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 Title: Gilgamesh- Odyssey Essay: Powerful Female Character

Homer’s Odyssey extensively described diverse roles of women discussing the dynamics of their character and social roles. The women in the Odyssey are unique in their intention, personality, and relationship towards men. It described a dynamic view of women at a time when their position was considered to be subservient to men, limiting their roles to domestic duties and childbirth. The paper will explore the role of Penelope in Homer's Odyssey as a powerful woman of influence and discuss the desirable traits that were valued in ancient Greek society.

Penelope as a character is positively portrayed throughout the Odyssey. She was the wife of Odysseus and studying her character provides much insight into how women would exert their influence and power in Ancient Greek society. She was loyal to her husband who is out to battle but would use her sexual charm and smart and cunning ways to manipulate the emotions of men to suit her needs. She represented the ideal wife, that Homer portrayed as a layered, complex and a contradictory character who not only exhibited submission, frailty, and meekness but strength, cunning and independence as well. Penelope would fend off the suitors, as men saw the ideal wife in the submission, fertility, and loyalty, she had. “She gives hope to each of us, makes promises to everyone, and sends out messages. But her intent is different" (Homer 29). She is strong-willed, canny, and has grit, not only competent and loyal but someone with a vivid imagination. She shows profound love for her moody and difficult son and looks after her family and large household for decades as a single mother.

The extent of her influence on Odysseus can be seen when Calypso, the goddess confronts Odysseus about her, demanding to know why he would prefer a mortal over the pleasures and power a goddess can offer him. He accepts the logic of the offer, yet wishes to remain faithful to his wife. Moreover, Penelope’s strong wits are acknowledged, described as, “the one who wore the lovely headband— none of them had shrewdness which could match Penelope's (Homer 30). She is cunning yet gives out a sympathetic and romantic impression that makes her appealing in her culture (North). The devotion she had to her husband was heard of very less in ancient myths, her loyalty to a husband presumed dead is almost heroic in Ancient Greece.

Moreover, the power she exerts comes from her intelligence and appeal, described by Homer with the word ‘Periphron’, one who carefully calculates and is prudent. One way she demonstrates her qualities is when she tricked the pestering suitors through a cunning plan, in which she managed to convince them that they should wait until she had finished weaving a burial shroud. This not only tricked the suitors but showed her devotion to Odysseus despite being able to preserve her dowry and land through remarriage. This was significant in a culture where a woman’s worth was measured by what she could offer.

Although, the characterization of female characters in the Odyssey was unique for the time, yet there is a limit to their representation; often restricted to the roles of a mother, servant or goddess. It reflected male domination within ancient Greece. Nevertheless, Penelope is a very strong character within the poem, and like Odysseus, faces many challenges throughout the poem, exhibiting the notion of equality with the story’s hero. Compared to Sita from the Ramayana, there is strong resemblance as both were portrayed as ideal wives with ideal gestures and qualities, and remained loyal and honest throughout their ordeals (Buck). Her representation is more powerful in comparison to the leading character from Gilgamesh, Shamhat, who would only use her sexuality to influence male characters (Hines). However, in all of these mythical stories, honesty and loyalty seemed to be the most valued qualities among women.

# Works Cited

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