12, Penelope states *res est solliciti plena timoris amor.* ("Love is a thing full of troubled fear." Ovid, *Heroides* 1.12) "Love" *amor* and "fear" *timor* seem to be two emotions that drive Penelope in the *Heroides*. This love/fear relationship directly reflects Roman elegiac tropes. As Thorsen states in her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy,* "In the Latin elegiac world, life can in fact consist of only two activities: love-making, if the beloved is present and accessible, and writing about past joys, future hopes and imminent anguish, if the lover is denied access to his beloved."[26] Thus, Penelope's love *and* fears become eroticized, brought together by her desire for Odysseus. Ovid constantly has her flipping back and forth between loving and fearing, and here he combines the two. By asserting these as driving motives behind Penelope's actions, Ovid again asserts his Penelope as much more emotional than Homer's.

Turning lastly to the theme of deception, which Ovid takes from Homer and emphasizes in the *Heroides*, Penelope both deceives and *is* deceived. Penelope's deceptive acts call into question just exactly how much power she wields throughout the course of the letter. Again, Ovid uses references to the *Odyssey* to create a further ambiguous narrative.

In lines 9-10, Penelope references her weaving: *nec mihi quaerenti spatiosam fallere noctem lassaret viduas pendula tela manus.* ("nor would the hanging web tire my widowed hands which seek to deceive the spacious night." Ovid, *Heroides* 1.9-10). Her

[26] Thorsen, "Introduction: Latin Love Elegy," 5.

statement is full of ambiguity, mainly pertaining to *fallere*. It is somewhat unclear who or what is doing the "deceiving". Ovid here clearly refers to the famous scene in Homer's *Odyssey* where Penelope deceives the suitors by undoing her weaving each night, in order to postpone having to choose one of them as her next husband. In the *Odyssey* Penelope's clever trick reinforces her devotion to Odysseus, as she goes to any length to protect their marriage. In the *Heroides*, Ovid dives deeper into the aspect of deceiving. Is it Penelope doing the deceiving? Is she deceiving the suitors, or the "spacious night" she refers to, merely attempting to fill the long hours by distracting herself from Odysseus and their *deserto lecto*? Or perhaps she is trying to deceive herself, or even is being deceived by the "spacious night" owing to the immense amount of time that has passed since she has last seen or heard of Odysseus. Ovid creates much more emotional tension in the scene through such ambiguity, giving more insight into Penelope's feelings surrounding her weaving. Earlier in the line she describes herself and her hands as exhausted, both from the weaving and the deception, wherever or whoever it may be coming from.

Next, Ovid toys with the audience's prior knowledge of events in the *Odyssey*. Lines 61-62, *quamque tibi reddat, si te modo viderit usquam, traditur huic digitis charta notata meis.* ("What he will deliver to you, if only he will have seen you anywhere, is these letters handed over, having been inscribed by my fingers." Ovid, *Heroides* 1.61-62), are full of foreshadowing and dramatic irony for Ovid's audience. A subtle suggestion by Ovid, it is implied that this very letter will end up in Odysseus' hands, as he has possibly already returned to Ithaca disguised as a beggar.[27] Ovid could also be alluding to Penelope's own wit and wisdom, implying that she knows or at least suspects to some degree that her husband is home. Furthermore, this line establishes her letter as one out of

[27] Kennedy, "The Epistolary Mode," 76.

many letters that she has written and sent, an important factor in considering her agency throughout Odysseus' absence. She may not be able to travel, but her words can. [28]

The last lines of *Heroides I* similarly end the epistle on an ambiguous note. Penelope describes her appearance after Odysseus' long years away: *Certe ego, quae fueram te discedente puella, protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus.* ("Certainly I, who had been a girl at your departure, though you should return immediately, will seem to be made an old woman." Ovid, *Heroides* 1.115-116). Penelope's description of herself is an interesting bit of irony by Ovid as it is *Odysseus* who will appear old (as he is disguised as a beggar) when Penelope first reunites with him.[29] Could this be another hint that Penelope is aware of the events unfolding? This ending also points to the differences between Penelope and Odysseus, and the realities each of them are facing. Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus has the gods, namely Athena, on his side. His transformation into a beggar is just that, a transformation assisted by divine powers. After he accomplishes his goals, he can simply transform back. Penelope's transformation, however, is a permanent reality. She has aged for twenty years into the "old woman" she describes, and there is no transforming back. The consequences of the Trojan war, and perhaps Odysseus' absence, are clear to see: Odysseus has missed *so* much of their life together. Perhaps Penelope decides to end on this note to truly drive this point home.

In discussing Penelope and the *Heroides* as a whole, current scholarship seems to have a loose consensus in that the letters portray women in a favorable light, creating strong, complex characters that take back control of their narratives from their male counterparts.

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[28] Belinskaya, "Penelope's Odyssey," 175.
[29] Barchiesi, "Future Reflexive," 336.

Looking at the first few lines of Penelope's epistle, we have previously discussed how Penelope's anger makes her take on an accusatory tone that suggests Odysseus holds some degree of blame concerning his absence. While anger is not one of Penelope's Homeric traits, it does deepen her perspective on the events of the *Odyssey* in the *Heroides*. Several modern authors take this interpretation a step further, arguing that lines 1-2 overall give Penelope much more agency than she ever had in the *Odyssey*, and helps her establish her own narrative.

First turning to Anastasia Belinskaya's article "Penelope's Odyssey" and Andreas N. Michalopoulos' article "Male Voices in Ovid's *Heroides*" both provide explanations for Penelope's character and treatment. Belinskaya argues that Penelope takes on an unprecedented amount of agency in the *Heroides*, and through her letter becomes alike to Odysseus himself.[30] She draws specific attention to lines 1-2 in the poem, where Penelope speaks directly to Odysseus, saying "Come yourself". Here, she argues, "in the *Heroides* she, in her capacity as author, controls men's movement from the very first line of her letter, where she commands Ulysses'[31] return".[32] Through her writing, she embarks on the very same journey as her husband, going from Troy to Ithaca and back again.[33] She becomes a confident, strong, independent woman who, although limited by earlier literary descriptions, re-writes her own story to take on many of the characteristics Odysseus possesses (trickery, deceit, adventure, etc). In this interpretation, Ovid becomes less of an author than Penelope, as she takes control of her setting and narrative.[34]

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[30] Belinskaya, "Penelope's Odyssey," 177.
[31] Specific choice of translating as "Odysseus;"
[32] Belinskaya, "Penelope's Odyssey,"183.
[33] Belinskaya, "Penelope's Odyssey," 177-178.
[34] Belinskaya, "Penelope's Odyssey," 182-183.

Michalopoulos similarly interprets Ovid's work as empowering its female subjects, and in the case of Penelope argues she becomes more independent. Michalopoulos discusses how Ovid's *Heroides* 'flips the script' on male and female characters by emphasizing the women's voices and marginalizing the men's.[35] Using letters, he states, "The letter writers have the opportunity to provide a more personal, or even alternative, narrative, because the epistolary genre blurs the boundaries between the 'real' and the 'fictional'."[36] This sets up a scene where Penelope is the one in control of the narrative, not Odysseus. Michalopoulos acknowledges that Ovid is a man writing from a woman's perspective, but argues that this does not detract from Penelope's empowered treatment.[37]

Turning to the theme of desire and eroticism, understanding Ovid's use of elegiac tropes is important for analyzing how Penelope transforms from Greek to Roman. Many authors point to Ovid's use of the first person as proof of her reclaimed autonomy. Through the use of letters, Penelope is able to convey her original, unfiltered thoughts, allegedly not impacted by her previous literary depictions or her husband. Her voice alone exists in the narrative, and thus she becomes a much stronger and independent character. This claim is backed up thoroughly by Belinskaya, as discussed above. Michalopoulos similarly draws attention to the first lines of *Heroides 1*, seeing Penelope's use of the imperative as evidence for her empowerment. In Penelope's case, the effect is "extremely ironic as well as very instructive regarding the role of the male voice in the Heroides: the most eloquent of the Greeks, their most capable and intelligent speaker, not only in the Homeric epics but also in later literature, is silenced by his own

[35] Andreas N. Michalopoulos, "Male Voices in Ovid's *Heroides*," *Dictynna*, (2022): 4.
[36] Michalopoulos, "Male Voices in Ovid's *Heroides*," 1.
[37] Michalopoulos, "Male Voices in Ovid's *Heroides*," 2.

wife,".[38] Both authors focus mainly on Penelope's *voice*, which makes Penelope both a strong woman *and* a strong writer. In her book *The Ovidian Heroine as Author,* Laurel Fulkerson argues that Penelope completely takes the place of Ovid as poets and elegists: "The women of the *Heroides* are successful in the same way as other elegiac Augustan poets - they may never 'get their man' but they create intricate *personae* and lasting poetry. In fact, the heroines are, because of their very abandonment, perfectly situated to become (like) male Augustan elegists: for both, desire creates poetry."[39] Here, as Fulkerson states, Ovid uses these key details to push his narrative of Penelope as a Roman woman.

Joseph Farrell discusses elegy further in his essay "Reading and Writing the *Heroides*". He begins his essay by stating that letter writing is an inherently gendered practice, one that is experienced differently by men and women, citing Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*.[40] Women, Ovid warns, must be exceptionally sneaky in their letter writing, to avoid any suspicion from outside parties,[41] while men must only be careful in ensuring he doesn't accidentally reveal multiple girlfriends.[42] Letter writing, Farrell states, is inherently more dangerous for women than it is for men.[43] Yet, there is also a sense of eroticism within this fear, rooted in Penelope's desire as mentioned previously.[44] Farrell then argues that the *intent* of letter writing is also gendered. Ovid shows that the act of seduction through letter writing is not a woman's place:

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[38] Michalopoulos, "Male Voices in Ovid's *Heroides*," 4.
[39] Laurel Fulkerson, *The Ovidian Heroine as Author: Reading, Writing, and Community in the Heroides,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 1-2.
[40] Joseph Farrell, "Reading and Writing the Heroides," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 98, (1998): 311.
[41] Farrell, "Reading and Writing the Heroides," 314-315.
[42] Farrell, "Reading and Writing the Heroides," 317.
[43] Farrell, "Reading and Writing the Heroides," 316.
[44] Thorsen, "Introduction: Latin Love Elegy," 5.

> "For women, the situation is different. Instead of deception and safety, the letter exacts from the female writer a more thorough disclosure of her soul even than she may wish, and can even become a document of incrimination serving only to prove… the seriousness and depravity of her desire."[45]

Farrell argues overall that the heroines are successful in deceiving *themselves* as they try to use their own truths as means of persuasion. In the case of Penelope, Farrell states, "try as she might to follow Ovid's advice about the letter of seduction, she finds that this is an essentially masculine form, that the woman writer is not sufficiently duplicitous to carry it off: that her writerly gift is not persuasion, but rather exquisitely, even painfully accurate self-disclosure."[46] Thus, Penelope cannot become a successful poet because she does not possess the inherent skills required by Ovid.

These analyses emphasize the ambiguity of Penelope's eroticism in the *Heroides*. While she is able to adopt elegiac tropes, it is difficult to pin down exactly *what* this means for her character. In R. Alden Smith's article "Fantasy, Myth, and Love Letters: Text and Tale in Ovid's *Heroides,*" he argues this language even paints Penelope as a "sex-starved, sex-obsessed woman."[47] In line 7 of the *Heroides*, Penelope laments her *deserto lecto*, which, as discussed previously, in addition to being seen as Penelope missing someone to share her bed with, could also be interpreted as missing the *activities* that come with it. M. Catherine Bolton similarly suggests a sexual undertone exists in the *Heroides* in her essay "Gendered Spaces in Ovid's *Heroides.*" Here, water serves as a metaphor for sexuality, specifically highlighting the gap between men and women's sexual freedom.[48] While men are able to traverse water, women are not. Thus, "Ovid

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[45] Farrell, "Reading and Writing the Heroides," 322-323.
[46] Farrell, "Reading and Writing the Heroides," 323.
[47] R. Alden Smith, "Fantasy, Myth, and Love Letters: Text and Tale in Ovid's *Heroides,*" *Arethusa* 27, no. 2 (1994): 229.
[48] M. Catherine Bolton, "Gendered Spaces in Ovid's *Heroides*," *The Classical World* 102, no. 3 (2009): 290.

demonstrates that the physical world outside of the domus is gendered, and that this gendered space becomes a moral marker for a woman's sexual identity."[49] While Penelope does not physically traverse this boundary, if we are to believe Belinskaya's analysis, she certainly fantasizes about it. The entire poem, in a sense, is Penelope fantasizing about Odysseus' return, and, based on the lines discussed above, could have elements that challenge Penelope's chaste narrative. This puts into question Penelope's Homeric status as a pure, idealized wife and woman, further placing her into a Roman narrative.

Deception is perhaps the most ambiguous scene in Ovid's *Heroides*. While on some levels she seems to match or even outwit Odysseus, some also interpret Penelope as losing some of her famed Homeric characteristics. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is well known for her impressive trickery. In the *Heroides*, however, as Sarah H. Lindheim argues in her book *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides,* "The only cunning the Ovidian Penelope can muster is an attempt to fool *herself*."[50] This is due to the specific language Ovid uses to describe the vehicle for her tricks, her weaving. Looking more closely at the lines, perhaps the most important of Penelope's traits, her cunning, are skillfully taken away by Ovid through his careful attention to wording. When describing her famous weaving, Ovid makes a slight tweak to the story: "Nor would the hanging web tire my widowed hands which seek to deceive the spacious night". Penelope's deception in the *Odyssey* highlights her intellectual abilities, placing her well above her suitors, who only caught her after her own maid exposed her. In *Heroides 1,* however, it is perhaps not the suitors Penelope deceives, but rather the

[49] Bolton, "Gendered Spaces," 273.
[50] Sarah H. Lindheim, *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003): 47.

"spacious night".[51] Thus, her trick becomes merely another desperate attempt to distract herself from the absence of Odysseus. It is not clear exactly which Ovid chooses.

In addition to the questions surrounding Penelope's ability to deceive either herself or others, Ovid calls into question her knowledge of past (and current) events in the *Odyssey* by subtly changing key details of the original story. As Smith states, "She reveals that she has been 'reading' the *Odyssey* in several instances when she purposefully deviates from Homer's text, most poignant of which, perhaps, is her statement that she sent Telemachus to Pylos to inquire about Odysseus."[52] This detail is extremely important to Penelope's deception, as it contextualizes the precise moment Penelope writes her letter in relation to the events of the *Odyssey*. Drawing attention to book 19, Ovid implies that Odysseus has, in actuality, already made his return to Ithaca, disguised as an old beggar.[53] In fact, Penelope may be handing her letter directly to him. As Barchiesi states, there is "a stranger already knocking at the gates of her house," and, reviewing lines 61-62, Penelope hands a letter to every stranger who comes to her shores. This detail creates an entirely new tone for *Heroides I.* If in fact Penelope *knows* Odysseus is back, her letter skillfully informs him of the dire situation while simultaneously questioning why he remains in hiding, still technically 'absent'. Like her test to Odysseus at the end of the *Odyssey,* where she tricks him into thinking their marriage bed has been moved, Penelope's letter transforms into the ultimate example of her intellectual power.

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[51] Farrell, "Reading and Writing the Heroides," 325-326.
[52] Smith, "Fantasy, Myth, and Love Letters," 257.
[53] Betine Van Zyk Smit, "From Penelope to Winnie Mandela – Women Who Waited," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 15, no. 3 (2008): 395.

As seen through the analyses above, Ovid's *Heroides* allows for countless interpretations. Penelope is both more and less Homeric than her counterpart from Homer's *Odyssey,* as seen through Ovid's use and transformation of her traits in terms of anger, jealousy, desire, bravery, and cunning. In some ways, she is a more independent character, as she takes control of specific narratives and changes key details in both her and Odysseus' stories. In some ways she transforms from a Greek wife to a Roman lover, adopting characteristics of the male elegiac lover through Ovid's attention to her love and lust for her husband, as well as her use of the epistolary form. Perhaps Ovid also used her as a tool for political commentary, as he struggled to come to terms with his own changing world. While it is difficult to pin down exactly *who* Ovid's Penelope is, there is no doubt she displays his immense talents as a writer by taking full advantage of her ambiguity.

Appendix A - Ovid, *Heroides* 1.1-116 Translation

Your Penelope sends these words to you, slow Odysseus, you write back nothing to me in reply: come yourself! Troy certainly lies in ruins, begrudged by Greek wives; Priam and all Troy were hardly so great. Oh, if only then, when he was making for Lacedaemon with his fleet, the adulterer was devoured, crushed by the raging sea. I would not have lied cold in a deserted bed, nor would I, left behind, complain about the slow days, nor would the hanging web tire my widowed hands which seek to deceive the spacious night. When have I not feared dangers more serious than real ones? Love is a thing full of troubled fear. I was imagining violent Trojans would go against you; I was always pale at the mention of Hector's name. Or if anyone was telling about Antilochus, having been conquered by the enemy, Antilochus was the cause of my fear. Or if Patroclus had fallen under deceptive armor, I was weeping that deceit is able to lack success. Tlepolemus has made warm the spear of Lycian with blood; my concern is renewed with the death of Tlepolemus. Finally, whoever had his throat slit, the heart of a lover was colder than ice. But a fair god pays good attention to pure love: Troy, having been overthrown, is ashes, my partner is safe.

The Greek leaders have returned, altars smoke, barbarian loot is offered to the ancestral gods. Bridges bring pleasing gifts to their safe husbands. They sing that the fate of Troy has yielded to their own. The lawful old men and nervous young girls are amazed. The wife hangs upon the lips of her husband as he tells his tale. And now someone shows the wild battle on the set table, and paints all of Troy with a little bit of wine: 'Here Simeus went, here is the land of Sigeia; here the high palace of old Priam stood. Here Achilles, here Odysseus was pitching tents, here mangled Hector frightened

the horses having been urged on. Old Nestor brought back news to your son, having been sent to seek you, while he to me. [He reported that Rhesus and Dolom were cut down by iron, and that one was betrayed by sleep, the other by treachery.] You dared, too! Forgetful of yours, to strike the Thracian camp with nocturnal tricks and to destroy so many men at the same time, having been aided by one! But you were good to beware, and first mindful of me. Continuously my heart fluttered with fear, until you, said to be victor, went through the friendly camp with Thracian horses.

But what is it useful to me is that Troy was destroyed by yours and your comrade's strength and, that which was wall, is ground, if I remain, like I was remaining while Troy endured, and my husband taken away, absent from me, without end? If Troy has been demolished for others, for me alone Troy remains, which the victorious inhabitant plows with captive cattle. Now a crop is where Troy used to be, and soil rich with Phrygian blood must be reaped by the scythe. Half-buried bones of men are struck by curved plows, grass covers the fallen houses. Though victorious, you are absent, it is not known to me what is the cause for your delaying, or in what part of the world you lie hidden with a heart of steel. Whoever turns his foreign stern to these shores, he leaves having been asked much concerning you from me, and what he will deliver to you, if only he will have seen you anywhere, is these letters handed over, having been inscribed by my fingers. I sent to Pylos, the Nelian fields of ancient Nestor; an uncertain rumor is sent back from Pylos. And I sent to Sparta; Sparta also unaware of the truth. Which lands do you inhabit, or rather where are you, slow one, being absent? It would be more useful if the fortifications of Apollo still stood. I myself fly into a rage, alas, due to my trivial prayers! If I knew where you were fighting, I would only fear war, and my complaint

would be joined with many. What do I fear, I don't know–However I fear everything, mad, and a broad scope is open for my concerns. Whatever dangers the sea holds, whatever dangers the land holds, I suspect are causes of so great a delay.

While I foolishly fear these things, which is your desire, you may be seized by a foreign love. Perhaps you also say that your wife is rustic, the sort of wife who objects to coarseness only in wool. May I be deceived, and may this crime vanish into thin air, or not to be free to return, you wish to be away. My father Icarius forces me to depart the widowed bed and continuously rebukes my immeasurable delays. It is permitted he may rebuke continuously; I am yours, it is right to be called yours; I Penelope will always be the wife of Odysseus. However that man is broken by my loyalty and my chaste prayers and he tempers his strength.

The Dulchi and Samii, and those who high Zacynthus bore, rush as a self-indulgent crowd at me, as suitors, and they reign in your palace with no hindering; my heart, your wealth, is being torn to pieces. What should I report to you of awful Pisandrus and Polybus and Medon and the greedy hands of Eurymachus and Antinous and the others, all who you yourself feed by your absence, with those things won at the cost of your blood. Needy Irus and Melanthius, herdsman of cattle to be eaten, add to your losses, the ultimate disgrace. Three in number are not suited for war, a wife without strength, and old Laertes, and Telemachus a boy. Recently, he was nearly taken away from me through ambush, while he prepares to go to Pylos with all reluctant. The gods, I beg, may command this, that with the fates going in order, he closes my eyes and yours! Here the guard of the cattle and the ancient nurse and the third is the faithful warden of the filthy pigsty act on your behalf. But Laertes, who is of no use in fighting, is not strong

enough to hold power in the middle of enemies. Stronger age will come to Telemachus (if only he may live); now this must be protected by a father's help. There is no strength for me to drive out the enemies from the house. You should come quickly, to your safe harbor and sanctuary. For you is, and I beg there is, a son, who softened by years ought to have been trained in his father's arts. Have a thought for Laertes; so that you may close his eyes he waits for the final day of his life. Certainly I, who had been a girl at your departure, though you should return immediately, will seem to be made an old woman.

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