

Heroides 1.81-100 Commentary

Heroides 1 requires additional scrutiny as it is the first poem of Ovid's *Heroides* collection. Traditionally Roman poets placed a clear emphasis on opening lines and works, as this is an opportunity for the author to 'set the tone' for the works that follow in a collection.¹ What makes Ovid's *Heroides* distinct from other Latin elegy is his treatment of mythical characters, as well as giving them a voice in the first person. In *Heroides* 1 Ovid combines the worlds of epic and elegy in an innovative manner, by promoting Penelope to the protagonist and by using Book 19 of the *Odyssey* as the setting for her writing a letter to Ulysses.²

Here we have the female voice of Penelope evolving from her rather two dimensional depiction as the devoted wife. In *Heroides* 1 Penelope remains loyal, but she is also 'deeply wracked by fear (*timor*) and resentment (*querela*)'.³ Fear considers *Heroides* 1 to be Ovid's attempt to 'appropriate the 'epic' Penelope into her new 'elegiac' context'.⁴ The reader would have been expected to have prior knowledge of Homer's *Odyssey*, so that they could observe the evolution of Penelope's character and compare it to the interpretations of his literary predecessors.⁵ The decision to present Penelope's thoughts in a letter allowed Ovid the flexibility to illustrate the character's

¹ See Baca (1969) 1 and Farrell (1998) 324-5 and for further discussion of this.

² Knox (1995) 18.

³ Baca (1969) 5-6.

⁴ Fear (1993) 8.

⁵ See Propertius 2.6.23-24 and 2.9.3-8 for Penelope as the devoted wife. See also Fear (1993) 7-8 and Knox (1995) 87 for further discussion of Ovid's aim to explore Penelope's character in more detail.

intentions, hopes and fears. The main focus of this epistle of course being Penelope communicating her need for Ulysses to return home.

Heroides 1.81-100 is pivotal to Penelope's argument as to why Ulysses should return. Here she explains what is happening in Ithaca during his absence. She is defying both her father and the suitors in her refusal to remarry and this continued situation brings an additional sense of urgency to her plea. There is also a clear contrast made in this section between Penelope's refusal to remarry because of her unwavering commitment to her husband, and Ulysses' own infidelities, which naturally Ovid's readers would have already been aware of.⁶

In 81-84 there is a mirroring of the *Odyssey* 15.16-17, and Ovid is using the same pressures to demonstrate that sense of urgency referred to previously. The imagery of 'uiduo desidere lecto' as 'a deserted bed'⁷ illustrates both the pull on Penelope from her father Icarius to move on and her own desire to remain with her husband. This is emphasised further in 'Penelope coniunx semper Ulixis ero.'⁸ Baca observes here that there is a risk that Penelope is suggesting to Ulysses that he can behave as she wishes because she will always be his wife, therefore she moves on swiftly in her correspondence.⁹ Penelope is determined to stay married to Ulysses, but there is the hint of an admission that this may become difficult if Ulysses' absence was to remain prolonged. The separation of 'immensas' and 'moras' in line 82 creates a more vivid

⁶ Knox (1995) 104.

⁷ Ovid *Heroides* 1.81. See also Knox (1995) 105.

⁸ Ovid *Heroides* 1.84.

⁹ Baca (1969) 8-9. This is explored further by Fear (1993) 63, who also sees the transition from the pushings of Icarius to the suitors as a 'description of much more compelling and threatening forces.'

image of the length of delay in Penelope remarrying and is a testimony to her loyalty to her husband. The following repetition of 'increpet usque' in line 83 perhaps suggests Penelope's indignation at being pushed towards remarrying.¹⁰

Lines 87-90 are again reminiscent of the *Odyssey* 1.245-51/16.122-8, where Telemachus outlines his frustrations with the suitors and mentions them coming from Doulichion, Same and Zakynthos.¹¹ Penelope is warning Ulysses about the threat they pose to his position and intends to upset him with the statement that his possessions 'dilacerantur' (are being torn apart). The use of the passive here demonstrates the lack of protection for his material items, but arguably this is applicable to all Ulysses has left behind. Penelope's description that the suitors 'ruunt in me' (descend upon me), creates a predatory image with the active form and presents Penelope as a helpless victim in need of her strong husband to protect her. The use of the vivid present emphasises the continual pressure on Penelope.¹² In addition, the use of 'turba' to describe them further emphasises the sheer number of suitors.¹³ The fact that they rule 'regnant' in her palace is a further affront to both Penelope and to Ulysses, as he is not there to rule, nor to sort them out himself, and she is incapable of doing so alone.

The polysyndeton of '-que' followed by 'alios' places additional emphasis on the number of suitors overrunning the palace, and the choice of Ovid to culminate the list of suitors and their actions with the emphatically positioned 'ultimus... pudor' (as

¹⁰ Knox (1995) 105.

¹¹ Knox (1995) 106.

¹² Ibid. 106.

¹³ Fear (1993) 63.

the crowning disgrace) further adds insult to injury for Ulysses.¹⁴ This is also a clear attempt for Penelope to awaken Ulysses' jealousy, as it is clear that there are plenty of young men eager for her hand, thus further emphasising her desirability even after several years.

The description of those still loyal to Ulysses in line 97 'tres sumus inbelles numero' (we are three in number and unwarlike), paints a pitiful picture, which is stressed further by the balance of 'Laertesque senex Telemachusque puer' (and Laertes an old man, and Telemachus a boy) in line 98, to show that any opposition to the suitors from those at home would be feeble. This statement runs in direct contrast to the fact that Telemachus was twenty years of age when the Odyssey is set, but it is clear that Penelope wants Ulysses to think of Telemachus as a child.¹⁵ This image of the age of both of Penelope's supporters, further cements her argument for the lack of physical strength on her side, as Ovid has already communicated where she refers to herself as being 'sine viribus' (without strength) in line 97.

The framing of line 99 with 'ille' for Telemachus and 'ademptus' (taken away) with the insertion of 'paene' and 'nuper' illustrates the physical danger ever present for Telemachus without the protection of his father. This coupled with his earlier description as 'puer' is a clear attempt from Penelope to kindle Ulysses' fatherly instincts, so that he should return not just for her and his kingdom, but also to protect his son. The retelling of Telemachus' trip to Pylos with the suitors 'invitis', hints that

¹⁴ Ibid. 108.

¹⁵ Knox (1995) 109.

Telemachus will continue to defy the suitors, hence his continued perilous position without his father. Knox observes that Ovid here has diverged from the *Odyssey* 4.701 where Telemachus was to be ambushed on his return.¹⁶ Penelope also contradicts herself in 63-5, as here she states that Telemachus was going off to Pylos of his own volition, perhaps to demonstrate to Ulysses that the presence of his father is required to guide him and to present Ulysses with a sense of ever-present and imminent danger for his son. Cunningham views this section as structured 'to achieve a proper rhetorical sequence of ideas' for a performance, as well as to 'show Penelope's distraught condition.'¹⁷ Therefore considering the impact of the epistle on the Roman audience, rather than solely considering the dialogue between husband and wife.

This section of *Heroides* 1 is essential to the epistle because it provides Ulysses with a glimpse into Penelope's world in his absence and as we believe he would have been the messenger of the letter (as Penelope did not yet know that the stranger was her husband),¹⁸ this means that he would have been able to experience her turmoil and respond to her call immediately, as he did not have to wait to travel home with the weight of this knowledge burdening him.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also Kennedy (1949) 418-9 for further discussion of instances where Ovid deviates from Homer.

¹⁷ Cunningham (1949) 105-6.

¹⁸ For further discussion of this, see Farrell (1998) 324-5.

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