The character of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is an antithesis to Penelope in Homer’s *Odyssey*. The polarization of these two characters is evident in the radically different ways in which the women receive their husbands. On one hand, when Penelope recognizes the man standing before her as beloved Odysseus, she greets him with tears and kisses (δακρύσασα δ’ ἔπειτ’ ἵθες δράμεν, ἀμφὶ δὲ χείρας δειρῆ βάλλ’ Ὀδυσσῆ; κάρῃ δ’ ἔκνος’ ἠδὲ προσηύδα, 23.208-209). However, Aeschylus’ portrayal of Clytemnestra is an inversion of model Penelope. Although Clytemnestra is said to have a wishful heart, “for she exercises power, a woman with a male-counseling heart, a heart that is expectant” (ὧδε γὰρ κρατεῖ γυναῖκὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ, 10-11), Clytemnestra longs for the homecoming of Agamemnon, not so that she can lovingly embrace him again in the manner of Penelope, but so that she can destroy him.

Aeschylus not only presents a clear distinction between the two women, but he also makes clear that Clytemnestra exists as the epitome of an unmanageable and villainous Penelope. Clytemnestra not only acquires a lover, Aegisthus, while Agamemnon leads the war against the city of Priam, but she plots to murder her husband upon his return home. In contrast, although many suitors unrelentingly insist that Penelope be married off, Penelope forestalls marrying any one of the suitors, thereby displaying unrelenting devotion to her husband.

After Clytemnestra presents her first speech in the *Agamemnon*, the Chorus notes that a man cannot escape predestined fate. A man who has committed a sin will turn “black like bad bronze” (κακοῦ δὲ χαλκοῦ τρόπον/τρίβῳ τε καὶ προσβολαῖς/μελαμπαγής πέλει, 390-393). The Chorus alludes to the curse upon the house of Atreus; the house must pay the price for its savagery. Tantalus, the first man to feast on the flesh of his offspring, establishes such a house. Because of his foolishness, Tantalus was condemned to starvation in the Underworld, with food and water situated forever
just out of his reach. However, following much deliberation from the gods, his son Pelops was restored to a new life and became the father to two sons, Atreus and Thyestes. These two brothers argue for rights to the throne, and eventually an angered Atreus serves to his brother the flesh of Thyestes’ own children. Therefore, the inhabitants of the house become sole indicators of a house based on cyclical revenge. In this house, sacrifice and murder provide a resolution to betrayal and grief.

Likewise, Odysseus is not able to escape his fate. The attempts of Odysseus to return home are thwarted by Poseidon’s storm. Fate had long ago dictated that Odysseus would wander the earth with trial and tribulation until his homecoming (καὶ δὴ Φανήκων γαῖς σχεδόν, ἕνθα οἱ ἄνδρες ἐκφυγέειν μέγα πείραρ ὑπόδος, ἢ μὲν ἰάναι. ἦλ’ ἔτι μὲν μὴν φημι ἀδόρην ἐλάνω κακότητος, 5.288-290). The reader should note that however different the fate of the house of Atreus and the fate of Odysseus may be, it falls upon both Clytemnestra and Penelope to accept the consequences of the fates of their husbands. Essentially, Clytemnestra and Penelope present two ends of a spectrum: one reunites in a loving marriage whereas the other seeks companionship elsewhere and brings her marriage to a violent end.

Not only do the differences between the Clytemnestra and Penelope remain stark, but Clytemnestra’s bloodthirsty nature becomes clearer and perhaps even more conspicuous than that of Agamemnon. In the king’s absence, Clytemnestra becomes the master of the palace of the Atreidae. The Chorus describes the queen as powerful even when the king leaves his throne (ἥκωσιν σοὶ, Κλυταιμήστρα, κράτος: δίκη γάρ ἐστι φωτὸς ἀρχηγὸς τίνων γυναῖκ᾽ ἐρημωθέντος ἄρσενος θρόνου, 258-260). Although it was customary that a male lead the household, Clytemnestra dominates even her lover Aegisthus in authority. Aeschylus conveys her power through the military language situated in Clytemnestra’s speeches. The death of a king is significant, but it is even more significant in the Agamemnon because the king’s long expected homecoming is the prelude to his sudden and swift demise.

In contrast, the Odyssey portrays Penelope as a wife faithful to her husband, a woman who still remains hopeful that her husband will return even though she has no evidence to this claim. Additionally, Penelope must resist the horde of suitors who attempt in vain to court and marry her. In Odysseus’ absence, the
suitors take control of the household, slaughtering Odysseus’ cattle and despoiling his precious possessions (οἵ τε οἱ αἱ ἑκαὶ μὴλ’ ἰδὶνα σφάζουσι καὶ ἐλλίποδας ἐλικας βοῦς, 1.91-92). Even in this case, Penelope does not assume the vindictive demeanor of Clytemnestra. Instead, Penelope undetectably employs her cleverness by unraveling at night the day’s weaving in order to forestall marrying one of the suitors. All the while, Penelope politely maintains a convincing façade before her suitors that she exerts herself laboriously to complete her work. Thus, while Penelope spends her days weaving and unweaving her shroud to keep the suitors at bay (τῷ οὔτε ξείνων ἐμπάξομαι οὔθ’ ἱετάων οὔτε τι κηρώνω, οὐ δημοεργοί ἐκαίν, ἀλλ’ Ὢδυση ποθέουσα φίλον κατατήκομαι ήτορ, 19.134-136), Clytemnestra weaves a web of bloodshed and deception within the house of Atreus.

Penelope is immortalized because of her unwavering devotion to Odysseus, as symbolized through her daily weaving and nightly unraveling of the Laertes’ shroud.¹ Penelope’s strength is noted through her ability to deceive the suitors. Thus, Penelope does what Clytemnestra does not: in the process of remaining faithful to her husband Penelope exhibits her strength, whereas Clytemnestra, an adulteress, exhibits her power through horrendous acts of violence. This disparity between the two characters is symbolized by Aeschylus’ description of the woven tapestry. In the Odyssey, the color and design of Penelope’s shroud is never mentioned.² In the Agamemnon, the color of the tapestry may be interpreted as a crimson color, reminiscent to the flush of blood.³ Aeschylus subtle description of the color of the tapestry is indicative of the bloodshed that occurs within the house of Atreus.

Furthermore, episodes of elation during the final scenes of both the Agamemnon and the Odyssey demonstrate that Clytemnestra is a perverse adaptation of Penelope. The death of Agamemnon brings Clytemnestra ecstasy. Clytemnestra likens her pleasure in being sprinkled with the gushing dark blood of her husband to the joy that the sown earth must feel when it is refreshed with the rain in the birth of flower buds (1388-1392). The erotic imagery suggests that Clytemnestra is fertilized by the blood of her husband. She rejoices in climax as her husband’s blood spatters on her.⁴

Penelope’s tears (δακρύσασα δ’ ἔπειτ’ ἱθὸς δράμεν, ἄμφι δὲ χεῖρας δειχῆ βάλλ’ Ὢδυση, κάλιν ἰ’ ἐκω’ ἤδε προσηύνα, 23.208-9)
reflect the shower of Agamemnon’s blood upon Clytemnestra. Blood and tears adorn Clytemnestra and Penelope respectively. These liquids exhibit the different ways in which the two women display emotion. The shedding of tears symbolically represents the loyalty and commitment to the household, οἰκός, in the case of Penelope. For Clytemnestra, spilling Agamemnon’s blood ushers her exultation and triumph. Clytemnestra speaks, “You attack me as if I were a woman without common sense. I speak with a fearless heart. Whether you praise me or blame me, it is the same to me. This here is Agamemnon. My husband, dead, thus this is the work of this right hand, a master of the task. And that is the end of the matter” (πειράσθε μου γυναικώς ὡς ἀφρόδισμονος· ἐγώ δ’ ἀτρέστι καρδία πρὸς εἰδὼτας λέγω: σοῦ δ’ ἀλευρί ἔτε με ψέγειν θέλεις δρομον. οὐτός ἐστιν Αγαμέμνων, ἔμος πῶς. νεφώδης δ’, τῆς δέ δεξίας χερὸς ἔργον, δικαίας τέκτονος. τάδ’ ὧδ’ ἔρχει, 1401-1406).

Furthermore, the maternal persona of Penelope is never fleeting, but Clytemnestra’s image varies greatly. Beginning at line 855, Clytemnestra strives to imitate the loving nature of Penelope, expressing her affection for her husband when he returns safely home (σοῦ ἀλεχονοῦμαι τοῦς φιλάνορας τρόπους λέξαι πρὸς ἡμᾶς, 856-857). This is identical to the desolation Penelope faces in her palace while Odysseus roams the earth. Clytemnestra continues, “It is dreadful for a woman to stay in the home alone without her husband.” (τὸ μὲν γυναῖκα πρῶτον ἄρσενος δίχα ήθαι δόμοις ἔρημον ἐκπάλινα κακῶν, 861-862). The outward praise does not come to a standstill yet: “I have said all I have suffered and now my heart is free from its weight. For this reason I would like to pronounce this man here, the guardian dog of the palace, the anchor of the ship, the lofty pillar, the father’s only son, running water for the wandering traveler, the hope that appears to sailors, and the bright day that appears after the winter frost!” (νῦν ταῦτα πάντα τὸν ἄπενθήτα φρενὶ λέγοιμ’ ἀν ἄνθρο πῶς σταθήσομε κόνι, σωτῆρα ναὸς πρῶτον, ὑψηλῆς στεγῆς στόλον ποδήρη, μονογενῆς τέκνων πατρί, ὀδουρώρ διδώντι πηγαίνου ρέος· καὶ γὴν φανεῖσαν ναυτίλοις παρ’ ἐλπίδα, καλλίστον ἦμαρ εἰσοδεῖν ἐκ χείματος, 895-901). Unlike the bloodthirsty and sexual Clytemnestra that Aeschylus previously describes, the Clytemnestra in lines 855-913 seemingly commends her husband on his authority. Clytemnestra rejects the notion that a woman is a submissive character and uses her guile as her strength. At times,
she fluctuates between a persona that reminds the reader of Penelope welcoming her husband’s νόστος and a persona that is well-laced with revenge.

The unpredictable nature in which Clytemnestra outwardly displays her character qualities shows already that she is everything that Penelope is not: unstable, retribution-seeking, and ruthless. Along with her exceptional attributes as a maternal figure, Penelope is a competent and faithful wife, even though she lives in a palace where the patriarchal order is disturbed. On the other hand, the reader is led to question Clytemnestra’s image as a woman in antiquity. She portrays herself as ἀνδρόβουλον (“man-minded”), but in doing so, distances herself from Penelope’s immortalized image. The women are destined to be as different as the dynamic between Agamemnon and Odysseus. Aeschylus illustrates the gruesome curse of the house of Atreus by portraying a fickle Clytemnestra against an unwavering Penelope. Clytemnestra recognizes the integrity of Penelope and therefore applies this knowledge to deceive Agamemnon. Unfortunately, the life of Clytemnestra is polluted with bitter contamination, no matter her attempts to reverse her fate.
Bibliography


Notes

1 Pantelia (1993) 496.
3 Goheen (1955) 116-117.