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English 9

30 December 2024

### The Role of Women

Throughout history, literature has set boundaries on the way women are portrayed, limiting their roles in society. *The Essential Odyssey* is an epic poem written by Homer and translated by Stanley Lombardo. In the poem, King Odysseus of Ithaca journeys home from the Trojan War, facing many obstacles along the way. Back home in Ithaca, his loyal wife Penelope and estranged son Telemachus undertake challenges in his absence, persevering in his name. Throughout his journey, Odysseus makes both foes and friends, defining both the course of his story and his allies. In *The Essential Odyssey*, the portrayal of women is flawed and constrained by societal norms presented in the poem, as female characters such as Penelope, Circe, and Calypso are reduced to stereotypes of loyalty, seduction, and dependency.

The portrayal of Penelope in *The Essential Odyssey* is skewed and misleading as it fails to recognize her strength and wisdom. When first introduced, Penelope appears as a grieving and sorrowful queen, unable to function without her godlike husband, Odysseus. As the story unfolds, her representation remains unchanged, only receiving recognition for loyalty and obedience rather than her intellect. At one point, she is even told by Telemachus, “You should go back upstairs and take care of your work, Spinning and weaving” (Homer 11). Penelope is dismissed and diminished by her own son, which not only sets limits on her role and power but also defines how she is perceived. Despite the restrictions set upon her, Penelope still expresses

her intelligence throughout the poem. For instance, she challenges the suitors with the bow of Odysseus, knowing only her husband knows how to string it. Penelope states, “Whoever bends this bow and slips the string on its notch And shoots an arrow through all twelve axes, With him I will go” (Homer 186). By presenting the suitors with this challenge, she subtly manipulates them, demonstrating her strategic thinking. Penelope's cleverness and thinking abilities defy the limitations imposed on her, proving she is much more than a grieving queen.

The portrayal of Circe and Calypso in *The Essential Odyssey* is inaccurate. Circe, an immortal sorceress that has the ability to turn men into animals, encounters Odysseus when he arrives on her island. Her portrayal implies that women are dangerous, seductive and a threat to mankind. Homer writes, “In a golden cup, and with evil in her heart She laced it with drugs” (Homer 87). Circe is defined by her seductive powers and ability to manipulate men, portrayed as nothing more than an obstacle in Odysseus’ journey. Similarly, the goddess Calypso falls madly in love with Odysseus when he washes ashore on her island, Ogygia. Despite Calypso's extraordinary power as an immortal goddess, her role in the epic is defined by her love for Odysseus, reducing her character to revolve around him. In a desperate attempt to keep him from leaving her island, she offers him eternal life, saying, “You’d stay here with me, deathless” (Homer 35). By offering Odysseus immortality, she reveals her dependence on him despite being a deity. Calypso only receives recognition for her connection to Odysseus, diminishing her status as an immortal goddess. Ultimately, both characters are misrepresented and lack accurate portrayal.

To conclude, the portrayal of women in *The Essential Odyssey* is limited based on societal norms presented in the epic. Penelope’s intelligence and strategic thinking are overlooked because of her role as a loyal and grieving wife. Likewise, Circe and Calypso are

defined solely by seduction and dependency, disregarding their true character. Ultimately, Homer does not correctly portray the women in the Odyssey, failing to acknowledge their full complexity and significance.

Works Cited

Homer. *The Essential Odyssey*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007.