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Kroner, Grace

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Heroides 1 as a Programmatic Letter

Grace Mahony Kroner
Washington University in St. Louis
Biology/Classics
Class of 2014

Abstract: The Heroides is Ovid's collection of verse letters between classical heroines and their lovers. The set of fifteen single letters and several paired letters begins with Penelope's letter to her husband Odysseus, who has been gone from Ithaca for twenty years due to the Trojan War. While Odysseus'adventures were chronicled by Homer in the Iliad and the Odyssey, Ovid sets out to share Penelope's perspective on, arguably, the eve of Odysseus' return. However, Penelope's letter is not just the first in the collection, it is a programmatic letter for the Heroides because it introduces the theme of the later letters, and it more closely follows epistolary style markers than the other letters. Penelope's letter occurs in a situation that is more realistic than others in the collection, and so readers are persuaded to accept the later letters, even if the situations seem less plausible. Ovid's interpretation of Homer's Penelope also prepares readers for his views of later heroines and demonstrates the important place of imitatio and aemulatio in his writing. Therefore, in acting as a programmatic letter, Penelope's letter introduces the collection and gives Ovid firm ground to explore with his later "writers."

Ovid's collection of verse letters, the *Heroides*, includes fifteen single letters and several paired letters. Ovid's books of poetry reveal clear organization, and it is reasonable to expect the same importance to be attached to order in this epistolary collection. Though seemingly distinct from books of poetry, letter collections were actually similar since "an epistolary collection...could exhibit patterns of continuity, variation, and closure, much like ancient poetic collections or other forms of books." Mary Beard makes this argument specifically for the traditional sixteen-book order of Cicero's letters because, since letter collections are always edited, the order, whether conscious or unconscious, has an important role in the final presentation. She emphasizes that the order of poetry collections —the first and last poems, the internal connections— especially during the Augustan age, when Ovid was writing, were likewise extremely important, and so letter collections published during and after that time likely also attached importance to the first letter or the last letter, and the sequence in which the letters were printed.⁴

Accordingly, the order of Ovid's collection of fictional, verse letters, the *Heroides*, which is obviously not chronological, is likely important for a proper understanding of the letters.⁵

¹ For instance, the letters in his *Epistulae ex Ponto* are carefully ordered to yield a symmetrical structure, yet one that contains variety from letter to letter. Jan Felix Gaertner, *Ovid, Epistulae ex Ponto, Book 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

² James Ker, "Letters, Roman," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Michael Gagarin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), accessed February 26, 2012 http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195170726.001.0001/acref-9780195170726-e-704?rskey=7MswtF&result=525&q=.

³ Mary Beard, "Ciceronian correspondences: making a book out of letters," in *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. T. P. Wiseman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120.

⁴ Beard, "Ciceronian," 121.

⁵ For example, the second letter is written by Phyllis to Demophoon, the son of Theseus, who himself is the recipient of the tenth letter from Ariadne, which discusses events much before Demophoon's birth. In addition, the letter from Oenone to Paris complaining of how he abandoned her for Helen would happen chronologically before Briseis writes to Achilles during the Trojan War and Penelope writes to Odysseus after the Trojan War; however Oenone's letter appears as the fifth letter, Briseis' as the third, and Penelope's as the first.

Therefore, just as a first programmatic poem epitomizes and hints at the whole work, Ovid's choice to place Penelope's letter to her wandering husband, Odysseus, first, indicates that it is a programmatic letter for the collection. As a programmatic letter, it emphasizes both the abandonment and anxiety themes of this compilation of "letters" and the position Ovid obtains in the literary world with the publication of this new book. Placing Penelope's letter first links Ovid with Homer, allowing him to claim a revered position in the literary sphere.⁶

More concretely, Penelope's letter functions as a programmatic letter for the *Heroides* because it introduces the themes of the later letters, and it more closely follows epistolary style markers than the other letters. Though certain other letters, such as that of Phyllis to Demophoon, Phaedra to Hippolytus, and Laodamia to Protesilaus, also open with a modified traditional opening, many of the letters read more like tragic monologues or suicide notes, especially so in the case of Canace to Macareus, who writes to her lover-brother after being gifted with a sword by their enraged father Aeolus. Penelope's letter is also more realistic than others in the collection since readers could easily imagine that Penelope knew how to write, and had the ability to send and receive letters. It seems unlikely, for example, that Briseis, who admits to her barbarian nature in the opening of her letter to Achilles, knew how to write Greek, or Latin verses, or that Ariadne, abandoned on a deserted island by Theseus, was able to find writing materials or look forward to the ability to send her recriminatory letter. In contrast, the plausibility of Penelope's letter induces readers of the *Heroides* to be more lenient when judging the epistolary qualities of later letters.

In addition, Ovid's Penelope, whose letter is not soul-baring, but carefully couched to persuade Odysseus, expands the Homeric Penelope, who, while clever, is often more emotional than Ovid's practical, yet sometimes bitter, Penelope. This imitation with change is typical of contemporary Roman literature and the remainder of the collection, since Ovid takes other well-known abandoned heroines and writes their interpretations of events. Thus, Penelope's letter is also programmatic in introducing Ovid's reinterpretation of classic stories, and her story of abandonment heralds the abandonment of all the "writers" of the later letters. The fictional authors, whether from well-known or obscure stories, all complain of their abandonment by their chosen lover. Demophoon leaves Phyllis; Achilles abandons the slave Briseis; Paris prefers Helen to the nymph Oenone; Jason abandons Hypsipyle and Medea in turn; Aeneas deserts Dido to misery and suicide; Theseus strands Ariadne on an island; and Phaon leaves the older Sappho without a word.

Homer's *Odyssey* was a well-known work in ancient times just as it is now. Therefore, Ovid's use of Homer's story of Penelope and Odysseus not only exemplified the abandonment theme of later *Heroides* letters, but followed with the Roman technique of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. Rachel Finnegan describes how Roman authors used topics and writing styles from Greek stories while adding a uniquely Roman twist. This practice was not considered at all indicative of a lack of creativity on the Roman author's part, but rather as a laudable characteristic. Ovid imitates Homer by reproducing the characters and events from the *Odyssey*, but he also invests the central abandonment theme of the collection with his own

⁶ Ovid's choice of Homer was especially meaningful because Homer was considered the "first" author of Greek literature according to Cicero's remarks in the Tusculan Disputations 1.1.

⁷ Harold Isbell, trans. Ovid: Heroides (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 11, 30, 117, 101.

⁸ Isbell, *Heroides*, 21, 90.

⁹ Isbell, *Heroides*, 11, 22, 42, 49, 111, 58, 90, 137.

¹⁰ Rachel Finnegan, "Plagues in Classical Literature," Classics Ireland 6 (1999).

¹¹ Finnegan, "Classical Literature."

interpretation by having Penelope write from her own perspective and omit or alter certain details in order to be more persuasive. In ancient times, Ovid's *imitatio* of Homer was even more marked because other versions of Penelope's story existed. Howard Jacobson details several stories including one in which Pan was born to Penelope and Hermes, and another version of the *Odyssey* in which Penelope is not the chaste model of wifely devotion she is in Homer's version, but rather a woman cavorting with the many suitors.¹²

Although most of the other women whom Ovid chooses as authors are not married to the male addressee of the letter, Penelope's story is still a successful introduction to the theme of abandonment since it was a notable and extreme example. With Odysseus having been gone for nearly twenty years, she eventually triumphs at his return unlike many of the other heroines, who die unhappily. Penelope's circumstances, while different in outcome, echo the abandonment of the other women, and her letter introduces the themes of complaint and fear, which are maintained in the other letters.¹³ Penelope's complaints about Odysseus' absence focus on his inattention to the duties he should be performing: namely, as son, husband, and father, all masculine roles. Interestingly, Roland Barthes claims that the "discourse of absence" is entirely feminine, and is marked by the female figure waiting for her man to return, a common theme in the *Heroides*.¹⁴ Therefore, Ovid's emphasis on Penelope's extreme abandonment roots his theme of female abandonment by men even more deeply.

Penelope's letter is also unique to the collection because it closely attends to characteristics of the epistolary genre. Ovid's attention to detail in this letter allows him more freedom in the later letters to play with his readers and bend their imaginations to his will. Penelope's reasons for writing her letter, and the method of sending it, are particularly clear, which help emphasize Ovid's idea that his verses are truly letters and not just tragic monologues addressing absent men. Because Penelope writes of Telemachus' return from visiting Nestor, the letter can be placed as having been written just at the time that Odysseus arrived dressed as a Cretan beggar. Duncan Kennedy claims that Penelope is actually giving this letter to Odysseus dressed as the Cretan beggar since he is the latest foreigner to arrive and she writes, "Quisquis ad haec vertit peregrinam litora puppim,/ ille mihi de te multa rogatus abit,/ quamque tibi reddat, si te modo viderit usquam." 16

Besides detailing the method of its delivery, Penelope's letter also meets the practical definition of a letter, as defined by Roy K. Gibson and A.D. Morrison. It is a written message between two people, Penelope and Odysseus, and is constructed in a physical method that requires ferrying to the actual recipient over a geographical separation.¹⁷ This is explained by Penelope's plan to give this letter and, presumably, many others, to travelers in hopes one will reach Odysseus. The letter's physicality is illustrated by the following line, "*traditur huic digitis*"

¹² Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 246-7.

¹³ Albert R. Baca, "Ovid's Claim to Originality and Heroides 1," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 100 (1969): 2.

¹⁴ Duncan F. Kennedy, "Epistolarity: the *Heroides*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 228.

¹⁵ E. V. Rieu, trans. *Homer: The Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1946), 246.

¹⁶ Whoever turns his foreign ship to this shore, he departs having been asked many things about you by me, and he will give you this, if only he should ever see you. *Heroides* 1.59-61; Duncan F. Kennedy, "The Epistolary Mode and the First of Ovid's Heroides," *The Classical Quarterly* 34.2 (1984): 418. This and all following translations are my own unless noted.

¹⁷ Roy K. Gibson and A. D. Morrison, "Introduction: What is a Letter?" in *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, eds. Ruth Morello and A.D. Morrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

charta notata meis." ¹⁸ In this case, if Kennedy's assumptions about the timing are correct, the geographic distance bridged by the letter is perhaps a hand-width as Penelope gives the disguised Odysseus the letter, possibly illustrating a bit of Ovid's irony. The letter is also fairly short at 116 lines, another distinguishing characteristic of Roman letters. 19 Lastly, Penelope begins the letter saying, "Haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixe," which is similar to a traditional salutation that includes the name of the writer and the recipient. ²⁰ These basic similarities to other classical letters allow Ovid's broader thematic elements to connect more naturally with epistolary themes.

A letter, since it is written in the first person, clearly shows the personal perspective of the writer. Penelope's letter, as written by Ovid, illustrates how the subjective female perspective can change the interpretation or focus of some events.²¹ The placement of Penelope's letter first is important to emphasize this point, because if Ovid used any other letter, the reader might not be as cognizant of all the details of the original story and so might be unaware when Ovid's "author" makes changes to the story. Because Homer's version of Penelope's story was extremely well-known, as opposed to the more obscure story of Phyllis and Demophoon for example, readers were aware of Ovid's changes and so could recognize how Penelope's perspective guided her narrative in the letter. This knowledge could then be taken into account when reading the other letters, so that readers did not forget that the letters may not be utterly truthful, but written with a goal in mind.

The personal perspective facilitated by the first-person narrative of a letter is an important marker of letters and again, Penelope's strong perspective of events adds to the programmatic nature of the first letter. Initially, she demonstrates concern only for the return of her husband, caring nothing about whether the war was won or lost. 22 Also, Penelope claims to have sent Telemachus to Nestor, which Kennedy indicates is a way for Penelope to prove to Odysseus that she is doing everything possible to find him.²³ The errors in Penelope's retelling of Trojan battles could be mistakes by Ovid, or, more likely, subtle reminders from Ovid of his view that Penelope is unconcerned with everyone besides her husband and what he should be doing back in Ithaca. Kennedy also offers the argument that perhaps Ovid was implying that Penelope's letter told the truth, but "later" versions, like Homer (going by the internal timeline), were incorrect, again illustrating Ovid's penchant for "competing" with famous older writers, like Homer and Virgil.²⁴ In addition, Ovid might have deliberately had Penelope make mistakes to show how she was so focused on Odysseus' absence that she neglected certain other details. Sara Lindheim argues that the letter does not demonstrate Penelope's feelings enough, and it actually takes away some of the power she should have as a writer since it focuses so much on Odvsseus. 25 However, even though Penelope describes many events that happen to Odvsseus. her interpretation of them and how she conveys her knowledge reveal her perspective much more than if she just wrote about her own activities. As Jacobson states, the letter shows Penelope

¹⁸ The paper, marked by my own fingers, is handed over to him [the traveler]. *Heroides* 1.62.

¹⁹ Gibson and Morrison, "Introduction," 3.

²⁰ Your Penelope sends this to you, slow Odysseus. *Heroides* 1.1.

²¹ Baca, "Ovid's Claim," 5.

²² Baca, "Ovid's Claim," 6.

²³ Kennedy, "Epistolarly," 421.
²⁴ Kennedy, "Epistolarity," 226. Ovid deals with Dido and Aeneas in the seventh letter of the *Heroides*, and the events of Virgil's *Aeneid* in Books 13-15 of the *Metamorphoses*.

25 Sara H. Lindheim, *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides* (Madison: University of

Wisconsin Press, 2003), 43.

when she is unhappy with Odysseus, not Homer's version of the usually perfect wife, and that only becomes truly clear when she talks about events dealing with Odysseus. ²⁶ This perspective also assists Ovid in comparing himself to Homer, by showing that he can add another dimension to the Homeric Penelope's character.

Letters also emphasize the relationship between the writer and the addressee since the letter is predicated on the belief that there is some relationship that needs to be continued despite the trials of time and distance. The continuation of the relationship is the vital aspect in the *Heroides*, since the "authors" are all writing to men who have abandoned them. Penelope's letter is important programmatically in this case, because her skill at persuasion enables her to utilize fully her relationship as Odysseus' wife to convince him to return. Unlike the other women, who are mostly abandoned lovers with no firm ties, Penelope has a firmer hold on Odysseus due to her status as his wife. This relationship is clearly strong for Penelope since she identifies herself in terms of Odysseus when she says "tua Penelope" and "Penelope coniunx semper Ulixis ero". However, she fears her connection with Odysseus is threatened when she says, "esse peregrine captus amore potes." Kennedy explains how Penelope shows her cunning here, because if the timeline of the Odyssey is followed, at this point Penelope already knows about Calypso, but she pretends that she does not. This omission seems plausible when the careful construction of the letter is considered. A veiled fear might better persuade Odysseus: he could return home to convince her he was still faithful, whereas if he knows that she knows the truth, he has nothing to gain, in terms of her opinion of him, by returning at once.

Ovid's expansion of the Homeric Penelope, which represents the programmatic *imitatio* of the collection, is clearly demonstrated by Penelope's questioning of Odysseus' faithfulness. Odysseus and Penelope seem to represent a marriage between partners who are considered nearly equal to each other; Penelope requests proof of Odysseus' identity after he slays the suitors, and she shows cunning equal to his in her weaving trick and the deception with the bow. Her later line, (*Penelope coniunx semper Ulixis ero*), seems to demonstrate her cunning in leaving some ideas unsaid, yet forcing Odysseus to see her unstated question. Instead of a profession of devotion, this statement rather seems to be a challenge to Odysseus: Penelope may always be his, but has he always been hers? Earlier in the letter, she has expressed concern that Odysseus is detained by another woman, and here she seems to imply that although she has been faithful, she has doubts that he has been utterly loyal to her. This sub-text, constructed by Ovid, shows Penelope's cleverness in her construction of the letter which agrees with Homer's portrayal of her endowed with cleverness, yet Ovid gives her more opportunity to challenge Odysseus. The slight change is another mark of Ovid's *imitatio* and shows how he is "improving" on Homer.

Many of the writers in the *Heroides* fear that their male lovers have changed their opinions about the merits of their former female lovers. Briseis worries about her aged skin, just as Medea believes Jason now thinks her impoverished and a barbarian, compared to his new wife Creusa.³¹ Sappho reminds Phaon that, despite her lack of beauty, he used to find her beautiful when she read her poetry.³² Penelope's letter again serves a programmatic function by

²⁶ Jacobson, Ovid's Heroides, 250.

²⁷ I will always be Penelope, wife of Odysseus. *Heroides* 1.1, 83-84.

²⁸ You are able to be captured by a foreign love. *Heroides* 1.76.

²⁹ Kennedy, "Epistolary," 421.

³⁰ Rieu, *Odyssey*, pg. 345, 40, 317.

³¹ Isbell, *Heroides*, 25, 109.

³² Isbell, *Heroides*, 134.

introducing this concern. Penelope reveals anxiety over Odysseus' perception of her, subtly asking him to return and tell her that his good opinion of her has not faltered, as if she is fishing for compliments. She says, "forsitan et narres, quam sit tibi rustica coniunx,/ quae tantum lanas non sinat esse rudes," which shows how she is afraid that he thinks her unworthy. 33 She circles back to this fear in the last line when she says "Certe ego, quae fueram te discedente puella,/ protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus." 34 As Lindheim describes, she focuses on the perspective of Odysseus, and how she fears he will find her not as pleasing as when he left. 35 However, this also may be Ovid's way of having Penelope tell Odysseus that he is aging as well, and paired with her discussion of the pressure she is under to remarry, seems to threaten that perhaps she will prefer one of the suitors to her aged spouse. This is especially ironic because when Odysseus returns he is disguised as an old beggar, so he looks even older than he is. While programmatically introducing the theme of anxiety over male opinion shared by the later "authors," Penelope's fears and implied challenges about loyalty and age also reinforce her cleverness, and Ovid's, in constructing the letter.

Penelope's penchant for cunning persuasion, and Ovid's skill, comes to the forefront when she discusses the current situation in Ithaca. Letters often include such descriptions of daily activities in order to provide emotional connection to the correspondents despite the distance separating them.³⁶ The description of daily life also substitutes for physical contact between the correspondents.³⁷ Here again, Penelope's letter fulfills these epistolary characteristics thoroughly, reaffirming Ovid's choice to use it as a programmatic letter for his collection. The other "authors" have less time to cover since their abandonment, but Penelope's letter is perfectly suited to share a detailed description of events in Ithaca since Odysseus' absence stretches to twenty years since he left for the Trojan War. She writes about her weaving, the return of the soldiers, the invasion of the suitors, the pressure from her father to remarry, how Telemachus is growing up and traveling, and how Laertes has become an old man. While listing what she would not be doing if the Trojan War had not occurred, she writes, "nec mihi quaerenti spatiosam fallere noctem/ lassaret viduas pendula tela manus."38 Since weaving was a common activity for women in ancient times, it seems that Penelope intends to indicate that something about this weaving is special since it would not have occurred without the Trojan War. Certainly, the obvious difference is her "widowed hands" trying to while away the hours of the night, but I argue that her use of "fallere" instead of something like "wear out" hints at her famous weaving trick in deceiving the suitors. Lindheim argues that Penelope does not mention her famous weaving trick and so downplays her own cleverness.³⁹ However, I claim that the way she phrases her description of this weaving clearly hints at the weaving trick and shows her predilection toward telling only half of the story if it suits her goals. Penelope focuses on the events that portray how weak she, Telemachus, and Laertes are in the final section of the letter, so perhaps Ovid chose to have Penelope omit an explicit mention of her weaving trick so that she would seem weaker, and more in need of rescuing by her strong husband.

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³³ Perhaps you even tell how there is a rustic wife for you, who is not fitted to work even the rough wool. *Heroides* 1.77-78.

³⁴ Certainly, I, who was a girl when you left, even if you come immediately, will seem to be an old woman. *Heroides* 1.115-116.

³⁵ Lindheim, Mail and Female, 49.

³⁶ Lindheim, Mail and Female, 37.

³⁷ Kennedy, "Epistolarity," 224.

³⁸ Neither would the hanging web tire my widowed hands, seeking to deceive the long night. *Heroides* 1.9-10. ³⁹ Lindheim, *Mail and Female*, 47.

Weaving has also been considered a metaphor for writing, so the discussion of weaving feeds into the portrayal of Penelope as an author figure. The depiction of Penelope as a convincing author is important for establishing the authorial roles of later heroines in the collection, who often seem less credible as letter writers. Ann Bergren discusses the roots of the association between weaving and writing or speaking. She explains how women's weaving is the making of signs and sharing of stories just as male speech, especially in poetry, tells stories. Ovid's inclusion of Penelope's weaving reinforces Penelope's persona as authoress, and especially seems to add credence to the fact that Penelope carefully constructs her letter, just like she would a tapestry, in order to persuade Odysseus to come back.

Penelope's epistolary "story" is essentially a persuasive letter urging Odysseus to return. She implies that Odysseus is staying with other women, and she tries to scare him by telling him that she will be betrothed against her will if he does not return quickly. Baca claims that she might be exaggerating the likelihood of her betrothal in order to get Odysseus to return. This seems possible, since Penelope's cleverness causes her to embellish the situation to ensure that Odysseus is motivated to leave his "foreign love", just as she implies his disloyalty, and his equal aging in other sections of the letter in order to persuade him to return. Penelope's persuasive techniques clearly support her purpose in writing the letter, and her arguments seem suited to appeal to Odysseus. Ovid's placement of Penelope's letter first is important, since the extreme and obvious persuasive goal in her letter establishes a persuasive purpose for the later letters, even though initially they often seem more emotional. The persuasive aspect, in addition to the other striking epistolary features of Penelope's letter, allows Ovid to convince readers that the verses are actually letters and not just mournful soliloquies.

Penelope's letter clearly shows more similarities to ancient letters than might be expected for a verse letter from a fictional heroine. On that account, it is important that Ovid chose to place it first in his collection of letters. Not only does Penelope's letter represent a famous story, but by using Penelope's perspective, Ovid is allowed to add his twist to the story and show that his writing is equal to Homer's. Penelope's story also introduces the abandonment felt by every other heroine Ovid chooses, providing cohesion to the collection. Furthermore, Ovid meticulously crafts Penelope's letter to emphasize its epistolary qualities: the practicalities, Penelope's perspective, and the persuasion most especially. Ovid's Penelope clearly has a goal, and is willing to sacrifice perfect truth between husband and wife to make sure her husband is convinced to return. These similarities to other classical letters allow Ovid more leeway in his later letters to have less plausible situations for writing letters. Penelope's letter carefully leads readers so that they feel Ovid's premise is believable, and in so doing opens another perspective on many famous myths.

⁴⁰ Laurel Fulkerson, *The Ovidian Heroine as Author: Reading, Writing, and Community in the Heroides* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 38.

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⁴¹ Ann Bergren, *Weaving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought* (Washington D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2008), 17.

⁴² Baca, "Ovid's Claim," 8.

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