Praise for Female Deceptiveness: Boccaccio’s Penelope

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Abstract: *The medieval reception of Penelope, wife of Ulysses and immortalised by Homer, was dependant on Latin sources particularly those from ancient Rome. In these texts her loyalty is stressed, but there is little to no acknowledgment of her intellect, a factor now largely recognised in studies of her Homeric background. The first Latin author to integrate the Greek and Latin traditions of Penelope was Giovanni Boccaccio in the fourteenth century. While there is doubt about how much Boccaccio really understood much of the Greek text, this paper will demonstrate how access to Homer provided new insights into the chastity of Penelope and her relationship to her husband. In doing so, he provides a rare example of praiseworthy female cunning.*

Around 1360, Giovanni Boccaccio, with the help of a Greek scholar, read Homer’s *Odyssey* in the ancient Greek, a text that had been unavailable in the West for about a millennium, “the first, after so many centuries, to commune with the divine Homer.”[1] The scholar was Leontius Pilatus and Boccaccio, at the behest of Petrarch, assisted in setting up a chair for him in Greek Studies at the Studio Fiorentino. Together they worked on translating the *Odyssey* in to Latin.[2] The main female character of the Greek epic, Penelope, became a subject in Boccaccio’s biography of women, *De mulieribus claris*, whom he praised for her marital chastity. This work is frequently cited as the source for the humanist use of classical women, including Penelope, as moral *exemplar*, but commentators rarely acknowledge the role

[1] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London: Allen and Unwin), ix.
[2] A copy with marginal notes by Petrarch is said to be housed in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, Parisinus 7780, 1 and 2. See Cornelia Coulter, "Boccaccio's Acquaintance with Homer," *Philological Quarterly* 5(1926): 46.

deception plays in Boccaccio’s description of her chastity.[3] While praising her role as a loving, devoted wife, Boccaccio also considered the role that intellect (*astutia* and *astu femineo*) played in devising the strategy to put off her suitors. His interpretation presented a praiseworthy model of deception, a characteristic generally vilified in medieval commentaries on female behaviour.[4] This posits Boccaccio’s text as part of the discourse on female chastity as empowerment.[5]

Penelope, wife of Ulysses, is remembered for remaining loyal while her husband was away at Troy for twenty years.[6] In the meantime, more than a hundred suitors assumed or hoped for the death of Ulysses so that they might marry the potential widow and claim the kingdom. She asked permission to weave a shroud for her father-in-law before choosing one of them. Every night she would undo the day’s weaving. In this way she was able to delay making a decision until her husband returned. This ruse allowed her to remain loyal to her absent husband.

[3] For Penelope’s role as a Renaissance model of female virtue see Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 110-11; J. Pamela Benson, "Eleonora Di Toledo among the Famous Women: Iconographic Innovation after the Conquest of Siena," in *The Cultural World of Eleonora of Toledo: Duchess of Florence and Siena*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 149. References to Boccaccio’s role in the development of Penelope as a Renaissance *exemplum* can be found in several sources, including R. A. Scorza, "A 'Modello' by Stradanus for the Sala Di Penelope in the Palazzo Vecchio," *The Burlington Museum* 126, no. 976 (1984):434; Georgianna Ziegler, "Penelope and the Politics of Woman's Place in the Renaissance," in *Glorianna's Face: Women, Public and Private, in the English Renaissance*, ed. S. P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies, (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 31.

[4] For discussion on female deceptiveness and the early Christian underpinnings, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 21, 43-4.

[5] The idea of chastity as empowerment is generally associated with the writings of Christine de Pizan in the fifteenth century and her reaction to male discussions of chastity. For Christine de Pizan’s role in placing sexual steadfastness within the category of rational stability, see Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 142-4. See also Stephanie H. Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism*, Theories of Representation and Difference (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 68; S. H. Rigby, "The Wife of Bath, Christine De Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women," *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 2 (2000):143.

[6] As this paper deals with the characters within Latin texts, I have opted to use this name rather than the Greek “Odysseus.”

There is no doubt that Boccaccio saw Penelope as a positive model for women even with his description of her deception. He draws attention to the importance of Penelope in his own preface, foreshadowing her inclusion as one of the more positive examples of chaste matrons within his work, along with Lucretia and Sulpicia.[7] Indeed, much of his representation of the Greek heroine is consistent with traditional values for the married woman. She remained at home while her husband was away at war; she did not take other lovers although there were many available to her; and she tended to her weaving. From classical times well into the medieval period, textile skills were gendered feminine, although within commercial enterprises men often completed the finishing states, especially the weaving.[8] In the domestic domain fabric construction remained a female responsibility, even if it was in a supervisory capacity.[9] As Penelope was praised for undoing her work, it could be argued that her reputation, as maintained by Boccaccio, was the antithesis of the archetypal good wife.

Alcuin Blamires in his essay on women and creative intelligence in the Middle Ages hints at ambiguity in Boccaccio’s representation of Penelope, but his focus is on the varied representations of Dido.[10] Her astuteness, he argues, contributes to the “subtler effects of a masculine culture’s attempts to discredit that intelligence.”[11] The negative aspect of her astuteness in Boccaccio’s text, he continues, is demonstrated by Christine de Pizan’s “systematic campaign to upgrade the relevant Boccaccian

[7] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, trans. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11.
[8] Ruth Mazo Karras, “‘This Skill in a Woman Is by No Means to Be Despised’: Weaving and the Gender Division of Labor in the Middle Ages,” in *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Cloth Work, and Other Cultural Imaginings*, ed. E. Jane Burns, (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2004).
[9] Ibid.
[10] Alcuin Blamires, "Women and Creative Intelligence in Medieval Thought," in *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2005), 220-1.
[11] Ibid., 213.

heroines” in her *Cité des Dames*, a book largely indebted to Boccaccio’s biography of women. [12] A comparison of the representations of Dido highlights the ambiguity of Boccaccio’s representation in which his use of the term *astutia* parallels the use of the term *engin* in the twelfth-century *Roman d’Enéas*.[13] These terms are likened to “creative” intelligence, consistent with the modern usage of the word creative in “creative accountancy,” a sense that is slightly pejorative.[14] Christine’s use of the term “prudent” to describe Dido’s character upgrades her from this negativity. In a similar way, Blamires notes Christine’s conversion of Penelope from astute in handling her suitors to “wise and prudent.”[15] This assumes that some ambiguity could be read into Boccaccio’s portrayal of Penelope as astute, but this is not addressed. Although there is ambiguity in the use of the terms *astu* and *astutia* in some chapters of the *De mulieribus claris*, in relation to Penelope, I believe they can be read as positive characteristics based on Boccaccio’s reading of the *Odyssey*.

Scholarship on the presence of Penelope in Boccaccio’s text has largely read her as representing ideals for the married woman in the Middle Ages without acknowledging the ambiguity that may arise from Boccaccio’s use of the term *astutia*. Stephen Kolsky notes that Penelope is one of only three women within the one hundred or so biographies described as an *exemplum* for other women.[16] She is described as a “most sacred and lasting example,*”* allowing for her to be read, as Kolsky suggests, as a lay saint.[17] Similarly, Pamela Benson, who proposes that Boccaccio’s text

[12] Ibid., 221.
[13] Ibid., 217.
[14] Ibid., 220.
[15] Ibid., 221. For the description of Penelope by Christine de Pizan, see Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1998), 152.
[16] The other two women are Artimisia [LVII] and Antonia [LXXXIX]. See Stephen. Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's De Mulieribus Claris* (New York P. Lang, 2003), 131.
[17] “*exemplum sanctissimum et eternum*”, ibid.The Latin text and English translation can be found in Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 158-9.

should be read as a foundation text for Renaissance profeminism, describes his representation of Penelope as a “*conventionally* heroic, chaste woman”.[18] The idea of conventional heroism overlooks the challenging aspect of praising a woman for her skills of deception. Margaret Franklin in her book *Boccaccio’s Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* describes different loyal wives who are each “praised without reservation for [their] unconventional acts”, for there “must be no doubt concerning [their] unswerving fidelity to [their] husband[s] or [the husbands’] memory.”[19] As Penelope’s loyalty was based on a positive reading of cunning, a quality traditionally discussed as a negative characteristic for women, I think her actions deserve further consideration. A positive representation of female cunning disrupts the traditional medieval binary of female behaviour of deceptive equals bad and chaste equals good.

There has been little engagement with how Boccaccio’s experience of reading Homer’s texts might have influenced his representation of Penelope. This is perhaps an acknowledgement of the difficulties he would have had understanding the Greek text. Leontius Pilatus’ limited ability to translate the Greek text word for word was suspected even by Petrarch.[20] Cornelia Coulter noted that the Homeric influence in *De mulieribus claris* is limited to the stories relevant to the Trojan cycle, but did not discuss how this might impact on the representation of Penelope and her chastity.[21] Kolsky in his discussion on the influence of *De mulieribus claris* on later Italian writers, comments that Boccaccio was able to use the chapter on Penelope to

[18] My emphasis. Pamela J. Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 9.
[19] Margaret Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*, ed. Allyson Poska and Abby Zanger, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 63.
[20] Robin Sowerby, "Early Humanist Failure with Homer (I)," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 4, no. 1 (1997):37-63.
[21] Coulter, "Boccaccio's Acquaintance with Homer," 48.

demonstrate his new but faltering knowledge obtained in working with Pilatus.[22] This included creating an “authentic character from the figure of Penelope, one endowed with human emotions.”[23] Neither scholar noted Boccaccio’s introduction of Penelope’s intellect as an important aspect of her representation.

Until the fourteenth century and the revival of interest in Homer, writers relied on earlier Latin texts for information regarding classical figures like Penelope. By the time of Augustus she was a well-established exemplar for marital chastity.[24] She is mentioned by Propertius and Ovid in this capacity, using the various epithets *intemerata*, *candida*, *pia*, and *casta*.[25] All of these terms are positive in relation to expectations of female behaviour, but not one of them invokes the idea of intellect or deception. Two classical sources mention the ruse Penelope used to deceive her suitors, but neither one uses any vocabulary which indicates her intellect. For example, Propertius says

> Penelope was able to survive untouched for twenty years, a worthy woman with so many suitors. She was able to put off a wedding with (the help of) deceptive Minerva, secretly unstitching at night what during the

[22] Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's De Mulieribus Claris*, 53.
[23] Stephen Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 72.
[24] In interpreting Ovid’s works, Jacobson offers the following. “Penelope is not the Penelope of the Odyssey, the worthy wife of the great Ulysses, but a Roman wife of the Augustan age, longing for the return of her husband from the war.” See Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), 263. Examples of Penelope as exemplum of the chaste and loyal wife in Propertius can be found in various elegies, for example: “since a chaste wife persevered at home, Aelia Galla beats even Penelope’s devotion”, Elegy 3.12, Sextus Propertius*, The complete Elegies of Sextus Propertius*, trans. Vincent Katz (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 111 and “Here no girl equals faithful Evadne or pious Penelope” in Elegy 3:13, Ibid., 285.
[25] For *intemerata*, see 3:4, Ovid, *Amores*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass, 1977), 460-1. For *candida*, see 2:18, ibid., 436-7. For *pia*, see 4: 13, Sextus Propertius, *Elegies I - IV*, ed. L. Richardson Jnr (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 109., For *casta*, see Elegy 3:12, ibid., 107.

> day she had woven: and although she never dreamed she’d see Ulysses again, she continued to wait for him, even as she grew old.[26]

Propertius attributes Penelope’s deception to the influence of (*falsa*) Minerva. It is possible that Boccaccio had access to the works of Propertius. Petrarch, Boccaccio’s friend and mentor, had copied a twelfth-century manuscript while in Paris, but there is nothing to suggest that this was his source for Penelope’s deceptiveness.[27] Simona Gavinelli has noted some references to the work of Propertius in Boccaccio’s *Genealogia deorum gentilium,* but suspects that this reference was filtered through Petrarch’s *De remediis*.[28] Virginia Brown, Guido A. Guarino, and Vittore Branca do not list Propertius as a source for any women in the *De mulieribus claris*, including Penelope.[29] Although Boccaccio may have learned the detail of Penelope’s ruse from Propertius, the vocabulary pertaining to Penelope’s cunning, as used by Boccaccio, is not apparent in this source. Similarly, Hyginus the mythographer mentions Penelope’s unweaving her work as a means of choosing a new husband in his summary of the return of Ulysses.[30] Guarino and Branca both suggest that Boccaccio used information from Hyginus to create his portrait of

[26] *“Penelope poterat bis denos salva per annos / uiuere, tam multis femina digna procis;coniuigium falsa poterat differre Minerva,/ nocturne solvens texta diurna dolo; /uisvura et quamvis numquam speraret Vlixem, / illium exspectando facta remansit anus.”* Elegy 2.9.3-8. See Propertius, *The Complete Elegies of Sextus Propertius*, trans. Vincent Katz (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 110-11. Although relying on Katz's translation, I have inserted the bracketed words.

[27] A list of the commonly used quotations of Propertius implemented by medieval scholars does not include any reference to Penelope. See James L. Butrica, *The Manuscript Tradition of Propertius* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 30.

[28] Simona Gavinelli, "The Reception of Propertius in Late Antiquity and Neolatin in Renaissance Literature," in *Brill's Companion to Propertius*, ed. Hans-Christian Günter, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 403.

[29] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Concerning Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), 254; Giovanni Boccaccio, *De Mulieribus Claris*, ed. Vittore Branca, vol. 10, Tutte Le Opere De Giovanni Boccaccio (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1967 (1970)), 513; and *Famous Women*, 489.

[30] Hyginus, *Fabulae*, trans. Jean-Yves Boriaud (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1997), 113.

Penelope, but like the description by Propertius, there is no mention of Penelope’s intellect;

> She held them off with this condition ‘I will marry when I have finished this weaving.’ What she wove during the day she unravelled at night and in this way held them off.[31]

Two other Latin writers that are recognised by scholars as underpinning Boccaccio’s approach to Penelope are Ovid and St Jerome.[32] Ovid wrote several works which included references to Penelope, the most detailed being the *Epistulae heroidum.*[33] It was a series of fictional letters, supposedly written by women, to absent husbands or lovers. In Penelope’s letter, which opens the series, she describes weaving at night to avoid the coldness of her bed, which is a corruption of the Homeric version in which she undoes her weaving at night.[34] It is an indirect reference to her ploy, which would have been recognised by the readers of Ovid’s work, but as the “letter” is addressed to Penelope’s husband, it emphasises her loneliness at night. There is no whiff of a suitor in this part of the poem. When the suitors are mentioned, it is to highlight her vulnerability and the risk to Ulysses’ property. At no point does she mention her strategy to deceive the suitors. As this perversion is in the words of

[31] *Apollodorus' Library and Hyginus Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek Mythology*, trans. R. Scott Smith and Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007), 141. The Latin text as published suggests a lacunae which raises questions about the reliability of this source for Boccaccio: “*quos illa concione ita differt, 'cum telam detexuero, nubam:' quam interdiu [texebat, noctu] detexebat et sic eas differbat*.” *Fabulae*, 113. However, it is doubtful whether Boccaccio did have access to this text, which was preserved in a ninth-century manuscript in Beneventan script, found in Germany in the sixteenth century. It is more likely that references to medieval reading of Hyginus reflect a greater accessibility of his other work, the *Astronomica*. For a discussion of the comparative availability of these texts, see Gregory Hays, “Did Chrétien de Troyes Know Hyginus’ *Fabulae*?,” *Romance Philology,* 62 (2008): 76.

[32] Brown limits her sources for the chapter on Penelope to Ovid’s *Heroides* and the influence of Leontius Pilatus. Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 489.

[33] Ovid, "Heroides," in *The Loeb Classical Library*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977).

[34] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, 264-5.

Penelope, Ovid cleverly portrays a different Penelope to Homer’s, while reinforcing the idea that she could cleverly manipulate words. This interpretation of Ovid’s letter is dependent on an inter-textual reading of Homer, something that could not be achieved by medieval readers until the fourteenth century when authors like Boccaccio had some access to the original Homeric texts. Without Homer as a guide, Ovid’s version of Penelope and her words can only be read at face value.

Ovid’s *Heroides*, because of the style of its Latin, and due to the shortness of each individual letter/story, became an important part of medieval Latin education.[35] How they were read can be determined by the numerous *accessus* or educational introductions/prologues preserved from the twelfth century on. The prologues impart information on how the text should be read, and include title (*titulus*), subject-matter (*materia*), intention (*intentio*), method of stylistic and didactic treatment (*modus*), utility (*utilitas*), and the part of philosophy to which it pertains (*cui parti philosophiae supponitur*).[36] These texts highlight how Ovid’s letters were believed to impart information on how to live ethically, commending especially the role of legitimate love. Penelope’s presence as the writer who demonstrates in her letters this ideal provides a rationale for her importance within these prologues.[37] Although there are other chaste wives within the collection, Penelope is the only one singled out for discussion: “In this first epistle Penelope is commended for preserving a legitimate love and, contrariwise, those not acting the same way are reproved.”[38] The

[35] Ralph Hexter, "Medieval School Commentaries in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria, Epistulae Ex Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum*" (Yale University, 1982), 226.
[36] A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), 12-3.
[37] Ralph Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling. Studies in Medieval School Commentaries on Ovid's Ars Amatoria, Epistulae Ex Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum.* (Munich: Bei de Arbeo-Gesellschaft, 1986), 157.
[38] “*In hac prima epistola commendatur Penelopes legitimum servans amorem et econtra non idem agentes reprehenduntur*”; "Medieval School Commentaries in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria, Epistulae Ex*

moralising tone in the medieval interpretation of Ovid is clear as Penelope’s position as writer of the first letter is explained: “But because she excelled the other [women] in her chastity, the author gave her the first place.”[39] There is no mention of Penelope’s ruse or deception, but there is recognition of Penelope’s emotions as she “burned in desire for her husband alone.”[40] Although lying outside of the frame of her letter, the common knowledge that Penelope was rewarded by Ulysses’ return assisted with the moralising interpretation of Ovid’s text.[41] The medieval reception of Penelope through Ovid is limited to her chaste love for her husband, not her deceptive intellect.

Jerome’s inclusion of Penelope in his *Against Jovinianus* was foundational for the inclusion of Penelope in the medieval discussion of classical women.[42] Writing in the fourth century, Jerome argued for sexual restraint, especially virginity, as an important element of female behaviour:

> Let these allusions to the virgins of the world, brief and hastily gathered from many histories now suffice. I will proceed to married women who were reluctant to survive the decease or violent death of their husbands

Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum". The Latin text can be found in R.B.C. Huygens, *Accessus Ad Auctores Bernard D' Utrecht, Conrad D' Hirsau, Dialogus Super Auctores* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 29-30.

[39] “*Sed quia ista per castitatem ceteas precellebat, auctor ei primum locum dat*” Hexter, "Medieval School Commentaries in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria, Epistulae Ex Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum*", 305; Huygens, *Accessus Ad Auctores Bernard D' Utrecht, Conrad D' Hirsau, Dialogus Super Auctores* 33.

[40] “*solius mariti calebat desiderio*” Hexter, "Medieval School Commentaries in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria, Epistulae Ex Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum*", 305. Huygens, *Accessus Ad Auctores Bernard D' Utrecht, Conrad D' Hirsau, Dialogus Super Auctores,* 33.

[41] Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling. Studies in Medieval School Commentaries on Ovid's Ars Amatoria, Epistulae Ex Ponto, and Epistulae Heroidum*, 186.

[42] Several works acknowledge Penelope’s inclusion in Jerome’s text and the importance of this work for medieval discussions on women. See Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's De Mulieribus Claris*, 60; Glenda McLeod, *Virtue and Venom: Catalogs of Women from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: The University ot Michigan Press, 1991), 54; Katharina M. Wilson and Elizabeth M. Makowski, *Wykked Wyves and the Woes of Marriage: Misogamous Literature from Juvenal to Chaucer*, Suny Series in Medieval Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 50.

> for fear that they may be forced into a second marriage, and who entertained a marvelous affection for the only husbands they had.[43]

Although Ulysses did not die, Penelope is listed among the pagan women who resisted remarriage; “Penelope’s chastity is the theme of Homer’s song.”[44] Kolsky has noted the similarity in approach to remarriage in the works of Boccaccio and Jerome: remarriage was to be avoided.[45] This provided a powerful basis for a tradition in medieval discourse that celebrated female self-sacrifice as a means for demonstrating female worth.

Medieval Latin references to Penelope continue the tradition of referring to her chastity without noting her ruse or the intellect that underpinned it. The works of three authors ably demonstrate Penelope’s exemplarity; both Alain de Lille and Walter Map laud her chastity while Arnulf of Orléans praises Penelope in his condemnation of deceptive women. Alain de Lille locates Penelope as an image on the garment of Chastity in his *Complaint of Nature*: “There in the mirror of the picture, I could catch sight of Penelope, mirror of purity.”[46] There is no discussion of how she maintained her chastity. It was enough that she did, earning her the honour of being pictured alongside Hippolytus, Lucretia, and Daphne. Walter Map bemoans the loss of chaste women in contemporary society: “Lucretia, Penelope, and the Sabine women carried the banners of chastity and (with fellow followers) brought back their prizes. My friend, there are no Lucretias, Penelopes or Sabine women now: beware

[43] Bk 1:43, Jerome, "Against Jovinianus," in *The Principle Works of St Jerome*, ed. W. H. Fremantle, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 381.
[44] Bk. 1:45, ibid., 382.
[45] Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's De Mulieribus Claris*, 60.
[46] “*Illic in speculo picturae, castitatis speculum Penelopem poteram speculari”* See Alan of Lille, “Medieval Sourcebook: Alain of Lille [Alanus De Insulis]: The Complaint of Nature,” ed Paul Halsall. (1996), http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/alain-deplanctu.asp. Accessed 18/3/2014

them all.”[47] Arnulf of Orléans wrote the tale of *Lidia*, a story which has been acknowledged as the basis of one of Boccaccio’s tales in the Decameron.[48] *Lidia* is explicitly marked as a warning to men on the negative influence of women:

> So that my *Adventures of Lydia*, imitated from works of old,
> might find approval, I have here depicted
> all the feminine wiles worthy of note.
> I have shown all that a woman is capable of
> so you may flee forewarned: after all,
> you too may have a Lydia in your life.[49]

Having warned his male readers of the dangers of deceptive women, Arnulf continues in a similar vein to Walter Map, bemoaning the absence of loyal women in contemporary society.

> What is marriage now? What has become of the nuptial vow?
> What is the advantage of the shared marriage bed?
> Penelope is nowhere; nowhere is Lucretia of old to be found.[50]

For writers like Arnulf of Orléans, female deceptiveness was a characteristic of the bad woman, the one who used her wiles to deceive a husband. There was no

[47] “*Vexilla pudicicie tulerunt cum Sabinis Lucrecia et Penolope, et paucissimo comtatu trophea retulerunt*. *Amice, nulla est Lucrecia, nulla Penolope, nulla Sabina, times omnes*.” See Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, trans. M.R. James, Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke, and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1983), 294-5.
[48] Day 7, Ninth tale, Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ed. Antonio Enzo Quaglio, 2 vols. (n.c.: Aldo Garzanti Editore, 1980; reprint, 1980).
[49] Lines 5-8. Alison Goddard Elliott, ed. *Seven Medieval Latin Comedies*, The Garland Library of Medieval Literature (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.,1984), 126.
[50] Ibid., 130.

recognition of a positive aspect of deceptiveness and thus Penelope’s ruse and her deception of the suitors was not acknowledged, even if known. The Penelope that Boccaccio received from the Latin tradition was extolled along with other classical figures for her loyalty to her husband, perhaps based on her love for him as received through Ovid, but was not recognised for her use of deception.

The portrait of Penelope in *De mulieribus claris* was not the first time Boccaccio wrote about the Greek heroine. In his *Amorosa Visione* written some twenty years earlier than the *De mulieribus claris*, Boccaccio’s representation of Penelope lauds her unstinting love for her husband.[51] The difference between the two representations reinforces my argument that it was his engagement with Homer that influenced his representation of her intellect. Cunning is mentioned, but it is a characteristic of her husband, not Penelope:

> Also there, turned in her direction, was Penelope, awaiting her beloved Ulysses; she never desisted from his faithful loving. When I fixed my eyes on her, to myself I thought how great her love must have been for him who, I believe, would never return to her. He, desiring to have experience of the world’s various peoples and cities, went beyond the boundary from which no one has ever been able to return, in vain employing force, in vain his cunning.[52]

[51] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Amorosa Visione*, ed. Vittore Branca, vol. 3, Tuttle Le Opere Di Giovanni Boccaccio (Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1974).
[52] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Amorosa Visione*, trans. Robert Hollander, Timothy Hampton, and Margherita Frankel (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986), 113. Italian text: “*ov 'era ancora verso lei rivolsa Penelope aspettante il caro Ulisse, che dal fidel suo amor mai non fu sciolta. Nella qual io le luce avendo finsse, fra me pensava quanto ful il disire de que' che mai no cre' ch' a le redisse. Ello, volendo del mondo esperire varie genti e cittati, passo` il segno dal qual nessun mai pote` in qua redire, invano usando forze, invan l'ingegno*”; *Amorosa Visione*, 216.

Like other medieval authors, Boccaccio saw the love for her husband as an important aspect of her chastity and in this early representation it is only her husband’s cunning that is noted. This love for her husband is replicated in the later text: “she welcomed with great joy the husband she had longed for all that time.”[53] The reference to her intelligence, which we might expect from a more Homeric reading, is in relation to the description of her ruse to deceive the suitors: “she devised a clever way to deceive her enemies”, and later, “with feminine cunning secretly [she] undid at night all that she had diligently woven during the day.”[54] The terms he uses are *astutia* for cleverness and *femineo astu* for feminine cunning.

As discussed earlier, Blamires associated Boccaccio’s use of the term astute with *engin* as described by Robert Hanning. It represents “wit, readiness to take advantage of a situation, problem solving, manipulation of others … [and] the shaping of the human environment to one’s advantage, not by force but by the gifts of the mind.”[55] This skill is associated with the idea of being able to “‘weave’ our own lives” noting its importance from antiquity.[56] The creative intelligence of Blamires and Hanning, whether *astutia* or *engin*, reflects the classical Greek ideal of *metis*. Weaving is one of the skills associated with the concept of *metis*, and Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant isolate the example of Penelope in their pivotal work on cunning intelligence, describing her as being as skilled in weaving cloth as she was in weaving plots.[57] Current scholarship on Homer, similarly recognises the importance of Penelope’s intellect, demonstrated both by her weaving and her ruse

[53] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 163.
[54] Ibid., 161.
[55] Robert W. Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 108.
[56] Ibid., 270.
[57] Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, European Philosophy and the Human Sciences (Hassocks [Eng.]: Harvester Press and Humanities Press, 1978), 239.

to deceive the suitors as fundamental aspects of her character.[58] Norman Austin in his exploration of the poetics of the *Odyssey* notes that all the main characters in the epic are described according to their intellectual prowess: Ulysses is *polymetis* (of many counsels or much devising) and Penelope is *periphron*, a word often translated as prudent but more literally means circumspect.[59] I believe it was this characteristic of Penelope that Boccaccio recognised in his encounter with Homer leading him to integrate it into his perception of Penelope as a truly virtuous woman.

There is no doubting Boccaccio’s praise for the Greek heroine’s skill, even though he acknowledges her cunning. Her *astutia* allowed her to deceive her suitors, but her intentions were morally commendable, especially according to the Christian standards of marital fidelity. Her deception was used to maintain her chastity whether her husband was dead or alive. Boccaccio presents deception as having the potential to be benign, more consistent with the ancient Greek ideal of *metis*. There are several factors that I believe point to the positive use of the term *astutia* in the case of Penelope.

First, the reference to Penelope’s *astutia* is associated with the divine: “It was surely by divine intervention that she devised a clever way to deceive her enemies.”[60] While this might be seen as undermining Penelope’s intelligence, it can also be seen as a reference to the Homeric original. Athena, the protector of Ulysses, also looked out

[58] Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer's Odyssey* (Lanham: Lexinton Books, 2004); Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); Richard Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope and the Plot of Homer's Odyssey* (University of Michigan Press, 2005).
[59] Norman Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's Odyssey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 39.
[60] Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 161.

for Penelope and gave her the plan while she slept.[61] Boccaccio adopts the Greek notion of the gods influencing human activity, even though he deals with the gods within the text as glorified humans.[62] There are several other pagans who are presented as inspired or protected by God or the Divine. The sibyl Erythrea was loved by God and so she was able to unveil the secret of divine thought.[63] Carmenta, the creator of the Latin alphabet was so loved by God, that other languages (Greek and Hebrew) lost their power within Europe.[64] Metabus needed to protect his baby daughter, Camilla, and God inspired him to attach her to a lance and shoot her to safety.[65] In all three of these cases, a divine influence reflects positively on the person.

In the case of Cassandra, another prophet or sibyl, the situation is not so benign. Boccaccio questions the source of her powers of prophecy: it might have been from God, reflected her own studious nature, or (what he suggests to be the more likely provenance) to have come from a devil.[66] If it were from God, it would have been seen as a positive reflection on Cassandra and her intentions. The divine influence within Boccaccio’s text is seen as a positive attribute. This reflects what Benson notes about Boccaccio; he was not so interested in the deeds of his subject, but the spiritual attitude that underpins the deeds.[67] This could account for the ambiguity in Dido’s case. She did trick people out of land, but it was for the purposes of building a

[61] Penelope explains to the stranger, Ulysses in disguise, that one of the gods inspired her task of deception. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 394.
[62] Guido A. Guarino, "Introduction," in *Concerning Famous Women*, (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1964), xii-xiii.
[63] Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 87.
[64] Ibid., 111.
[65] Ibid., 155.
[66] Ibid., 136-7.
[67] Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, 14.

city for her people.[68] He does not refer to any god as inspiring her, although he notes that her earlier idea to leave her homeland had possibly come to her in her sleep, suggesting external or spiritual inspiration, or it might have been her own idea.[69] There is not decision either way for Dido's inspiration. In Penelope's case Boccaccio had written that she had decided to maintain a chaste state whether or not her husband was dead. The divine intervention came when "[s]he saw no possibility of refusal and was afraid that the resolution she had taken within her chaste breast would be broken."[70] Thus, I think it is clear that in the case of Penelope, divine inspiration, despite having the ability to undermine her skill, also contributes to the positive nature of her character. This is reinforced by the comment that the timeliness of Ulysses' return was through divine mercy.[71] In a context in which the pagan gods are treated as glorified humans, mention of divine intervention needs to be understood as a positive judgment on the character of the individual.

Second, Boccaccio also uses the term *astutia* to describe Ulysses' disguise as a beggar. The medieval Ulysses, maintained in many forms of literature, was a wise man.[72] Through his reasoning skills, he resisted the Sirens' call and avoided being made into a beast by Circe. Like Penelope's weaving, Ulysses' disguise is a deception and like Penelope's deception, it is for a moral good. Was Boccaccio setting out to feminise or denigrate Ulysses' wisdom by the use of *astutia* to describe his actions? Although there is some discomfort at times with Ulysses' reputation as a

[68] Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 170-1.
[69] Ibid., 168-9.
[70] Ibid., 161.
[71] Ibid., 161-3.
[72] There are several books that deal with the use of Ulysses as the wise man. For a discussion of this role in Fulgentius' *Mythologies* and other medieval texts, see Ann W. Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 8; Jane Chance, *Medieval Mythography* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 110; Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 42.

trickster, there is no evidence in this text to suggest that Boccaccio was alluding to this. The disguise allowed Ulysses to re-enter his household and assess the circumstances without threat. This situation, referring to both husband and wife as astute, also reflects the Homeric original. As mentioned earlier, Homer described the couple as *homophrosyne*, or like-minded.[73] By referring to both as astute, Boccaccio is reapplying ancient Greek ideals to the couple’s behaviour.

There is no ambiguity in the way Boccaccio presents Penelope. Boccaccio’s representation weaves together the Latin tradition of the chaste and loving wife and the Greek clever woman who is a like-minded match to a clever man. Although deceptive arts and cunning are often linked negatively to the feminine in the Middle Ages, in the example of Penelope, deception is presented as a positive characteristic. The inclusion of Penelope’s cunning reflects Boccaccio’s positive interpretation of Penelope in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

[73] The importance of *homophrosyne* or the like-mindedness of Ulysses and Penelope is a common feature of recent Homeric scholarship. See Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*, viii, 44; Helen P. Foley, "Penelope as Moral Agent," in *The Distaff Side: Female Representation in Homer's Odyssey.*, ed. Beth Cohen 93-115, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 96; Froma I. Zeitlin, "Figuring Fidelity in Homer's *Odyssey*," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen 117-52, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 120.

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