The New Yankeee

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Introduction

For any fans of Homer’s epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, I have some exciting news for you! Get on the next available flight to New York and head over to the Metropolitan Museum of Art! The museum recently opened up a new gallery showcasing two cloths, recently unearthed and dating back 3 millennia. The cloths depict several recognizable moments from the Trojan War. One of the cloths was woven by THE Helen ‘of the white arms’ and the other was woven by THE ‘circumspect Penelope’. Now, anyone who is a lover of Homer’s classics needs to see these because they give us a glimpse of the Trojan War from a new perspective, a female one at that!

**Penelope’s Cloth**

Now, before I start, I must compliment Penelope’s attention to detail. Despite the fact that she did not witness the war first hand, she managed to weave some incredibly detailed scenes. As a fan of Homer myself, I could probably go on a rant about everything on the cloth, but for the sake of efficiency and time, I will limit myself to only commenting on three of the events depicted, which I think are the highlights of Penelope’s cloth.

The first scene, and woven with a rich blue yarn, is depicts Odysseus’ departure to Troy, with Penelope and Telemachos seeing him off. As the wife of Odysseus, it makes sense for Penelope to include this in her cloth. Now, I don’t want to claim that Odysseus was reluctant to go to Troy, but he may not have been as eager to go off as the other Achaeans fighters, given that
he is one of the only warriors in the Achaean army who thought of what he left behind fondly and somewhat often. This is evident early on in *The Iliad* when Odysseus responded to Thersites abusing Agamemnon and threatened, “If once more I find you playing the fool, as you are now, nevermore let the head of Odysseus sit on his shoulders, let me nevermore be called Telemachos’ father …” (Book II, Ln 258-260). Clearly, Odysseus thought often enough about his son that he would see his father status as equal to keeping his head when it came to making promises. However, it can’t be denied that Odysseus was interested in gaining glory and amassing treasure as well. In Book IV (Ln 350-355) of *The Iliad*, Odysseus reacted aggressively when Atreides suggested that Odysseus was a lazy fighter and in Book IX (Ln 266-268) of *The Odyssey*, Odysseus asked Polyphemus for “a guest present or otherwise some gift of grace”. These two examples show, that to some degree, Odysseus cared about glory/reputation and amassing treasure. My point is that, even thought Odysseus though of his family from time to time, the man was prideful and a little greedy. The Trojan War was his opportunity to win glory and enrich himself.

Given the way Penelope’s cloth depicts the tearful farewell, I am inclined to say that Penelope disagreed with Odysseus’ desire for glory and wealth. Penelope loved Odysseus as he was before he went off to fight; in her mind, he didn’t need the glory or the wealth from the war for her to be happy at his side. While she laid in bed in Book XX (Ln 88-89) of *The Odyssey*, Penelope spoke of a dream she had, “For on this very night there was one who lay by me, like him as he was when he went with the army, so that my own heart was happy.” When she described this ‘vision’ of hers, I think it is especially crucial to note “like him as he was when he went with the army” because the key words are “as he was”. Was Penelope dreaming or fantasizing about a new or improved Odysseus in her bed? No! Penelope wants the Odysseus
from before the war and that Odysseus obviously had made her happy because she said, “so that my own heart was happy”. Penelope is hinting at the possibility that the women in Homer’s epics didn’t place value on things like ‘glory’ and wealth. This is why I think she decided to include the Odysseus’ farewell in her cloth; it was her way of saying that she would have loved him just the same, without the ‘glory’ and the conquests of the war, as if he had merely remained by her side to raise their son. This would have shocked Odysseus and the Achaean men because they placed a huge emphasis on ‘glory’. This is evident because Achilles seriously debated between going home and living or dying but achieving glory and fame in Book IX (Ln 411-416) of The Iliad.

Now, the second event, of major interest, depicted on Penelope’s cloth is the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. You know, that can’t miss argument in Book I of The Iliad. That brings up the question of why; why would Penelope choose this event? Well, given that Penelope surpassed all other women “for beauty and stature and for the mind” (Book XX, Ln 248-249), I believe she was clever enough to see a parallel between the suitors and Agamemnon’s behavior. Achilles’ confronted Agamemnon in Book I (Ln 158-168) when he said, “Always the greater part of the painful fighting is the work of my hands; but when the time comes to distribute the booty yours is far the greater reward … when I am weary with fighting.” Achilles basically accused Agamemnon of being greedy because he took advantage of the hard labor of others and enriched himself, while he did nothing. This is relevant to Penelope’s own life because she herself dealt with not one, but several, suitors who took advantage of her husband’s absence and depleted Odysseus’ supply of wine, feasted on his herding animals, and coveted her, his wife! Penelope made note of the suitors’ abhorrent behavior when she said that good suitors “do not eat up another’s livelihood, without payment” (Book XVIII, Ln 280). In the
case of the suitors, the men are not acting as good suitors should and in the case of Agamemnon, he wasn’t acting as a leader should according to Achilles. This parallel, between the suitors and Agamemnon, would have without a doubt surprised Odysseus. After all, he may not have agreed with Agamemnon, but he stayed by his side during his fight with Achilles. If Agamemnon and the suitors were guilty of the same crimes, e.g. taking another man’s earnings and coveting their woman, then why didn’t Odysseus condemn Agamemnon as he did the suitors? These may have been some of the questions popping into Penelope’s mind as Odysseus recounted the incident to her, but I don’t think the question would have pleased Odysseus. So, by weaving a depiction of this event, Penelope could have been posing the question to those who would see the cloth and known the stories of Agamemnon and Odysseus.

One of the last events depicted, and the third most notable in my opinion, is that of Hektor’s death. Back in college, before my days as an art critic, I took a class on ancient and medieval epics. During a class, in which we analyzed The Iliad, the professor pointed out how Hector seemed to be the family man of the epic.

So, why is this relevant and why did Penelope weave this? I think Penelope was once again drawing a parallel, this time, between Hektor and Odysseus. After all, each man had a wife and a son who were left behind as the man left for the war. Penelope could have put herself in the place of Andromache and envisioned Odysseus’ death in battle; never to make it home to his beloved wife and son. If Odysseus had indeed died, not like he wasn’t as good as dead for twenty years, Penelope would have been left defenseless with their young son. Penelope and Telemachos were actually left, to a certain extent, at the mercy of the suitors. Odysseus himself best put into words their situation in Book XXIII (Ln 35-39) of The Odyssey, when he said, “You dogs, you never thought that I would any more come back from the land of Troy, and
because of that you despoiled my household, and forcibly took my serving women to sleep
beside you, and sought to win my wife while I was still alive.” Here, Odysseus basically listed
everything his household suffered at the hands of the suitors because he was absent. What
Odysseus is hinting at, and what Penelope was trying to get at when she wove the scene, was the
destruction of the household and family that occurs as a result of men leaving for war. Penelope
herself alluded to this phenomenon in Book IV (Ln 722-728) of *The Odyssey*, when she said,
“Hear me, dear friends. The Olympian has given me sorrows beyond all others who were born
and brought up together with me for first I lost a husband with the heart of a lion … my beloved
son, without trace, from the halls, and I never heard when he left me.” What Penelope is saying
here is that nothing good can come of a man leaving his household; she first lost Odysseus and
now she stood to loose her son because they left home.

This is where the idea of Hektor being the family man comes into play. Andromache
said, in Book VI (Ln 429-434) of *The Iliad*, “Hektor, thus you are a father to me, and my
honored mother, you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband. Please take pity
upon me then, stay here on the rampart, that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a
widow.” Andromache told Hektor that he represented all of her family and his death would
essentially leave her and their son defenseless. What Andromache said there and what Penelope
is hinting at in her cloth is the destruction of the household/family when the man of the house
leaves for war. I’m sure the men wouldn’t have appreciated what Penelope implied, for it made
them seem responsible for the problems that plagued their households.

**Helen’s Cloth**

Now, when it comes to the cloth woven by Helen, I also want to focus on three of the
scenes depicted. However, unlike Penelope’s cloth, in which each of the events depicted
showcases Penelope’s different opinions on different aspects of the war, the events depicted on Helen’s cloth are meant to be read in relation to each other because the cloth is meant to not only tell the story of the Trojan War, but additionally tell Helen’s story.

While it may not be the first event depicted on the cloth, the fight between Menelaus and Paris is certainly an interesting one. In today’s society, some women might find the thought of two men fighting or competing for their attention romantic. However, the way Helen depicted the scene made it appear anything but romantic. Paris and Menelaus were not fighting over her as woman; on the contrary the two men and the others around them, saw her as a possession. One notable example of this is when the Achaeans and Trojans agreed to allow Paris and Menelaus to fight in order to decide the fate of Helen; in Book III (Ln 86-94) of The Iliad, Hektor announced “That one of them who wins and is proved stronger, let him take the possessions fairly and the woman, and lead her homeward while the rest of us cut our oaths of faith and friendship.” The phrasing of “let him take the possessions fairly” is important to note because it indicates that the war is about more than just Helen; it is about other material possessions as well and it is about Paris insulting Menelaus by stealing from him. Whoever possessed Helen was the true victor, not because they loved her, but because it was a matter of pride between the two men. This is why Helen depicted the fight between Menelaus and Paris with her in the background next to mountain of treasure; she was just a part of the prize. This idea of a woman being seen as a prize is not exclusive to The Iliad. In Book XXI (Ln 106-110) of The Odyssey, Telemachos told the suitors “But come, you suitors, since her is a prize set out before you, a woman(Penelope); there is none like her in all the Achaian country … You yourselves also know this; then why should I praise my mother?” What Telemachos said here about his mother indicates that it is not unusual for women to be seen as prizes to be won.
The depiction of the fight was Helen’s way of describing how little power she actually had in the situation. However, Helen is not strictly seen as powerless in *The Iliad*. In Book III (Ln 156-157), the elders of the Trojan people discussed Helen at the Skaian gate, more specifically they said, “Surely there is no blame on the Trojans and the strong-greaved Achaians if for long time they suffer hardship for a woman like this one. Terrible is the likeness of her face to immortal goddesses.” This line implies that Helen is truly to blame for the war, not because she is cruel or manipulative, but because she had such a lovely face that it rivaled those of the goddesses; implying that her good looks could bewitch men and the men can’t be held accountable for their actions as a result. In a way, it seems like *The Iliad*, either wanted to make her look like a powerless victim or a seductress who was guilty for not controlling her own charms.

However, I believe Helen’s powerlessness is solidified when Aphrodite basically threatened her to get her into bed with Paris in Book III. Aphrodite warned Helen not to refuse her orders, that was, unless Helen wished to be “caught between both sides, Danaëns and Trojans alike” and perish (Ln 414-416). This essentially turned her into a hostage. Furthermore, Paris said to Helen “Never before as now has passion enmeshed my senses, not when I took you for the first time from Lakedaimon the lovely and caught you up and carried you away in seafaring vessels” (Ln 442-444). What is really important about Paris’ words here is the use of “I took you”, “caught you up” and “carried your away”. These phrases don’t make the actions undertaken by Paris seem completely consensual. The way he described his treatment of Helen is similar to how one treats a possession or a stolen good. This is why I think the depiction of the fight between Paris and Menelaus is actually meant to show how Helen felt powerlessness while observing the war went on.
The second event of major importance depicted is Hektor’s death. Helen depicted Hektor being slain by Achilles because she felt guilty for her role in starting the war and consequently, Hektor’s death. The first sign that Helen felt guilty over Troy’s suffering is when Iris came across Helen weaving a “red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronzed-armored Achaians, struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god” (Book III, Ln 126-128). Her weaving the cloth, depicting the sufferings of both parties for her sake, indicated that she felt guilt over it. She further iterated this when she told Priam “Always to me, beloved father, you are feared and respected; and I wish bitter death had been what I wanted, when I came hither following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsmen, my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age.” (Book III, Ln 172-175) This shows that Helen not only felt guilt, but that she also acknowledged her own culpability in it; indicating that Helen was not ignorant about her role in the war, regardless if she had any say or power in the situation.

Her depiction of Hektor’s death was the best way for her to show how guilty she felt. She most likely chose Hektor’s death to symbolize her guilt because he was the Trojan she was closest to. This is evident in her words to him in Book VI (Ln 343-348), “Brother by marriage to me, who am a nasty bitch evil-intriguing, how I wish that on that day when my mother first bore me the foul whirlwind of the storm had caught me away and swept me away and swept me to the mountains, or into the wash of the sea deep-thundering where the waves would have swept me away before all these things had happened.” This is important because that she seemed to have an awareness of what her actions had done to Hektor and Troy, and literally blamed herself for everything.
In order to better understand the connections, between the fight of Menelaus and Paris and the slaying of Hektor, it is important to pay attention to what these events meant specifically to Helen. The fight between Paris and Menelaus symbolized her powerlessness in the war and the death of Hektor symbolized an awareness of culpability and guilt. It is important to keep this in mind as I go into my review and breakdown of the third major event depicted.

Helen chose to depict The Trojan horse for her last major event in her cloth. The cloth itself doesn’t show the soldiers hidden within the horse or the sacking of Troy. It just depicts a large wooden horse enclosed by Troy’s walls. To understand how this event was significant to Helen, we must look at Menelaus’, and ‘Helen’s’, account of the event. In Book IV (Ln 274-279) of The Odyssey, Menelaus recounts “Then you came there, Helen; you will have been moved by some divine spirit who wished to grant glory to the Trojans, and Deiphobos, a godlike man, was with you when you came. Three times you walked around the hollow ambush, feeling it, and you called out, naming them by name, to the best of the Danaans, and made your voice sound like the voice of the wife of each of the Argives.” In my class back in college, we had discussed the kind of insight Helen would have needed to not only know which heroes were in the horse, but would additionally need the ability to perfectly mimic the voices of each of the heroes’ wives. So, I think we can say that this isn’t an accurate account of the story. What is important to note is Menelaus’ choice of using the words “moved by some divine spirit”. This is significant because it indicates that Menelaus didn’t believe Helen to be guilty or have willingly attempted to sabotage the Achaeans’ ambush of Troy. I think this really sheds some light on how the men saw women at the time of the Trojan War. The fact that Helen did not contradict his story is also of significance because it means that she isn’t opposed to Menelaus thinking that she was under the influence of a god.
As I noted when interpreting Helen’s depiction of the Hektor’s death, Helen seemed to have some sense of awareness and felt guilt. In her depiction of the fight between Menelaus and Paris, she was trying to show how powerless and trapped she felt during the war. What I am trying to imply by bringing this up is that Helen was more than just a pretty face. I believe that Helen would have noticed how Menelaus chose to use “moved by some divine spirit” and made her own observations of how women, like herself, were seen by the men around them. They were either seen as possessions or weak and easily subjected to the will of the gods; women were essentially incapable of acting without the influence of men or the gods. This idea that the gods are the ones who turn women evil also appeared in Nestor’s conversation with Telemachos when Nestor said, “(Agamemnon) had given many instructions to keep watch on his wife; but when the doom of the gods had entangled her, so that she must submit.” (Book III, Ln 268-270)

I believe that through her depictions of the Trojan War, Helen was trying to tell her own story. She knew that any portrayals of her person going forward would be dictated and written by men. With her depiction of the Trojan horse, she was actually alluding to the account given by Menelaus. She understood, that just like Menelaus, other men would hijack the story going forward and paint her in whatever light fit their idea of the war. With her depiction of Hektor’s death, she was trying to say that she did feel guilty about her role in sparking the war. Her way of saying that she had partially acted freely when she left with Paris and she was aware of that; she wasn’t ignorant to the suffering on both sides. With her depiction of the fight between Menelaus and Paris, she was trying to say that she was treated as a prized possession and in the end, she became a victim and hostage. So, Helen’s cloth is not only the story of the Trojan War, but additionally it is her own story and feelings. This would have surprised any of the warriors viewing the cloth because it would have been unexpected for her and to have more depth than
‘have a pretty face’, especially because it was believed that she was under the influence of a god. She would have brought up the idea that women do have free will and can take actions against their husbands without necessarily being subjugated by a god.

**Conclusion**

I sincerely encourage fans of Homer and others to visit the exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It will provide you with a fresh and female outlook on the Trojan War. I think visitors will be leaving the exhibit understanding Helen and Penelope in a way that their husbands never could. These cloths are true art and worth the visit. They are beautifully woven, tell a story, and give the viewer an insight into the mind of their creators.