Laodamia Reads Penelope and Oenone: an Intratextual Reading of *Heroides* 13

Scholarship on Ovid’s *Heroides* 13, the letter from Laodamia to her husband Protesilaus, has focused on its intertextual aspects, including Homer’s *Iliad*,Catullus 68, and Propertius 4.3 (Rosati, Jolivet, Landolfi, Davis). Intratextual readings have shed further light on the poem, including an examination of several verbal echoes between this letter and those of Oenone (Jolivet) and Penelope (Landolfi) and a reading of the letter against that of Deianira’s (Fulkerson 2005). Drawing on the idea that the *Heroides*’ writers “read and adapt one another’s texts” (Fulkerson 2005, 143), I offer an intratextual reading of Laodamia’s letter against those of both Penelope (1) and Oenone (5). Laodamia’s revision of several items from Penelope’s letter suggests that Laodamia is quite different from Penelope, while her assimilation of Oenone, especially elements missing from Oenone’s story in *Heroides* 5, implies that Laodamia is aware that her husband is indeed about to die (or already has) and has every reason to react as she does.

Both Laodamia and Penelope have been left behind in Greece and desperately wait and wish for their husbands’ returns from the Trojan War. Yet while Penelope can admit her fears were greater than reality and acknowledges her prayers have been answered regarding Ulysses’ safety in the war, Laodamia cannot stop from obsessively, yet rightly so, worrying for Protesilaus’ wellbeing. Rather than Ulysses’ safety per se, Penelope fears a rival or him not being able to help against the suitors and to look out for their son. While Penelope spends only a few lines denouncing Paris, Laodamia repeatedly censures both Paris and Helen. Penelope wishes Ulysses were still fighting at Troy so she would know where he is, while Laodamia wishes Protesilaus would not fight there. While Penelope suggests that she envies the Greek wives who are reunited with their husbands, Laodamia explicitly envies the Trojan women who arm and welcome home their husbands from battle (and, it is implied, bury them). While Penelope notes the altars burning in honor of those returning home from the war, Laodamia mentions altars after she has seen Protesilaus’ ghostly image. Laodamia’s reversal or expansion of these elements from Penelope’s letter highlights the differences between them, that Penelope is about to be reunited with her husband while Laodamia is about to be (or just has been) widowed, and indicates that she also may be aware of her husband’s death.

Laodamia, intentionally or not, reveals herself to be more similar to Oenone as she repeatedly draws on Oenone’s near-contemporaneous letter to Paris. While Penelope’s hopes are fulfilled, both Laodamia’s and Oenone’s wishes are not, as their prayers for return and reunion are dashed or come about in undesired ways. Oenone’s letter highlights how she too has lost her husband to the future Trojan War, although husband and cause are the same. Both Laodamia and Oenone describe similar scenes of their husbands’ departures, offer lengthy and negative views (and curses) of Paris and Helen, and share the opinion that Menealus is justified in reclaiming his wife. Both urge their husbands to be lovers instead of fighters, imagine fantasy pasts or futures with them, and imply a desire to be Andromache. Most importantly, both identify the moment or event that doomed them to be separated from their husbands and describe their fearful responses to prophecies or omens concerning the departure and return of Paris and Protesilaus.

Furthermore, if Laodamia brings about her husband’s death via her letter (Fulkerson 2005) and displays prophetic skill (Fulkerson 2002), she proves to be more of an Oenone than Oenone herself as she exhibits aspects of Oenone’s traditional story (an indirect hand in her husband’s death, prophetic abilities) suppressed in Oenone’s letter. Laodamia’s new-found prophetic ability further stresses that her urgency, fears, and panicked state of mind concerning her husband’s death are legitimate. Reading Laodamia as herself having read both Penelope and Oenone reveals a Laodamia who is more aware and emotionally stable than she initially seems.

**Works Cited**

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